

**NARRATIVE, EXPERIENCE, AND THE POLITICAL
THE INTERSECTIONS OF LIVES AND ACTIVISM IN AN
ECUADORIAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION**

by

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Abstract

This thesis engages ethnographically with some aspects of the *Taller de Comunicación Mujer*, an Ecuadorian women's organization located in Quito, Ecuador. Since 1984 the *Taller de Comunicación Mujer* has been involved in projects for women's integral empowerment. This includes organizing around the concrete needs of low-income urban women, as well as addressing the ways in which women's identities are socially constructed. To this purpose, the *Taller de Comunicación Mujer* relies on recuperating and revaluing women's experiences as a starting point for analyzing and changing their status in Ecuadorian society. This thesis pays particular attention to how narratives about the intersections of personal lives and activism - life story fragments and comments - constitute an integral part of the organization and its projects of social and political renewal. I argue that this net of narrations can be an important, fluid site for women's engagement in the political. It is a locus where the subjects are constantly recreated, and where the 'personal' and the 'political' are daily negotiated and commented upon.

This thesis draws on feminist debates on experience, literature on social movements, and the concepts of popular education and theatre in order to address this interconnectedness of narratives, experiences, and political involvement within the project of the organization. It is based on fieldwork which was carried out from January to April 1996. My understanding of the organization is particularly structured by and around the life story fragments of three women involved in the *Taller de Comunicación Mujer*: María Escudero, 'Milena' and 'Silvia'. Looking at the organization through these stories allows me to attend to the shifting narrative space within the organization as a locus where the political might be reinvented. This thesis also addresses the complex issue of experience as something both grounding in relation to political action and always in need of critical examination. Finally, it underlines that narrative practices are important politically - not necessarily as 'better' versions of truth and 'truer' representation of the world, but as complex negotiations of the place of personal experience in relation to activism, politics, and history.

To my family: Andrea, Stefano, and Enrica.

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Note on Translations

All of the material written or published by the *Taller de Comunicación Mujer* is originally in Spanish and the translations presented in this thesis are mine. My translations other than these are indicated in the text. In presenting quotes from material written or published by the *Taller de Comunicación Mujer*, I have quoted also the original Spanish version wherever this expresses some shades of meanings not easily translatable into English. In this way, Spanish speaking readers can appreciate the difference.

Introduction

We do not believe in '100% effective' work with the popular [low-income] sectors, nor in ideal women and organizations', nor in 'ideal supporting staff'. We believe in the construction of spaces which would permit and strengthen women's development, their autonomy, gender solidarity, human solidarity and, if possible, joy, whereby supporting wider collective and individual processes with characteristics which we cannot predetermine (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, e: 6).

In the *arpillera* (patchwork) made by a woman from Quito, Ecuador, is depicted a large, red table. Women are sitting around it and each of them is preparing patchworks, sewing little dolls and pieces of cloth on to a scene. Behind them, at the wall of the meeting room shown in the *arpillera*, are hanging three large posters with the drawing of the face of a woman. Around this central scene are depicted images from daily life: a woman is cooking something on the stove in a corner of the meeting room, another is breast feeding her baby.

This *arpillera* depicts a typical scene in an Ecuadorian women's organization, the *Taller de Comunicación Mujer*¹ (from now on referred to as *Taller*). This is a non-governmental grass root association located in Quito, the capital city of Ecuador. The *Taller* has been in existence since 1984, when it was started by four social activists as a neighbourhood forum for low-income women where to discuss pressing issues and to organize for social action. The organization then expanded to comprise a number of other, independent women's groups² located in different *barrios*³. Most of these groups/*organizaciones* were started or proposed by women of the neighbourhoods themselves, who then contacted the *Taller* for advice, technical help, and financial assistance. A small staff (eight persons in 1996, including three of the original founders)

¹ It is also called *Corporación Promoción de la Mujer*.

² The number of the women's groups varies, as more are formed and older ones dispersed. For reference, the *Taller* has been closely involved with at least nine different groups.

³ Spanish for neighbourhood. The staff however, uses the word *barrios* usually to designate the neighbourhoods they work in, that is very low-income quarters of the city. I also prefer to use *barrio* rather than neighbourhood because it suggests an idea of community.

coordinates amongst these groups, finds, channels, and manages the funding, and organizes the major projects. The latter range from the facilitation of popular education workshops on topics such as violence against women, and women's political participation; economic/income-generating projects such as the production of handicrafts; and the development of *barrio's* wide benefits such as daycare and health services. The staff also coordinates the communication sector, an essential part of the organization: the *Taller* in fact has been using and experimenting with alternative media like community newsletters, *fotonovelas* (see Chapter Three), and self-help pamphlets.

This paper engages ethnographically with some aspects of the *Taller* as a popular⁴ movement for social change. It draws on fieldwork carried out from January to April 1996, during which I tried to participate in the activities of both the 'main office'/staff and the women's groups and daycare of (particularly) one of the *barrios*. More precisely, I am looking at the ways in which narratives constitute an important part of the organization and its projects for social and political change⁵. Here I am not primarily interested in the contents of stories, but rather in the ways these are created and used in the context of the organization. The narratives I am considering here - comments and life story fragments - are stories people tell about the complex intersections of personal lives and political participation. As such, they are both about what it means to be a woman in Ecuador (the social constructions of a gendered identity) and about the organization and its project of discussing, questioning and changing the latter.

⁴ The word 'popular', here and everywhere else in this thesis, refers to low-income groups, which also make up the majority of the people in the nation.

⁵ In this thesis, I talk about 'the political' according to the following definition of Laclau and Mouffe, as practices "whose objective is the transformation of a social relation which constructs a subject in a relationship of subordination. ... What we wish to point out is that politics as a practice of creation, reproduction and transformation of social relations cannot be located at a determinate level of the social, as the problem of the political is the problem of the institution of the social, that is, of the definition and articulations of social relations in a field criss-crossed with antagonisms" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 153).

I am arguing that this net of stories is an essential part of the organization and an important “political space”. Narratives themselves are deeply political acts, as they are a sort of mediation: they create experience as something that is both personal and political, both grounding and elusive in relation to a social movement. Looking at the organization through these stories, then, can also be one way of tracing the constant creation and reinvention of political spaces.

Two strands of literature have been useful starting points for these considerations.

I.: Social movements⁶ and the redefinition of the political

The *Taller* is part of the wave of social movements and popular organizations which have been emerging in Latin America since the seventies. Concerned with the deterioration of the standards of living, with repressive governments, and with various forms of discrimination, very diverse groups have been bringing forth a multiplicity of struggles in a variety of contexts. These movements comprise women's forums, indigenous organizations, ecologists, anti-racism activists, and neighbourhood associations, to name just a few. Poor women have been the ones most involved in these struggles, for a variety of reasons - including that they are the ones most affected by crises in their countries (see Chapter One), as well as the most ‘forgotten’ in development interventions (see below).

One of the most interesting things that draws social movements together is that they connect “a political struggle in terms of access to the mechanisms of power [with a] cultural [struggle] in the search for different identities” (Jelin 1990: 206). In other words, these groups are not only fighting for better living conditions, and demanding from the institutions certain rights, and changes in the governing structures. They are especially

⁶ Here I will not address the debate about whether or not to call these social movements ‘new’. Here I am interested in this literature in so far as it illuminates some important characteristics of these movements, such as their struggles around identities, as well as the ‘redefinition’ of political spaces.

engaging with the very way identities are constructed as well as reformulating different identities which would empower them.

A poignant example of this practice is given by the *Taller* itself. One of the central aspects of the organization is its creative and critical work on identity, 'self-discovery', experience, and 'herstory'. This is reflected in all of their projects and is most immediately apparent in their media productions. Thus, one participant of the *Taller* said that the women who join the organization just for practical interests, such as learning a skill or earning some extra money through the economic projects, do not remain for long: they fail to understand what the organization is really about. To make an example, the importance of the *Taller* is not only that women have the possibility of learning new skills. The participants also challenge the concepts about (low-income) women according to which they, unlike men, do not profit from, do not need to, or do not want to learn something new and interesting if it is not directly related to the household or to an income-generating activity.

The fact that social movements are about identities as well as about concrete needs, rights, and power structures has been a central insight in the literature (see Melucci 1989; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; and the edited collections of Westwood and Radcliffe 1993; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Jelin 1990). Furthermore, in so far as they are "economic, political, *and* cultural movements" (Escobar 1992: 64, emphasis in the original), social movements have been redefining what it means to engage in politics, and engendering an alternative view of the political. In this regard, Escobar and Alvarez speak of a "fundamental transformation in the nature of political practice and theorizing itself" (Escobar and Alvarez 1992: 3), and a "challenge [to] our most entrenched ways of understanding political practice and its relation to culture, economy, society, and nature" (Escobar and Alvarez 1992: 7).

This redefinition of what is considered as political has been conceptualized in a number of ways. It is evident that social movements inaugurate a way of participating in the

political culture outside the structure of traditional political parties. Indeed, Lind (1992), Escobar and Alvarez (1992), and many others argue that these movements came about also as a result of the lack of confidence in parties and traditional governmental structures. The *Taller* presents an interesting case in point (see also Chapter One). The staff organized in February 1996 a "Seminar on Women's Political Participation". In the course of the two-days workshop, the organization discussed the role women have played in Ecuadorian history, the structure of the Ecuadorian state, and the history of the traditional parties. What was particularly interesting was that the staff was trying to engage the women in a new way of looking at the political parties participating in the forthcoming elections. They wanted the participants to ask these essential questions: whose interests do they represent? and Are any of their programs linked to a change? The staff was thus proposing a critical reflection on *all* of the candidates, and on the very way in which Ecuadorian politics is carried on by parties none of which represents a real alternative to the status quo. At the end of the seminar, the strongest recommendation from the side of the participants and the one which generated more enthusiasm was the proposal to build networks of women like them and of popular organizations across the country.

This proposal attests to the fact that women's movements such as the *Taller* are creating a new sphere for political participation, close to the personal life of the social actors and suspicious of the traditional venues of 'democracy' - thus situated in the *barrios*, in self-help associations, and in discussion groups. It is a sphere located

in the intermediate space between individualized, familiar, habitual, micro-climatic daily life, and socio-political processes writ large, of the State and the institutions (Jelin 1987 quoted in Escobar 1992: 70).

This new political location is both a physical and a discursive site. This is best seen in relation to women's involvement; many authors have noticed how in women's organization the creation of a new political sphere often comes out of a reframing of the 'personal' and the 'political'.

Jelin writes that women's involvement seem to "arise 'naturally' out of daily life" (Jelin 1990: 204). She further argues that for most groups this fact, rather than limiting their political actions, has meant an opening of new spaces for political involvement. Similarly, Caldeira warns us that the fact that many women legitimize their participation through their familial role should not blind us to the ambiguity of this participation,

which in spite of being carried out in the name of their most traditional role, involves going out and leaving precisely that sphere used as a means of legitimization (Caldeira 1990: 61).

This issue comes particularly to the fore in groups such as the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina, the *CoMadres* of El Salvador, the CONAVIGUA widows in Guatemala, and many others. Each of these groups have been constituted during times of intense political repression in their respective countries (in the seventies and eighties), and consist of women relatives of persons who have been 'disappeared' by the police or the military. The members protest together against the regime and its killings, demand to know 'the truth' about their relatives, and act to commemorate those who have disappeared. Groups such as these generally present themselves as 'apolitical', and as an extension of a traditional mother's role into the public realm. However, it is hard to ignore the ways in which the actions of these women also 'exceed' and subvert the fixed categories of the 'private' - as for example, in this comment by a *CoMadre*, América, collected by Schirmer:

To the government, we as women are incapable of understanding the political, social, or economic situation. To them, we are only sexual objects for having children. We somehow cannot understand that a low salary for a factory worker means there is little hope of taking care of a family, we somehow are not aware of how *el patrón* doubly exploits us as women workers, we somehow are not living and seeing the effects of this war upon ourselves as mothers and women, and upon our children. What we are capable of understanding is that El Salvador is not a democracy, and that we are not afraid of speaking out; *Basta ya* to all the killing! (América quoted in Schirmer 1993: 35).

The *CoMadres* politicize the "personal" in such a way that it brings to a whole questioning of other concepts, categories, and discourses. Schirmer writes:

'Mothering' becomes so politicized that it goes far beyond its reproductive meanings, forcing women to see themselves as indigenous women and as peasant women,

and further, to make

a theoretical leap: they have connected their experience and analysis of political violence (disappearance and torture) to personal violence against women (rape and battering) (Schirmer 1993: 30-31).

The insight in this literature is that women's movements are in a sense 're-inventing politics' by delineating and appropriating a new sphere of political struggle - in this case, carved out of what is *supposedly* personal. Caldeira summarizes this in a very interesting way:

There is no doubt that women's absence from the political parties does limit their personal transformation in the public arena. But neither is there any doubt that it is this limitation which is enabling them to change (Caldeira 1990 :67).

In other words, the 'political' is here placed in a new way both in relation to women's lives and to mainstream political culture. This can be seen as one strength of these movements, as it is an "attempt() to give a new meaning to politics" (Jelin 1990: 204).

Westwood and Radcliffe suggest looking at these processes also as the creation of a "multiplicity of sites" of struggle in which women participate, "from the domestic sphere and the world of the household to the streets" (Westwood and Radcliffe 1993: 20). This view mirrors some aspects of the work by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who see in contemporary societies an "indeterminacy of the social", and who emphasize the importance of the resulting plurality of sites for the political. This plurality of political spaces corresponds to a continuous praxis of reinventing and recreating collective identities. Laclau and Mouffe thus understand social movements as being located in a situation

characterized by the essential instability of political spaces, in which the very identity of the forces of struggle is submitted to constant shifts, and calls for an incessant process of redefinition (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 151).

Laclau and Mouffe have developed their theory in the European context and much of their reflection is tied to European history. However, their work is illustrative in that they emphasize that the emergence and practices of social movements challenge the conceptions of the political by theorists and left activists. According to Laclau and Mouffe,

the appearance of social movements represents a brake from political mobilization in Europe based on class consciousness. This presumed a division of the social space in two opposing domains - traditionally, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. As such, this conception of political mobilization was based on the idea of essential identities (the working class, for example) and on the imagining of a "unique" political space for struggle (the foundational division in two camps and the antagonism between them).

The emerging popular movements, on the contrary, reveal a plurality of struggles and of political projects. They express a multiplicity of collective identities, of social groups and actors, and of particular demands. Laclau and Mouffe are particularly interested in the fact that most of these demands are centered on freedom and equality, and can thus potentially constitute a new project of "radical democracy". According to Laclau and Mouffe, then, contemporary social movements suggest a different view of politics by the Left, which would no longer center on a fixed identity which could 'carry' a political project, but rather on the articulations which can be constructed between these different demands and creative reformulations of identities. This leads them to envision a shifting and open political realm, which can - at least potentially - be shaped by the coming together of these demands and redefinitions of different, empowering identities.

One very interesting aspect of the discussion on the redefinition of politics is that it has put daily life in the forefront. It has brought to our attention that the creation of this shifting and fluid political realm is rooted and constituted in daily life and its practices. Escobar (1992) and Melucci (1989) among others have emphasized this point. Melucci for example writes of the importance of creating new meanings in daily life and in the "nets of social relations" which constitute a "submerged" side of social movements. This side is in fact also the one which makes their political significance possible. And Jelin contours the importance and possibility of this perspective when she writes:

If we study the meaning of political practice in daily life, the construction of identities and discourses, we do not do it assuming that these are determinant - or necessary - of practices at the institutional level. Neither do we assume the autonomy of democracy in relation to people's quotidian practices. The

relationships between one and the other level are complex, mediated. Our intention is to point to a field of construction of democracy that, in the first place, is important in itself, that of the social relation of daily life. ... We believe that daily life and social movements are privileged spaces in which to study these processes of mediation, since social movements are situated, at least in theory, in the intermediate space between individualized, familiar, habitual, micro-climatic daily life, and socio-political processes writ large, of the State and the institutions, solemn and superior (Jelin 1987 quoted in Escobar 1992: 70).

Theoretical considerations on the redefinition of politics and the creation of political spaces in daily life by social movements have been one starting point for my considerations on the *Taller*. I find Jelin's expression "a field of construction of democracy" illuminating because it emphasizes that sites of political struggles and the very meaning of politics are renegotiated daily in what is a fluid and 'messy' process. Imagining that such a "field" exists and that it is important for social movements has permitted me to look at the shifting field of narrations in the organization as a locus where the political is daily created and redefined. This net of narrations embodies a multiplicity of sites of struggle and as such it both nourishes and fragments the organization and its project. This also has to do with the complex relationship between experience and social activism.

II.: Experience and political organization

Donna Haraway warns us that

just as nature is one of culture's most startling and non-innocent products, so is experience one of the least innocent, least self-evident aspects of historical, embodied movement (Haraway 1991: 109).

Experience has been very important for politics as an "oppositional ground" (Steadly 1993: 25). Particularly, feminist movements have recorded and used women's experiences to make visible and to reappropriate women's ways of looking and understanding the world which have been erased in the writing of history and of society. Attending to women's experiences has also been an important way of naming and analyzing some of the forms of oppression encountered by women as women. In this role, experience has been and continues to be unavoidably useful.

However, many authors have argued for a critical examination of how this concept has been often used as something

endlessly plural and unchallengeable, as if self-evident, readily available when we look 'inside' ourselves, and only one's own, or only own's group (Haraway 1991: 109).

This way of thinking experience is tied to an essentialist notion of the subject - a unified, fixed and fully conscious social actor with a transparent will and rationality. Experience then would be what this fixed subject 'has' (cf. Steedly 1993: 26).

Such an essentialist way of approaching experience obscures other important questions, such as what counts as experience? And, how is experience produced, interpreted, negotiated? Haraway (1991) points out how women's studies, and feminisms more generally, have been engaged in a practice of constructing 'women's experience'. However, by not paying enough attention to the politics of this construction and the differences between women, this practice has effectively excluded the experiences of people such as women of colour, gay and lesbians, 'Third World women', and First Nations women to name just a few (see for example, Emberley 1993; Trinh 1989; Ossennontion/Kane and Skonaganle:rá/Maracle 1989).

If experience is used as something self-evident and 'original', it is not possible to consider how the category 'woman' is produced, nor how in this construction gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. Difference itself is thus essentialized, and it becomes the mark of a monolithic rather than historical identity. Works such as Pathak and Rajan (1992), Mani (1990), and Spivak (1988; 1987) have highlighted this problematic. Women's experiences can be appropriated and become instrumental to colonialist and patriarchal practices and ultimately silence women further (cf. Mani 1990; see also Escobar 1995 below). The presumed innocence and self-evidence of experience also tends to obscure women's agency in different contexts and the ways they negotiate their places in society. For these reasons, Scott (1991) argues, it is important to "historicize" experience itself and allow for a questioning of how difference is produced.

Similarly, Mouffe writes that “the central issues [should] become: how is “woman” constructed as a category within different discourses? how is sexual difference made a pertinent distinction in social relations? and how are relations of subordination constructed through such a distinction?” (Mouffe 1992: 373) Civi Sánchez and Martínez Flores (1994) seem to point in this direction. Their research attempts to map Ecuadorian women’s experiences and identities as complex constructions along the axis of desires, aspirations, dominant conceptualizations of women, relations with the “others” (here men and “bad women”) and daily acts of resistance.

Here the project of historicizing experience goes hand in hand with historicizing the subject, that is to recognize it as socially constructed, shifting and partial. It is allied with thinking identity as a never accomplished creation, as something always in the process of becoming and of being transformed (see Bhabha 1994; Butler 1990). Experience then is a “process” in which the “self-as-subject” is constantly (re)created (cf. Steedly 1993: 20 and 26). Consequently, there will also be a necessarily complex relationship between experience and representation. Steedly suggest that we see this relation as a creative, disruptive, “mutual shaping of each to the other” (Steedly 1993: 25). This is particularly relevant to a movement like the *Taller* which seeks empowerment for/by women who have been historically erased as subjects.

In relation to political organizing, experience emerges as “that which is at once most necessary and most in need of examination” (Steedly 1993: 25). Significantly, the actions and narrations of the *Taller* reflect this double edge of experience. The concern for women’s identities, knowledges and personal life conditions is central to all of their projects and ideally guides their way of organizing political action and of conceiving social change. Moreover, *both* representing women’s experiences *and* critically examining how the latter are socially constructed are important aspects of their praxis. The *fotonovela* discussed in Chapter 3 is an example of a ‘way of telling’ which combines these two strategical needs. Furthermore, the participants’ narrations can be seen in themselves as

creative reworkings on how experience can be translated into a political project. Stated differently, the ways women put lives into words also address the processes of putting lives into projects.

Social movements by women in Latin America emerge from an historical context in which, among other things, development has appropriated women's experiences without necessarily empowering them. Escobar (1995) points out that from the seventies onward the discourse of development has made women visible as subjects and as potential participants in the 'wave of progress'. However, the terms of this participation and the very meaning of 'development' have been decided by others, mainly bureaucrats and economists in First World institutions. In other words, the machine of development "allows [women] ... to be seen, but would not pay attention to what they say" (Chow 1992 quoted in Escobar 1995: 191). This also refers to a process of knowledge creation in which women's lives become data without a voice, or fixed and stereotyped experiences to be depicted and ultimately erased - in which "typified descriptions become a 'way of knowing and a way of *not* knowing, a way of talking *about* women and a way of silencing women'" (Escobar 1995: 179-180). Similarly Lind (1992), documenting this issue in Ecuador, argues that development interventions tend to constitute women as subjects in need, whereby "need" is seen primarily as domestic or economic, and is dissociated with issues of identity and power. In this context social movements represent an alternative as they build on women's experiences to politicize what women themselves perceive as being their needs.

The *Taller* then finds itself both inside and outside of development. On one side, it is tied to the latter as it is funded by international organizations (mostly NGOs) which operate in the sector. As part of this link, it has to 'produce knowledge' in the form of detailed descriptions about the realities its encounters in the *barrios* and about its plans, goals, and results. Part of the activity of the 'main office' where the staff works is in fact to produce records about the organization. Their work, projects, and actions are thus accompanied by a deep reflection on their philosophy, goals, and learning experiences, and

by a critical analysis of the social setting they operate in. The staff writes these accounts both as parts of proposals sent to these funding agencies, and as a way of reflecting on and evaluating the processes and activities of and within the organization. On the other side, however, the *Taller* challenges dominant development discourses and practices with its focus on experiential learning, on popular education methods, and on social justice struggle as an open-ended, participatory process (see Chapter One).

This thesis is thus about narration, experience, and the political engagement of women involved in the *Taller*. It is also a *situated* and *partial* ethnography. Clifford (1986), emphasizing how writing is not an innocent or transparent process, writes that every ethnography is necessarily “*partial* - committed and incomplete” (Clifford 1986: 7). Tsing (1993) brings this further by pointing out how ethnographic “knowledge” is the result of the imbrication of the ethnographer in the mesh of storytelling (see also Haraway 1991; Favret-Saada 1980). What makes ethnography insightful is primarily that it is constructed by situated commentators. As it is always placed within and engaged with its wider contexts, this telling, listening and retelling of stories shows both the strength and the limit of local knowledges and discourses - as well as the cross cultural constructions of gender, of ‘development’, and of the displacements which constitute centers and peripheries.

In this thesis I look at the *Taller* through particular stories about the uncertain borders of personal lives and public participation. My ‘knowledge’ of the *Taller* is mediated through these narrations. Indeed, my focus during the research shifted from programs and structures of the organization to ‘stories’, as the participants constantly diverted my attention to the criss-crossing of lives and activism. My understanding of the organization is particularly structured by and around the life story fragments of three women: María Escudero, ‘Milena’, and ‘Silvia’. The latter two are pseudonyms I have chosen to use in order to protect the privacy of two women who might not be comfortable with their private stories being told. I also tried to conceal private information in all three stories as much as

possible. In regards to María Escudero, I found it impossible to talk about what I learnt from her while erasing her name and her public role in Latin America.

These three women are very different from each other in terms of class, age, education, etc. Theirs are not meant to be typical stories presenting some norms about women's lives and participation. Nor are their stories 'exceptional' in the sense that they are intended to show, through their difference, what 'other' women do and think. Rather, each of these life stories became for me a particular reading key for interpreting and understanding the *Taller*. As such, I also hope to have woven into my analysis some of the admiration and respect which their lives and knowledges inspired. These life stories emerged in day to day conversations. I did not intend at first to include them in my research. However, I feel that reflecting on these stories in this thesis is necessary for me to be accountable to their sharing of knowledge, as well as to my own positionality. The way these women told me about their lives created for me a possibility and ground for learning, that is a situated perspective on the organization. This echoes, once again, Tsing's argument that

ethnographic insight emerges, not from culture-to-culture confrontation nor woman-to-woman communication, but, instead, from the stories told by one situated commentator to another (Tsing 1993: 225).

In her ethnography of the Meratus, Tsing attends to situated, cross-cultural commentaries of particular women, and reads their stories in two directions. She sees them as commentaries on trans-cultural and local discourses of gender and culture which make up the context in which these narrations are embedded and socially constituted. At the same time, she pays attention to how the creative reworkings of the speakers highlight and stretch the very limits of gender and culture. In other words, the women's stories she presents, with their elements of resistance, "show the contours of power in which resisting [and marginal] subjects are themselves constituted" (Tsing 1993: 232). However, a central part to her project is to attend to the ways in which individual stories "expand and

unbalance dominant ideas of the contours in which familiar subjects are made” (Tsing 1993: 232).

Following her approach, I do not want to consider women’s stories merely as a representation of “transparent concomitants of ... social categories” (Tsing 1993: 232) such as class differentiation, ethnic identity, or dominant conceptions of gender. Nor do I want to take stories just as accounts of agency and resistance within the ‘personal’ realm. Rather, I attempt to look at how the very act of narration blends and expands these two aspects to constitute a complex and engaged commentary anchored in the context of social action. These partial and situated readings allow me to look at the fluid narrative space within the organization as a locus where the political might be ‘reinvented’ and they make visible a myriad of sites of political engagement.

My text will thus alternate between chapters in which I describe in a general way some projects and the rationale of the organization (descriptions which thus reveal a fictitious point of view from ‘above’) and chapters which reflect a perspective shaped by the participant’s stories and comments. In Chapter One I will introduce the organization in terms of its goals, projects, and philosophy. What I will particularly refer to in this chapter is how the *Taller* is centered on ‘experience’ both as the point of departure for social change and as a method informing its analysis and strategies. This focus also points out different and concurrent modes of knowledge in the organization.

This very focus on experience by the *Taller* brings us to look further than programs and projects. In the second chapter, I follow the narratives of María Escudero and Milena which reflect on the issue of experience in political organizing. Part of my argument is that, when we follow these stories, the scenario becomes ‘messy’ and reveals other perspectives, and other issues at play in the organization. In this chapter I attempt to consider narrations as actions, and actions as narrations. This gives a different perspective on the organization, as it disengages us with a fixed view of programs on the one side and

comments about the latter on the other side. Both projects and stories, as well as the instability of their difference, are an integral part to the *Taller* as a social movement.

In Chapter Three I will address the *fotonovela* produced by the *Taller* as a particular way of telling women's lives and experiences. I will thus return to the philosophy and a particular project of the *Taller* as well as develop further the concept of narrative as a strategical process and a tool for empowerment. Finally in Chapter Four, I will present Silvia's narration. Her story is embedded in a web of commentary which contours both the organization and its philosophical project and her position within it, through her occupying and authoring of stories.

Chapter One

A Decade of Empowerment

El hecho de ser mujeres ... no crean que es t n facil. Muchas y muchos de ustedes quiz s nunca se habr n puesto a pensar cu nto cuesta ser mujeres en el Ecuador de hoy d a y m s a n ser mujeres de sectores populares.

Being women ... do not believe that this fact is so easy. Perhaps many of you have never thought about it, how much it costs to be women in today's Ecuador, and even more, being women of the popular sectors. (In *Shirma*, no. 1, December 1994: 1)

The *Taller*, while inscribing itself in the rise of social movements in Latin America, is also a response to a particular social, economical, and political condition in Ecuador. A large number of women's organizations had emerged in Ecuador in the seventies (cf. Lind 1992), during the time of the military dictatorship (1970-1979)¹. However, it was with the return of a more democratic structure in the eighties that women's groups and movements became even more numerous. According to Lind, the principal reasons for this development were the deepening of the economic crisis in the country and a generalized disillusionment with political parties and government structures.

The *Taller* in particular was started during the term of Le n Febres Cordero (1984-88), which combined a conservative and repressive government with economic scarcity. During that period the country was experiencing increased poverty, cuts in public services, and state repression - with many reported human rights abuses and the 'disappearance' of a number of people. The economical hardship was, on the one hand, a consequence of recession in the country started in the early eighties and, on the other hand, a direct result of

¹ President Velasco Ibarra proclaimed himself head of the country with the support of the military forces in 1970. The latter replaced him with General Rodr guez in 1972. Rodr guez was then ousted from power by another faction of the army in 1976. This event was followed by three years of tense and complex negotiations for a return to civilian-democratic rule. During that time Ecuador was still under the control of the armed forces (cf. Hurtado 1985: 294 ff).

structural adjustment programs in line with the requirements of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The latter were first introduced in 1982 under the government of Osvaldo Hurtado (1980-84) and then taken on by all the governments that followed.

These programs of adjustment and stabilization comprised the devaluation of the Ecuadorian currency, an on-going privatization of services and state companies, and policies geared towards export. This also meant that real wages fell while food and transportation prices rose, and that public services such as health and education were cut. Although state repression eased with the end of Cordero's term in 1988, the politics of structural adjustment have been maintained and are responsible for the continuous deterioration of the standard of living for the majority of the population.

In this context, as Moser (1993) indicates, low-income women have been experiencing the worst cutbacks (see also Escobar 1995:176; Lind 1992). It is they who are usually responsible for the maintenance of the household, and the 'crisis' has meant for them harder and longer work hours to make ends meet, and to compensate for the decline in wages and/or employment of their male partners or spouses. For these reasons, argues Moser, low-income women in Ecuador are also having a hard time balancing their different roles - their work in the home, in the (official/unofficial) market force, and in the community.

These conditions are apparent in the marginalized *barrios* with which the *Taller* is involved. These are neighbourhoods more or less at the periphery of the city (El Placer and La Cantera, for example, have grown on the steep sides of the mountains which encircle Quito) and which have been growing with the migration of rural people to the capital. Some of them are 'ghost' neighbourhoods, that is they are not recognized as existent by the municipality which consequently does not see it as its task to provide them with any

services. Depending on the *barrio* and on the family², the living conditions range from poor to extremely precarious. In the two *barrios* I mentioned above, for example, most of the houses are literally crammed into each other, and in La Cantera part of the dwellings are overtowered by a quarry which is said to be about to collapse.

It is the women of these neighbourhoods who are the ones most confronted with the very poor services which, due to the economic crisis, are further receding. In most of the *barrios* there is no garbage collection, no paved roads, no health centres, no public transportation within the neighbourhood, no recreation areas for children, and in many cases no running and/or drinking water. This makes the daily tasks of women all the more strenuous. The participants of the women's groups often expressed the fact that they have very little time for their daily chores, let alone for themselves. The majority of them either works at home (sometimes also manufacturing, cooking, or fixing something for a small profit) or is involved in low-paying jobs such as street vendors, domestic servants, or washerwomen. The time spent for the meetings and activities of the organization has to be added to their paid occupations and their work in the household.

Most of the women in these *barrios* see their workload constantly increasing also because they are always looking for some other activities which could supplement the family wages. In April 1996, for example, the participants in the women's groups *La Cantera* started to attend a course organized by the *Taller* to learn to bake breads and to set up and manage a bakery. One of the workers in the daycare thus described her day as following: she wakes up early to prepare some food, she works in the children's centre from 7:30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., she attends the baking course from 5:00 to 8:00 p.m., then she goes home, buys food, prepares dinner, does the occasional laundry (that is washing

² The *barrio* La Cantera, for example, is divided within itself. Afro-Ecuadorians and indigenous migrants from rural areas occupy the poorest and most precarious living spaces. The former live further from the entrance to the *barrio*, and the houses of the latter are mostly located directly under the quarry.

by hand), all while caring for her young children³. In the weekends and her occasional times off, she cleans the house, does some extra chores which pile up during the week and is involved in some events of the organization which might take place. Notwithstanding the strenuous routine, she and her fellow participants indicated that they did not want to give up the work in the daycare (their source of income) nor the baking course. The latter was a source of enthusiasm for the whole group and the participants indicated that it represented a great opportunity for them to learn a new skill together with other women.

Furthermore, the deterioration of the living standards and the cuts to health services mean that the health of most women who live in these areas is undermined. For example, anemia resulting from poor nutrition is a very common concern among the participants. This is a serious problem especially during pregnancies. The women in the *barrio* groups and the staff have also been very concerned with the effects of these situations on children's living conditions. The children of the *barrios* in which the organization operates are often at risk due to malnourishment and little access to health care. In 1993, the women's organizations *Mujeres en Camino*, *Calandria*, and *La Cantera* wrote in the bulletin *Chaquiñan* (no. 20, December 1993: 1) that in their *barrios*, seven out of every ten children did not have proper food and were consequently in poor health. Furthermore, most of the children who are too young for school⁴ have to spend their day without the care of adults, either at home or in the streets, and once old enough, working jobs such as street vendors or shoeshine boys. The staff indicates that approximately one million children under 15 work such jobs in Ecuador (cf. *Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, a: 4). Girls also tend to assume at a very early age responsibilities for the household and for their younger siblings. These situations, writes the staff, have brought an "increase in accidents,

³ According to the staff, poor women work up to 17 or 18 hours per day.

⁴ Most of the children in the *barrios* go to school at least for some years.

malnourishment, morbidity and affective/emotive deprivation" (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, c: 5).

Major projects addressing these problems that have been accomplished in the past five to ten years has been the institution and organization of three child care centres. Two of these are currently operating, and are now managed by the women's groups of the respective *barrios*. They have been very important accomplishments for the organization and for the neighbourhoods. Children in the centres are given meals, receive medical attention, and have a safe place where they can play, learn, and socialize with others. The daycares are also an important space for women, and one of the two centres still functions as the meeting place for the women's group.

Besides structural adjustment and the worsening economic situation, the *Taller* is also confronted with a political arena largely dominated by populism, which effectively excludes the participation of the popular sector and of women in particular. The recent situation of Ecuador in fact could be described, to borrow a term by Whitehead (1992 quoted in Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 43), as a "democracy by default". Since 1925 Ecuador has oscillated between civilian and military rule⁵. Rather than a participatory democracy, it is a "kind of truce" (Whitehead 1992 quoted in Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 43) left by the past repressions and dictatorships which characterizes the political situation in the country.

Populism is an important aspect of this scenario. Most political parties in Ecuador have used the image of 'the people' and of 'the popular' to gain political power. As Stein comments in regards to the Peruvian political scene, the result amounts to "the political massification of paternalism" (Stein 1980 quoted in Rowe and Shelling 1991: 153). The staff sees populist rhetoric as a serious problem, as it seeks to appropriate certain hopes, languages and imaginings of the less privileged strata of society only to gain power and

⁵ The military has seized power during four periods: in 1925 to 1931, in 1937 to 1938, in 1963 to 1966, and in 1970 to 1979 (cf. Hurtado 1985: 255 ff).

further control these parts of the population. In the poignant words of one of the bulletins of the organization:

The president, the vice-president, and the others ... offered us, in their electoral campaign, to make an end to poverty, and yes, they are accomplishing it: they will eliminate us all poor people...but by killing us of starvation! (In *Chaquiñan*, no. 21, March 1994: 2).

According to the staff populist practices have made a real political participation of the popular sectors even more difficult, because they have eroded all confidence of people in institutionalized politics. As María Escudero described political praxis in Ecuador: "lies are [taken for the] truth, and the truth [consists of] lies".

As I indicated before, the *Taller* is clearly situated in a time of disillusionment with all political parties, similarly to the majority of other contemporary social movements. The staff of the *Taller* has very a strong commitment to the Left, but does not see any left-oriented party in the country able to sustain and promote an effective political, social and economic alternative. It often expressed that this is a time of general "*desconcierto*", characterized by "a lack of alternative proposals for the construction of a new society and a new public administration". The distrust of the current political structure in Ecuador is also evident in the women involved in the organization at the neighbourhood level. Their first response to politics and political participation is disinterest. During a popular education workshop in February 1996 which focussed on the political participation of women in Ecuador, the participants repeatedly expressed that politics does not matter in their lives and that it is something not really worth investing in. Although most of them would vote, they did not have the least trust that their conditions would improve by hand of the government.

The *Taller* seeks to address these interlocking issues through a wide-ranging project of empowerment - in the words of the staff, through "integral actions". Practically, these translate into projects geared towards both finding concrete solutions to the pressing problems I mentioned above such as health facilities, professional training, and daycares, as well as facilitating personal growth, expression, and critical consciousness. For this

latter purpose, the *Taller* relies on concepts and methods of popular education and popular theatre.

To characterize them in a few words, the concepts of popular education, mostly associated with the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, center on combining (adult) literacy and education with liberation from oppression. Freire (1970) criticized institutional approaches to learning, in which education and literacy are disconnected from the reality of people's lives, and which are based on an asymmetry of power between the many who do not know (the students) and the few who do (the teachers, and/or those in power). Freire sought to valorize what marginalized people already know, and to build on this knowledge to attain not only literacy but also critical understanding, self-assurance, and the will to change conditions of oppression.

The tradition of popular theatre in Latin America has been based on similar ideas (see De Costa 1992; De Toro 1984; Boal 1979; Luzuriaga 1978). Theatre is seen as a language and a mode of expression which all people can use to reflect on the conditions they live in. As such, it can act like a powerful catalyst for social change. It is a theatre located in the streets and engaged with its audiences in a collective process of learning. Central to popular education and theatre is that education should not be an imposition of 'notions', but an experiential learning - that is a discovery and a critical reflection of one's location in the world. This creation of knowledge necessarily needs to happen through dialogue. As Freire describes it, it has to be "an encounter among men (sic) who name the world, it must not be a situation where some men (sic) name on behalf of others" (Freire 1988 quoted in De Costa 1992: 10).

The deployment of these concepts by the staff together with the affiliated women's groups brings about different modes of knowing and representing reality, which coexist with more traditional accounts, analysis, and statistics. This is, again, a mode of learning shaped by popular education methods, based on experiential knowledge and consisting on 'naming' one's own world and envisioning solutions in a dialogue with other women. In

one bulletin, for example, the women's group of the *barrio* La Cantera describe their neighbourhood together with the staff in what is also an attempt to reclaim the community's history and a possible common identity. In this account women from this *barrio* narrate its story from the earliest settlements, based on talks they themselves had with older occupants. They also include legends and events which are part of its imaginary landscape. I will quote their description at length:

Our *barrio* started to exist many years ago. It is so old that we could not find out exactly when it was formed. ... Its origin was [linked] with the prison 'García Moreno'. On the right side there were small houses made of adobe and on the left side there were some more houses behind the river which the miners called 'La Quebrada' ... The majority of the people worked exploiting the quarry, some were guards in the prison, and the rest of them had different occupations. ... [In the quarry,] the rubble was almost exclusively a product of women's work. They obtained it as following: they placed small stones on a big and flat one and they hammered them small. ...

Some of the oldest persons in the *barrio* were already born in this sector. ... There are very few people remaining from that period. We visited some of them, ... with smiles and tears they told us the following: 'Although the *barrio* did not have the basic services, it was maintained very clean. People used candles and oil lamps for light, took water from the slope for their cooking and they washed in the river. ...' He also told us: 'do not think that because we were quarry miners we had no education, from us was born the art of sculpture and cutting of stone, ... We were united and we supported each other. ... From our *barrio* were born politicians, artists and ... professionals, like Jaime del Castillo and the brother Villamar.'

The *barrio* has been progressing in some aspects and it has been regressing in others. A part of the lands of the quarry which were owned by the Church were given to poor people and the women's organization, supported by the Corporación Promoción de la Mujer, constructed a daycare.... Our *barrio* has a history and today it is not the same [as yesterday's]. ... What we hope for the future [is that] all of us neighbours change our attitude, that we be more enthusiastic, joyful, communicative and united, to transform our *barrio* in an enjoyable place, active, human, beautiful, since it is here that we live. ... We have many problems, [some of] the most important are: There is no participatory neighbourhood committee ... There is no understanding [and collaboration] between neighbours. ... There is a lack of support from the municipality... [Some] Solutions to our problems [are:] More integration and collaboration of all the people of the sector. Calling of a meeting so that we inform each other of our problems and we resolve them together (In *Chaquiñan*, no. 19, September 1993: 3-6).

The women who speak in this text ground on their knowledge and experiences the authority to analyze critically and collectively the problems of the community and to suggest changes and solutions. While doing this, they depict the *barrio* as their home and

community; as a place in which to live and where it is possible to struggle for improvements and solidarity. This view clearly contrasts with representations of the *barrio* as just unsafe, dirty, and poor.

This mode of knowledge reflected in this description of the neighbourhood La Cantera by its women inhabitants is part of the attempt from the side of the staff to develop a whole methodology from the direct contact and dialogue with low-income women, "a participatory methodology, not hierarchic, nor based on impositions" (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, *d*: 2). From the self-descriptions and reflections of the staff it becomes apparent that they see the organization as being centered on experience in two (related) ways. They point out how the *Taller* is first of all, a "decade of experience", that is, it is based on an ongoing *process of learning* to which the founders have dedicated much of their lives. Furthermore, it is the lived experiences of oppression, inequality as well as empowerment of low-income women which can be the source of change for the society. In the first issue of the bulletin of the women's group *Shirma*, we read this presentation of who they are and what they stand for:

Here we are ... We wish to tell you things and that you listen ... We, women who never had our own voice. Women who have been told what to feel and what to think since a very long time. And you should know that this is for all of us a great effort. Inclusive for you, who we hope will be our reader. Because some times it is difficult to appreciate what comes out of our own hands, of our own head. This is one of our goals: to know firmly that we women are worthy human beings and that we are able to accomplish a great deal for our selves, our families, our sector, and our country (In *Shirma*, no. 1, December 1994: 1).

The focus on experience in the *Taller* also comes to the fore in the description of their first and small single project carried out in an impoverished neighbourhood in the periphery of Quito, La Ballica, in 1984. To this purpose, María Escudero, Nela Meriguez, Clara Merino and another woman who consequently left the organization, came together to form the *Taller* with the financial support of *Servicio Universitario Mundial* /World University Service. The project mainly consisted on organizing a women's discussion group located in the neighbourhood itself, and consequently to organize projects with its participants that would improve the living standard of the women and their families, as well

as raise their critical awareness on a number of issues. This very first project dealt with four basic areas: education, skill-building, health, and recreation. The staff organized workshops on sexuality and critical thinking, courses geared towards generating more income for women, like sewing and weaving, and some cultural and recreational events. In this *barrio*, the *Taller* also created a small pharmacy and a health care centre.

The staff persons describe this work as the beginning of a difficult process of learning, and thus harder than any of them had expected. On the one hand, in trying to organize a women's group, the *Taller* found itself in conflict with many husbands in the *barrio*, who did not agree with their wives attending a women's group meeting outside of the house. This is still a problem today in most *barrios* where the *Taller* operates. As a general rule, husbands do get accustomed to their wives being involved and participating in women's groups activities after some time. The women I talked to indicated that this change of attitude happens in part because their husbands can see that the organization accomplishes something positive for the entire community. However, some amount of confrontation always remains, and both the staff and the participants of the *barrio* groups indicate that many women still cannot participate or are limited in their involvement by their husbands or relatives.

On the other hand, the staff discovered, in their collaboration with women of the *barrios*, a reality which "surpassed the vision from which [they] (...) had started". They summarize this reality as follows:

the women confronted: misery and poverty, but also solitude and abandonment; the necessity to survive as well as silence; extenuating work days that wore them out prematurely, and also violence against their gender; the need for dignified work and at the same time the lack of education and skills; historically rich cultural expressions and yet, paradoxically, the depreciation of these expressions (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, b: 2).

In this statement the staff also refers to the undervaluing of indigenous cultures as well as the complexity of identification for women who are of mixed descent (*mestizos*). The latter category comprises the majority of the participants of the organization. In most cases their

parents or (great)grandparents were Quichua people from rural areas in the Sierra which migrated to the city.

Ethnicity is a problematic and power-laden issue in Ecuador, as it is elsewhere in Latin America. Indigenous people have suffered a long history of genocide and on-going open discrimination. Tied in this history are the discourses of the 'nation' which promote a myth of "racial democracy" (see Radcliffe and Westwood 1996; Whitten 1981). The latter refers to the idea of a democratic 'mixing' of people under the project of a unifying and modernizing project of the nation. Within this rhetoric, however, indigenous identity stands for "backwardness and distance from the modern project" (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 37) and 'mixing' denotes a "hierarchical movement ... - *blanqueamiento* or whitening understood in physical and cultural terms" (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 37).

The staff, together with the women's groups, reflects in the *fotonovela* on the complexity of this issue in the life of the participants of the *Taller*. The opening images of the *fotonovela* titled "*Soñar... ¡Cuánta locura!*" show a *barrio* dweller looking at two indigenous persons in their traditional clothing. What he thinks about them is startling in its duplicity:

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| [first picture] | This <i>barrio</i> has been filling up with <i>indios</i> . |
| [second picture] | I do not understand what they say. |
| [third picture] | <i>¡Qué bruto!</i> [literally: what a brute I am!; How stupid from me!] Just now I realize why I could never understand my grandmother. |
| [fourth picture] | My grandmother was just like them! |
| [fifth picture] | It was beautiful where she lived. There was a waterfall and plenty of trees ... while here the city is taking over the mountain. |

(*Fotonovela La Venada* , no. 10, no date indicated: 3-4)

This monologue expresses well the sense of distance from indigenous culture and identity. The first of its connotations is a self-conscious act of distancing which reflects the discrimination against indigenous people pervading the society - reflected in the

contemptuous and rejecting statement that the *barrio* is 'full of "indios"'. The second sense of distance denotes an historical difficulty in reconnecting with one's sense of history and part of identity - emerging in the statement that he is not able to understand their language as he was not able to communicate with his own grandmother. This scene reflects the sufferance of a generation which seems to be lost and "tak[en] over" by the city and which cannot understand any more the ways and language of their grandparents together with what they stand for.

Similarly, another *fotonovela*, "*Mirando adentro...*" (*Fotonovela La Venada* no date indicated), contours this problem of identity in present Ecuador by depicting the wanting to/having to hide 'indigenous-ness' and the urge to reclaim the latter as a part of identity, as an historical root, and as a tool for empowerment (see also Chapter Three, Fig. 5). These depictions also open the question of who gets to define the difference between 'indigenous' and *mestizo* and in which contexts. The character of the first scenes of "*Soñar... ¡Cuánta locura!*" might romanticize the indigenous identity of his grandmother and the beautiful place she lived in, and at the same time still resent the contemporary, 'poor *indios*' who live in his own *barrio*.

Listening to these experiences of the participants helped the staff to reflect on the needs of women living in popular *barrios* - and on the necessity of putting these needs and experiences in the foreground of their analysis and action. This informed the holistic approach of the *Taller*, which would take into account the concrete problems of the participants at the same time as it addressed the ways popular women think about themselves. The staff realized that if they wanted women to participate in a social movement and in the reshaping of the society, they had to find ways to strengthen their creativity and self-esteem, and to transform the very way popular women conceive their life and their role in history. Therefore the *Taller* took on as its role to help

the integral development of each *compañera* [woman participant] so as to cause/spark her self-esteem, her conscience [*autoconciencia*] and her need to express herself, to recreate her own reality, and to feel able to transform it (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, *d*: 2).

This approach based on 'direct experience' also includes a continuous attempt on the part of the staff at reformulating a possible relation of solidarity and constructed affinities between them and the women they work with at the neighbourhood level. They write:

little by little, we were also discovering our selves, and becoming involved [*involucrando*] with them in a relation of respect for differences and diversity, in order to construct collectively spaces of participation (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, b: 2).

The staff recognizes the need to create alternative relationships with low-income women who participate in the *Taller* - links based on solidarity and affection rather than paternalistic and clientelistic ties. These, according to the staff, are often prevalent in other Latin American social movements. The staff acknowledges that there *are* differences - especially in terms of class - between them and the women living in the *barrios* and they do not intend to build relations with the latter by concealing these differences. The staff argue that in their role of intermediaries they are necessary for the organization, at least at this moment, and that it is possible for them to work together with popular women in a positive way. At the same time, their goal is that the women's organizations in the *barrios* become independent from the support of the 'main office' including in the raising and managing of their own funding.

This issue of difference and affinities is important, and I believe that it plays a significant role in the projects and self-reflections of the staff and the organization as a whole. For example, the organization has been using alternative media, and producing community newsletters. The purpose of this is to provide women of the *barrios* with a vehicle for expression, and the staff has been organizing workshops on "popular journalism" to build towards this goal. However, the contribution of the 'main office' is decisive for the media production to actually happen. The staff edits the contributions it receives from the women's groups, writes some (sometimes almost all) of it, funds its production and organizes its publication. I believe thus that the staff is engaging in a tension and a continuous movement between 'letting women speak' and wanting to/having

to mediate this process thereby also deploying and retaining power. There is no ready solution for this complex and tense issue of interaction, but rather it exists as a question and as an open debate within the organization.

In summary, the staff stresses that their vision, work and strategy is based on their direct work experience with the women of the *barrios*. This is not simply the base of the knowledge production which guides their involvement and the direction of their projects. The aim of the *Taller* as an organization is to work with the personal experiences of marginalized women, as a starting point for discussing, understanding, and transforming both the private and the public realms. The staff writes:

With a direct experience, which became richer and richer through the contact with the women of this sector, we reaffirm the necessity to trigger processes leading to self-esteem [*autoestima y conciencia*] ... which would have the possibility to maintain broad horizons [*que tuvieran posibilidades de mantenerse a largo plazo*]. For these reasons, we create integral actions (which include the public and the private), as a form in which women can discover their potentials, appropriate their own lives, and glimpse their own path toward becoming full subjects (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, b: 2).

To the staff, this double-sided focus on experience is what makes the *Taller* a popular organization, reaching the popular classes that make up the majority of the Ecuadorian population. According to the staff many, if not most, of the other women's organizations in the country are concentrating in giving women political power, following an approach sketched in the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. However, for the staff, this task is impossible if women of the popular sectors do not change the very way they think about themselves and their lives, and if they do not attain more self-esteem and empowerment in their daily relations.

The staff's critical stance towards most Ecuadorian women's groups also derives from the fact that they are extremely suspicious of any women's organization which would work too closely with the institutions of power - more precisely with the Ecuadorian state, and with the United States' agencies or organizations. For this reason, the *Taller* does not accept funding from the Ecuadorian state but only from international (yet non-U.S.) non-governmental organizations. The staff is very critical of the co-optation of social

movements by hand of the state, either directly - by offering patronage in return for votes - or ideologically and discursively - by transforming women into subjects in need, clients of the state and a group which has to be protected by agencies and institutions who ultimately control them (see Lind 1992).

This phenomenon has indeed a long history, both in Ecuador and more widely in Latin America. Miller (1991) for example writes about how governments and political parties in various countries of South and Central America tried to co-opt early feminist movements who were lobbying for extending the right to vote to women (for other examples see Alvarez 1990: 20). According to the *Taller* instances of co-optation happen often in Ecuador with women's organizations and with neighbourhood associations, to name just these two. In the case of the latter, political candidates regularly offer promises and guarantees of improvements in exchange for the neighbourhood's electoral support. This very limited nature of most neighbourhood associations was in fact one of the reason which prompted the four founders of the *Taller* to create an alternative meeting group for women. They felt that those associations were too bound to electoral concerns and that they did not provide a space where women could effectively voice their opinions.

The following event further exemplifies the point of view of the staff towards the issue of co-optation in relation to women's associations. On March 8th many women's groups in Quito decided to accept the invitation to join the municipality in the celebration and commemoration of International Women's Day. Instead the *Taller* decided not to join and to voice their protests about the status of women and the status of the country by demonstrating in the streets as it does every year on this day. According to the staff, the other groups which participated in the programs organized by the municipality were turning a day that ought to *belong* to women into a day *about* women, in which the authorities once more talked *for* women. In their opinion this amounted to a surrender from the side of the women's groups involved, allowing the municipality to take control of the event and its meaning.

This example underscores the fact that the staff sees the identity of the *Taller* as a popular organization as very important in its relations to other Ecuadorian women's groups. The staff deplores the fact that, although there have been and still are a large number of women's groups in Ecuador, these have not been successful in creating a larger and far-reaching, effective women's movement in the country. In its analysis, the staff argues that one of the reasons for this failure is a lack of communication between these different organizations as well as of a common and concrete program for social transformation. According to the *Taller*, another serious problem in some of these organizations is that they advocate for a major participation of women in society, but do not address the need for deeper structural changes. Still other organizations, mainly led by middle-class women and/or members from the Left, have as their objective to form a movement with women from the popular sectors, but in reality do not work at all with these women and are very distant from the very reality they want to represent. This emphasizes once again how the connection with women's experiences at the level of the daily life in the neighbourhood is central to the philosophy of the organization. Its participants, writes the staff, are "women with needs and dreams which were not invented by others, but rather emerged from conflicting realities and from the search of collective and individual changes" (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, b: 5).

To conclude I want to make clear that this critical stance towards women's movements must not be taken as a wish on the part of the *Taller* to operate in isolation. On the contrary, the *Taller* sees it as necessary to network with other women's groups both in Ecuador and abroad. Many of their activities are directed towards this goal. The staff has always insisted that the *barrio* women's groups participate in exchanges and partnerships with other organizations, and this has happened a number of times. Two members of *La Cantero*, for example, have participated in international meetings on the status of women, travelling one to Chile and another to Cuba. The *Taller* in fact sees itself as a part of popular

movements by women, and recognizes that it is in the strength of these alliances and the articulation of their efforts that a new society can be created.

This description of the organization would make little sense were I not to attend, in the next chapter, to stories about people's participation in the *Taller* and the additional perspectives these suggest. The stories told me by María Escudero and Milena interrupt and coexist with this coherent pattern of structures, projects and mandates which permits me to imagine the *Taller* in this present description - which itself is also just one particular way of narrating the organization. Things are not so clear if I take the paths of life story fragments and commentaries as the starting point of the analysis. Chapter Two is a discussion about the links between women's experiences and political involvement guided by interlocking reading keys. It will be shaped by María's suggestion that I see experience as double-edged - both something grounding in relation to the *Taller* as a social movements, and always in the process of being renegotiated in narration, therefore constantly recreating the subjects involved in its political struggle. What I learnt from Milena, in turn, is a suggestion to look at the organization itself as a narrative space and to consider how narrative practices address the complex issue of experience within activism.

Chapter Two

'Experience' and the Political - Four Fragments

I. María Escudero

My grandfather was an *Indio* of the *Selva* [rain forest], in the North of Argentina, but his job was as a railman. My grandmother was a cook, she used to sell food at the market. My grandfather the railman could not read or write but he used to tell us about the train: he knew places, things and people, he knew all the distances of wherever his train went.

He was an *Indio* of the *Selva*. And the train ... I grew up in the countryside, but with the presence of the train, the coming and going of trains, its perennial movement, the interminable traveling of the train.

And the train made me a traveler, made me cosmopolitan, made me social. Social because traveling by train means to get to know the people who are sitting beside you, in front of you, and behind you. It is movement but in this movement one socializes.

And the train taught me so much about life!

It taught me that nothing is stable, nothing is permanent, and definitive.

Every place and every station of life is only a passage. It is not possible to stop, everything is movement. Life is the train that continuously comes, that continuously passes. I have a huge, interminable memory. A 300 years old memory of this beautiful continent, of the conquest, of what could have been this continent without the conquest. I remember everything. I used to come to villages with my theatre group [at the time María Escudero and her group were travelling by foot and by bus through all of South America to perform popular theatre], and I would say: let us go to the church. It is this way. And we would go that way, and reach the church. I know every place, because I have an interminable memory, a memory that precedes me. The train taught me life - so I know all the stations that come before me, and I can see all the stations that come after me.

...

Theatre is what is most inside society, and life. ... Because we are all, always, characters, and every day we put on a character. ... The important thing is to distance ourselves, recognize the particular character we are playing, and construct a dialectical relation with it. And when the actor does this ... ah! What a relief for the audience!

This is a life story fragment of María Escudero, one of the founding members and current staff of the *Taller*. María Escudero is one of the most important popular theatre actors and

producers in Latin America. As part of her long work with theatrical forms and with social justice struggles, she funded and directed the Argentinean group Libre Teatro Libre in 1969 (cf. De Costa 1992; Boal 1972). The latter envisaged its role as

a theatre of active creators, who do not write texts which will be said by the personages, but who rather speak in their own words: the words which are thought and said by the people to which they belong (Libre Teatro Libre quoted in De Costa 1992: 31, my translation).

Situating themselves in the tradition of Boal, Grotowski, and Brecht, María Escudero and her group developed theatre forms in which the spectator becomes a witness to fundamental social problems, and is thus encouraged to seek solutions through collective actions. Within the *Taller*, María Escudero has continued this work by facilitating workshops on expression directed towards the women living in the *barrios*, and by teaching them how to produce 'socio-dramas' in their neighbourhoods in order to involve *barrio* inhabitants in the net of popular movements.

In this chapter, I am interested in the relations between 'women's experiences' and projects of social and political renewal such as the *Taller*'s. I started this chapter with a long quote by María Escudero's because, in the context of a discussion on experience and political involvement, her words are as elucidative as they are elusive. One of the most striking aspects of her account is the tight link between personal and collective identity and political consciousness. For María Escudero, activism for social justice is intimately connected with her life as an artist. She has spent most of her life doing popular theatre in various countries of Latin America as a means of empowering people, of building critical consciousness, and of fighting for social justice.

Furthermore, she expresses her sense of identity by saying that she feels an "American" in the widest sense of the word - her own memory is also the one of the whole continent; it encompasses the history of brutal exploitation and conquest, and of popular resistance against it. It even comprises the alternative histories and possibilities of change which are coterminous with the living of this history - that is, which emerge from the movements of history within identity and of identity within history.

Although not in the same way or on the same terms, all participants of the *Taller* draw meaningful connections between their personal lives and their activism. This relationship is certainly not particular to the *Taller*, but is central to most organizations committed to social change. Ginsburg (1989) writing about women involved in abortion activism in the United States, sketches this link as a creative and complex interweaving of the interpretations of one's life and one's public actions. She argues that activism both provides a language in which to understand and give meaning to personal experiences, and affects changes in the way of life and perceptions of the activists themselves.

Significantly, in most discussions I had with participants in the *Taller* there was a strong connection between personal lives and the participation in a public, political movement. On the one hand, there was a sense that participating in the organization changed the ways the participants thought about themselves and their lives. The staff often commented on this fact by explaining that the women who have been participating in the *Taller* have become much more articulate and can talk with more confidence about themselves and their life situations. This change in assertiveness was noticeable even for a short term participant like myself. Women in the *barrios* have also indicated that the organization gave them the possibility and/or the strength to live differently - to go out of their homes, meet other women and be involved in learning processes - and that this has been of great importance to them. On the other hand, both the women of the *barrio* groups and the staff expressed on one occasion that different ways of participating and different kinds of commitment were also dependent upon these transformations. Changes in their lives and way of thinking through the organization can bring the women to understand differently the rationale of the *Taller*, what is important about it, and how it can connect with their lives.

María Escudero's story pictures this important correspondence between experience and political action. However, I find it equally significant that her account defies a linear reading. In her text, the listener or reader is confronted with an interweaving of different

subject positions and of different tales. S/he is left wondering, is this text a fragment of a life story, a critical account about America or a theatre piece about both? As I indicated above, in María Escudero's words political action seems to arise from the interpenetration of history and memory. This process, however, blurs the lines of demarcation of the subject which is here constantly (re)written and erased. The listener or reader is somehow unable to 'find' an essential and unified subject or set of experiences from where memory and narration could start. We are here reminded about Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of the social where the multiplication of political spaces goes along with the constant re-creation and shifting of identity formations.

In her story telling María Escudero taught me about theatre using her life story and about her life story through theatre. The two genres make each other possible, as much as they interrupt each other. María Escudero, while recounting her life, said that "we are all, always, characters and every day we put on a character"; this effectively helps her to distance herself from bio-graphy - as the process of writing one's story and tracing a subject position -, and to "construct a dialectical relation with it". Within this duplicitous narration, the subject is "hid[den] ... in such a way that it then is [repeatedly] discovered" (Calvino 1981 quoted in Steedly 1993: 21). And it is in this constant process of discovery and creation of the subject that a political space is constructed.

What comes to the forefront then is the idea of representation as a strategical process. Theatre here enacts this transition between the personal and the political, between memory and history. Theatre is a tricky way of narrating because, according to María Escudero, it makes visible, more than other ways of telling, the opaqueness and artifact-ness of every representation. María Escudero indicates that it is theatre that permits us to discern the link between the political and the personal, to actualize this transformation, and indeed to deconstruct the dichotomy between the two. I believe María Escudero's words suggest a possible way of reading, which would foreground narration as a strategical practice of construction in relation to identity and experience, rather than taking identity and

experience “as foundation” for the political. It is this concept of experience which will guide my reading of narratives in this chapter.

Indeed, in relation to political involvement, experience is as elucidative as it is evasive. Experience is “an indispensable point of reference” for political praxis (Culler 1982 quoted in Steedly 1993: 25), as it constitutes a ground from where to name and counter oppression. Yet Steedly reminds us that

memory is never private property and experience is never a simple matter in this overinhabited terrain; voices are always multiple, fragmented, interrupted, possessed by the memories of other people's experiences (Steedly 1993: 22).

Steedly argues that it might be important to look at experience in this way, as “uncertain, duplicitous, always open to revision, *bottomless*” (Steedly 1993: 15, emphasis in the original). One reason for doing so is that this way of thinking makes visible the constructedness of experience (see Introduction: 9 ff).

On the one side, experience both shapes and is shaped by narration and it is this complex movement of negotiations which has to be taken into account vis-à-vis political involvement. I will pay particular attention to this aspect of narratives and experience in the next section of this chapter. On the other side, this very duplicity and constructedness of experience might also “provoke [a] mode of critical reading” (Steedly 1993: 15) regarding representation in political practices as well as the concept of experience itself. We can read María Escudero's words as enacting this ‘bottomlessness’ of experience, which suggests a way of reading against the grain of dominant historiography. And while her identity is firmly anchored in history and a particular (indigenous) identity, at the same time it works so as to create spaces for the possibility of other experiences, histories, subjectivities, and interpretations. In the next section I will look at these double-sided *possibilities* of experience and of narration in the story of a woman whom I will call Milena.

II. 'Milena'

Like María Escudero, Milena shaped my perspective on the organization in very important ways. During a conversation, Milena told me her life story to elucidate how she sees the organization, women's movements, and her links with the *Taller*. This talk also coincided with a difficult time for me, in which I was feeling increasingly unsure about my place in the organization. The narration she crafted out of her life story, then, was something I could term a 'healing tale', in which the act of putting life into language assumes a taumaturgical and enabling significance. I perceived that, at least to a certain extent, her narration was meant to exorcise and heal the 'pain of experience' (both hers and mine). Here, I am not so much interested in the events about which she told me, but rather in the way she crafted this life story, and the way she used this narrative journey to comment on 'women's experience' and on the organization.

While recounting her life, Milena gave her story a clearly discernible structure leading from ignorance and innocence to discovery. In describing her youth and marriage, Milena evoked a past as if it were almost abstracted from reality, something surreal which had the character of the once-upon-a-time: "I married very young, I was only a child who did not know anything. ... At the time, my mother would ... still clothe me ... spoon feed me ... I had a child of my own and I was still a child myself." Milena used this description of her first years as a young bride to emphasize the distance hence the difference to later parts of her life, in which she tried to educate herself, and learned to care for her family - literally, "to cook and to work". This becoming an adult person within a net of social relations has arguably a double connotation, in so far as Milena learned both a woman/wife's role (symbolized by cooking) with all it entails and to think of work also as a means of asserting her capabilities and autonomy.

Through its structure, Milena's story enacted this 'journey': she started her adult life without any education or skills and gradually she acquired knowledge and capabilities.

Most importantly Milena indicated that she grew to be aware of her own strength and of her accomplishments - something which challenges existing gender assumptions. This difficult process of learning contrasts with the attitude of her husband, who never really noticed Milena's efforts and personal growth nor could ever acknowledge her capabilities. The following incident illustrates this unequal power relation. Milena recounts how someone was looking to hire a person, and he kept asking Milena and her husband if they knew somebody who might be suitable for the job. "And I was always silent, did not say anything, although I really wanted that job. So one day I said, 'What about me?' And my husband: 'But you, ... you do not know anything!'"¹

A 'twist' in the plot of Milena's narration traces one of the major 'comings of consciousness' for her. Suddenly she discovered that her husband was being unfaithful. This was the beginning of a difficult period very typical of women in her situation, as she had to decide about the future of her marriage. This was also the time when she returned to the organization, that is, as she expressed it, to other women who also encounter situations similar to hers.

In so far as Milena's narration evokes this difficult journey, we can say that her story and her way of telling points to a problem which finds similarities in so many women's lives and which is also one of the main issues in the work of the *Taller*: the lack of self-esteem and of certainty in women, and their struggle for (self)discovery. This poem by Gloria Martín (no date indicated), printed on the back of the *fotonovela* titled "Decisiones..." (*Fotonovela La Venada* no date indicated), expresses well this issue:

*Mujer, si te han crecido las ideas
de tí van a decir cosas muy feas:
que no erès buena, que si tal cosa,
que cuando callas eres mucho mas hermosa.*

Woman, if you have grown ideas
of you they will say very ugly things:
that you are not good, that this and that,
that when you shut up you are much
more beautiful.

¹Milena was subsequently hired.

*Mujer espiga abierta entre pañales,
cadena de eslabones ancestrales,
ovario fuerte, dí lo que vales:
la vida empieza donde todos son iguales*

Woman open wheat ear between diapers,
chain of ancestral links,
strong ovary, say what you are worth:
life begins where all are equal.

*Mujer, si te han crecido las ideas,
de tí van a decir cosas muy feas:
cuando no quieras ser incubadora
dirán... no sirven estas mujeres de ahora.*

Woman, if you have grown ideas,
of you they will say very ugly things:
when you do not want to be an incubator
they'll say ... they are useless, these
women of today.

*Mujer... semilla, fruto, sol, camino,
pensar es altamente femenino.
Hay en tu pecho dos manantiales,
fusiles blancos y no anuncios comerciales.*

Woman ... seed, fruit, sun, path,
to think is highly feminine.
You have in your chest two water springs
white guns and no commercial ads.

(Gloria Martín quoted in *Fotonovela La Venada*, no. 6, no date indicated: 16, ellipsis in the original)

This poem expresses well both the need and desire for ‘self-discovery’ as a creative appropriation and reformulation of identity *and* the ambiguity of this process as it contrasts with dominant constructions of the category ‘woman’. In many participants’ lives, this struggle comes particularly to the fore in the unequal power relations between husband and wife. A woman in the *Taller* recounted, for example, how the husband is generally the one who speaks and the wife the one who is supposed to listen. The *fotonovela* “Soñar... ¡Cuanta locura!” (*Fotonovela La Venada* no date indicated) dramatizes this fact by depicting a typical scene in a married couple, in which the husband says: “So now let me speak and you listen” (*Fotonovela La Venada* , no. 10, no date indicated: 34).

This scene also makes visible the ‘common sense’ according to which the husband who speaks is also the one who knows. This includes knowing about both himself and his wife. The latter, on the contrary, would not even be able to understand her self. According to this conception, she would not be aware of her capabilities, she would not know what might be wrong in her life, and she would not be able to name her feelings or opinions. The turning point of the story in this *fotonovela* is constituted by the moment in which the wife does speak and responds “Yes, it is always you who have spoken ... and I have always done what you wanted” (*Fotonovela La Venada* , no. 10, no date indicated: 34).

Following this answer, the wife re-interprets what it means for a woman to be labelled 'crazy' by the rest of the society as she is experiencing it. She thus reappropriates the knowledge about her self, and about why it is that so many women are driven 'crazy' by their restricted lives. On the one hand, then, I can find in Milena's story the trace of this struggle and journey for self-discovery important to so many women, and the way it impinges upon their lives. On the other hand, this trace does not give rise to the picture of a common experience between women, but rather highlights the ambiguities of self-discovery.

Milena's narration starts as a fable and ends as the autobiography of a struggle. In other words, her tale gives way to a multi-layered and *contradictory* discovery - which is at the same time the one of her strengths, of her husband's secret deceptions, and of her difficulties in leaving him to start a new life as a strong, independent woman. Her discovery is also the discovery of a failure, the one of the feminist's project of solidarity between women so important to the staff of the *Taller*. In commenting on her own rage and pain for the infidelity of her husband, she asks:

How to say we have to build solidarity amongst women ... - should one of our husbands be unfaithful ... wouldn't we all like to kill the woman with whom he ran away?

This is not a simple question about Milena's personal circumstances. Milena *uses* her story - and not only like an anecdote, like a story pointing beyond itself to comment on women's organizations. She also uses her story to build solidarity, and to ground and 'explain' her participation in the project of political and social change of the *Taller*. What is so interesting here is how Milena comments and redefines the issue of experience in political organizing, and how this, in turn, highlights the political importance of narrative.

As we got into the conversation, Milena's life story became the answer she offered me to the many questions I had on the *Taller* and on her participation in it². Her involvement with the organization can only be understood on the ground of her 'experiences'. However, the way Milena frames and uses her life story indicates that what ties her to the *Taller* and its other participants is not a *simple* and *linear* experience. By this term I mean an essentialized experience which includes the possibility of being shared by all women as such. Joan Scott (1992) calls it "foundational experience" - a "bedrock" for knowledge and political consciousness. This use of experience has been crucial to many political projects, because in these conceptions, "the possibility of politics is said to rest on, to follow from, a pre-existing women's experience" (Scott 1992: 31). In the case of Milena this is not possible because her experience is just like a discovery whose light always casts shadows on something else³. And Milena indicates that the other women in the organization also know very well these situations with the contradictory, duplicitous 'experiences' these entail. What links her then to the organization?

Milena problematizes an essentialized experience without foreclosing the possibility of collective political action. Experience here calls for the appropriation of language to mediate between gaps in events and knowledges, and between what is disclosed and what is deferred by these disclosures (cf. Delany 1988 quoted in Scott 1992: 36). In the case of Milena, then, experience is more of a narrative moment, or a mediation. Milena does participate in the *Taller*, but she grounds her involvement in her *life-story* - on her emerging tale which enacts this transition from ignorance/innocence to discovery(ies).

² I was interested in how she saw the organization and women's movements in general, what she thought about the involvement of volunteers and about my presence, and why she was involved with the *Taller*.

³ Butler 1990 talks about a similar process in relation to identity construction. She writes that identity is based on iteration, that is the continuous repetition of itself. However, this very movement which creates identity also always displaces it, as the repetition of the "I" always casts shadows upon it.

Scott, discussing Delany's memoir, "The motion of light in water" (1988) points to the significance of this conception of experience for political consciousness. I will quote her at length:

For Delany, witnessing the scene at the bathhouse ('an undulating mass of naked male bodies' seen under a dim blue light) was an event. It marked what in one kind of reading we would call a coming of consciousness of himself, a recognition of his authentic [gay] identity, one he had always shared, would always share with others like himself. Another kind of reading ... sees this event not as the discovery of truth (conceived as the reflection of a prediscursive reality), but as the substitution of one interpretation for another. Delany presents this substitution as a conversion experience, a clarifying moment, after which he sees (that is, understands) differently. But there is all the difference between subjective perceptual clarity and transparent vision; one does not necessarily follow from the other even if the subjective state is metaphorically presented as a visual experience. Moreover ... 'the properties of the medium through which the visible appears - here, the dim blue light, whose distorting, refracting qualities produce a wavering of the visible,' make any claim to unmediated transparency impossible. Instead, the wavering light permits a vision beyond the visible, a vision that contains the fantastic projections ... that are the basis for political identification. 'In this version of the story,' Swann notes, 'political consciousness and power originate, not in a presumed unmediated experience of presumed real gay identities, but out of the apprehension of the moving, differentiating properties of the representational medium - the motion of light in water' (Scott 1992: 34-35 quoting Swann 1991).

The significant insight here is that political participation is grounded not on a clear and transparent vision - a foundational experience - but rather on a mediation or a movement, - experience as "the appropriation of language ... in both directions, over the gap ... that constitutes the subject (Delany 1988 quoted in Scott 1992: 36). Similarly, for Milena, it is a mediation and a movement - the trajectory of the narrative - that is used as a basis for solidarity and identification within the organization, and the 'motivation' for political action.

Here narration becomes a political act in itself, and a sort of mediation between the supposedly personal and the supposedly political. Narrative is here not "the verbal replication or deformation of [a] 'lived experience' [which justifies political action]" (Steadly 1993: 25). It is not a transparent medium that links them dialectically. What emerges here, as also suggested by María Escudero, is a certain opaqueness of

representation, a heaviness of language which lets us 'see' reality differently - much as the dim blue light in Delany's scene.

III. Narrated Space

The way in which Milena links experience and political participation through narrative suggests a particular way of understanding the *Taller* - as intelligible through/as a very complex net of particular (life) stories. These, however, are first and foremost *narrations* - that is, they are lives, experiences, and events put into language in very particular and strategical ways. As such, they can be used as fables, as paths, and sometimes as weapons.

The *Taller* thus appears as a space saturated with stories, as a very complex layering and intersecting of narrations. If I am allowed to paraphrase Taussig⁴:

One gets the feeling that it was not the [structures, meetings, workshops and demonstrations] that bound the [organization] into a unit but these countless bonds of [life-stories and narrations] wound round people like the [marches and workshops] themselves. But while the [demonstrations] were things you could see ... the bonds of [telling] and [listening] were not all that visible (Taussig 1987: 68).

In other words, the *Taller* exists not only in the form of projects and meetings but also as an "imagined" (see Anderson 1983), narrated space. María Escudero's and Milena's accounts suggest that it is in this fluid space that the subjects in struggles are constantly recreated, and that the 'personal' and the 'political' are daily negotiated and commented upon. In other words, narration disseminates sites of women's engagement in the political, from the streets, to the household, to the projects of the organization (cf. Westwood and

⁴ Here I substituted the organization for the Amazon and the system of debt peonage. The original quote reads as follows: "One gets the feeling that it was not the rivers that bound the Amazon basin into a unit but these countless bonds of credit and debit wound round people like the vines of the forest around the great rubber trees themselves. But while the vines were things you could see ... , the bonds of credit and debit were not all that visible." (Taussig 1987: 68)

Radcliffe 1993: 20). These processes which, in a way, define the political struggles of the women involved, are important within the actions for social and political change of the *Taller*.

We can read Melucci's concern to understand movements in their totality, taking into account both their visibility and latency, along this line as well. He writes:

But movements live in another dimension [than public expressions, "political effects, and organizational tactics"]: in the everyday network of social relations, in the capacity and will to reappropriate space and time, and in the attempt to practice alternative life-styles. This dimension is not marginal or residual. Rather it is the appropriate response to new forms of control that no longer correspond solely to state action (Melucci 1989: 70).

Melucci emphasizes that it is a hidden web of social relations in daily life which gives substance and strength to a movement, and that it becomes impossible to look at social movements without looking at this "'submerged reality' that constitutes both the condition of possibility and the very stuff of social action" (Escobar 1992: 73).

In my reading of the *Taller* I have taken narrations as an instance for this submerged reality which is a constitutive part to the organization and to alternative ways of engaging in the political. "Narrative experiences" (see Steedley 1993) emerge here as a "site" of engagement in the political and as the articulation of networks of differences. Indeed, they unfold in a *multiplicity* of sites of struggle. The projects of the *Taller* thus partake of the movements and mediations of stories, and the duplicitous character of experience on which the organization is built.

The next section is an attempt to look at one of the most significant actions of the *Taller* - the yearly March for International Women's Day - from this particular perspective. I will look at this important event through some of the commentaries about it which circulate in the organization. Similarly to life story fragments, these comments reveal processes of mediation and negotiation in regards to the conjunction of life and activism. I will argue that they are a central part to the event and that they shape discourses, actions, and issues at play in the organization.

IV. Rain Stories

Compañeras, this year at the March, remember, bring umbrellas, cover signs with plastic bags ... because, as you know, it *always* rains (Clara Merino).

Every year, the *Taller* organizes a public demonstration for March 8th, the International Women's Day, in which the *Taller* and all of its affiliated *barrio* women's groups march through a good part of Quito's centre. Many other local women's organizations are invited to join every year, and some of them do. The March is a very important event in the life of the *Taller* as, in a way, it proclaims the very existence of the organization. This day marks the *Taller's* appearance in the public space of the streets and plazas. The organization becomes 'visible'. I also already indicated in Chapter One how the March, in a way, signifies the *Taller* as an organization which belongs to popular women and does not allow its co-optation by the state. Furthermore, March 8th is one of the few days of the year in which all individual *barrio* women's organizations, which are usually rather autonomous, come together. Indeed, there is a very strong expectation from the part of the staff that they do.

For most of the staff the March is the living proof that the organization is working, and that it is achieving its objective of building community, solidarity and affection as 'alternative relationships' among the participants and between the latter and the staff. According to María Escudero this success can be seen in that *barrio* women always come to the March even if it almost always means to walk under the rain. Similarly, in the bulletin *Chaquiñan* we read the following thoughts about the March:

Do you [*compañera*] remember how you sheltered me with the sign that you were carrying so that I would not be drenched from the rain? Your gesture made me see you in a different way. From that moment you were not only my neighbour. You had other values which I could not understand until that day. You had realized that it is good ... to get together with other women ... in order to change everything. ... another time the rain! ... but do not worry ... because this year again, with or without rain we will continue to dream aloud on the eighth of March (*Chaquiñan*, no. 17, March 1993: 1).

The first week of March, in fact, generally corresponds to a brief rain period in the region of Quito. Thus, on International Women's Day "it always rains", as pointed out by founder and staff member Clara Merino above. However, this simple phrase is invested with a different meaning according to the change of context. For example, the day after the March the staff was still celebrating the success of the demonstration in spite of the rain, both in terms of the participation of the women and of the attention of the bystanders in the streets. Women in the *barrios*, however, were complaining about the weather and in part blaming it for what in their view had been a rather poor turnout from the part of their fellow participants. In general, most women from the *barrios* are not very keen in participating to the March, and there is not much enthusiasm from their part both after and before the event. Anne-Marie, a volunteer told me about this brief conversation she had with a woman from one of the *barrio* groups a few days before International Women's Day:

The other day I asked her: 'Will you go to the March?' And she said: 'No, I will not go, because it always rains'. So I asked: 'But if it doesn't rain, will you come?', and she replied: 'But it *always* rains'.⁵

This reticence in participating could be a way of exerting some power while at the same time still supporting the organization and wanting to be involved, it could reflect a lack of confidence in the organization, or rather just disinterest in public celebrations. According to the *Taller*, many participants are also afraid of taking over the streets which are seen as a male domain (and they do take them over, as during the March most of the traffic is stopped and parts of the street are effectively blocked). The staff describes how the women are at first shy to do this, and how they gradually even get to enjoy it. Furthermore, many women also do experience a social pressure from their husbands and/or families not to be seen as a member of a woman's group, screaming out 'feminist' slogans in the streets. This passage from the bulletin *Chaquiñan*, describing the thoughts and

⁵ This woman eventually participated in the March.

feelings of a woman (real? fictional?) from a *barrio* who is seeing the march for the first time, highlights this issue:

Sabe...se me revolvió desde el corazón hasta las tripas. Me agarró tal escalofrío ... Por un lado estaba de acuerdo con lo que gritaban: 'No más golpes contra la mujer', 'Las mujeres también tenemos derechos', 'Los quehaceres domésticos también son trabajo', 'Las mujeres queremos educación, capacitación, empleo' 'Vivan las organizaciones de mujeres' y así ... infinidad de cosas. O sea que, compañera, eso me daba una alegría. Por que ni crea que algunas de esas cosas yo no las había pensado. Pero también le diré que me daban vergüenza ... hasta pensé 'medio locas están', 'no les dirán nada los maridos?' y decía: 'a las primeritas que les han de pegar ha de ser a ellas'. 'Cómo se atreven a gritar esas cosas en público'. Cosas del hogar, decía yo, no deben decirse hacia afuera.

You know... everything turned inside me from the heart to my stomach. It seized me such a shiver ... On one side, I agreed with what they were shouting: 'No more beatings for women', "We women also have rights", 'Domestic tasks are also work', 'We women want education, training, employment' 'Long live women's organizations' and so on ... a lot of things. Or perhaps, this gave me such a joy. Because do not believe that I did not think some of those things myself. However, I also have to say that I felt embarrassed ... I even thought 'these women are half crazy', 'won't their husband say something to them?' and I was saying 'they are the very first ones who should be beaten'. 'How can they dare to shout such things in public'. The things of the home, I was saying, cannot be said outside (*Chaquiñan*, no. 17, March 1993: 1, second ellipsis added).

Their fears and the social pressures they encounter then force women into difficult decisions regarding their place in the society and in the public opinion of the *barrio* community.

Commentaries on the weather are thus a way of talking about alliances, as well as about power issues within the organization. Furthermore, the March is perhaps the only (or at least the best) instance in which the individual women's organizations can exert power over the 'main office' and its staff. Since the March constitutes the time of the year in which the *Taller* shows itself as a public, popular movement, the non-participation from the part of its affiliated groups and women would mean putting the 'main office' in a rather difficult position of legitimacy. There is no doubt that there is a great deal of affection, tenderness, solidarity, and important shared emotions in the organization, however these

stories about the rain also point to the processes of negotiating the terms of these relationships.

For yet another participant, the rain came to signify the issue of inequality within the organization:

If it is true that we as women are equal, if we march all together - and this especially for the [International] Woman's Day - then how come that ... after the March, they [some of the staff] go away in the car, comfortably ... and the [*barrio*] women? Tired, under the rain, with their children, they go take a bus and return the same way they came. Where is equality? I saw myself abandoned under the rain and I felt like crying ... How horrible to abandon us all, and under the rain! Yes, because it always rains.

And do you know why it always rains? I think it rains because the *Taller* always says it rains, and the *Taller* says that it will always rain.

Inequality is a very delicate and complex issue here. As I indicated before, although the 'main office' is aiming at rendering the individual women's organizations fully autonomous, it ultimately still holds much of the power, including in the production process of the media. Most of the staff belong to a different social and economic class, background, and education from the women in the *barrios*. In their project to support a popular movement of women, they find themselves oscillating between recognition and difference. They talk about "discovering themselves" through their involvement with *barrio* women, and at the same time about building relations attentive to differences. As I indicated in Chapter One, the staff, who is well aware of this issue, writes that it should be possible as well as necessary to build alternative relations in the context of the organization. However, some women in the *barrios* do perceive not only difference but also an inequality between themselves and the staff and this tension erodes confidence in the organization as a whole.

Let us turn back to the commentaries. It is telling that, like the woman above, many others leave open until the last minute their decision to join in or not, "because it always rains". The complex intersections of personal lives and political activism is commented upon through 'rain stories'. With these stories the March, as a symbolic itinerary through

the public space, is also turned into a symbolical interweaving of one's life course in the paths of the organization.

At the same time, the coexisting of these contradicting interpretations opens up something similar to what Barthes calls "third meaning". We can get a glimpse of this in the comment of the participant above, which 'catches' this emerging meaning-effect from the narrative space of the organization:

"You know why it always rains? I think it rains because the *Taller* always says it rains, and the *Taller* says that it will always rain."

Barthes explains the concept of "third", "obtuse", or "supplementary" meaning, that he developed in relation to photographic stills, as follows:

An obtuse angle is greater than a right angle ...; the third meaning also seems to me greater than the pure, upright, secant, legal perpendicular of the narrative, it seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely. I even accept for the obtuse meaning the word's pejorative connotation: the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs to the family pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral and aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the false, the pastiche), it is on the side of the carnival (Barthes 1977: 55).

The comment of the participant above also present an "obtuse angle", which bypasses the "perpendicular" sociological meaning of rain stories, that is their use as commentaries on power relations. It is a direct comment on the organization that goes askew, and is surreal in its hinting that it is the organization and the staff themselves who control the weather and who 'bewitch' the rain to fall on the March every year. This comment does not need to be read as an assertion on magic. In this context it is used as a critique, a sort of resistance vis-à-vis the discourses of the organization, and as a counter-narrative. This brings forth a further question: isn't the *possibility* of these commentaries and (even "supplementary") meanings rooted in the fact that the March in itself can be read as a narrative, the telling-of-a-story, a commentary?

Marching through the public space here comes close to the tracing/writing of a story (cf. Derrida 1976: 107). This is especially apparent in regards to the final and most

powerful part of the March, where the writing of an itinerary/tracing of a narration goes over into a theatrical performance which effectively connects action and narration.

In the final part of the demonstration, all of the participants were singing the following *ronda*. A *ronda* is a children's play-song, a carousel (here with a change of lyrics), and it follows the tune of a well-known *ronda* sung daily in the daycares of the organization:

*Juguemos en el parque
Hasta que el lobo esté
Si el alcalde aparece
No a todas enganará
No a todas enganará*

We are playing in the park
Until the wolf comes
If the mayor appears
Not everyone he will fool
Not everyone he will fool

*Juguemos en el parque
Hasta que el lobo esté
Si el lobo aparece
Yo me defenderé
Yo me defenderé*

We are playing in the park
Until the wolf comes
If the wolf appears
I will defend myself
I will defend myself

*Juguemos en el parque
Hasta que el lobo esté
Y si quiere violarme
Yo le enfrentaré
Yo le enfrentaré*

We are playing in the park
Until the wolf comes
And if he wants to rape me
I will confront him
I will confront him

*Juguemos en el parque
Hasta que el lobo esté
Si privatizan el petroleo
Yo les pelearé
Yo les pelearé*

We are playing in the park
Until the wolf comes
If they privatize the oil
I will fight with them
I will fight with them

*Juguemos en el parque
Hasta que el lobo esté
Si se roban los millones
Yo les denunciaré
Yo les denunciaré*

We are playing in the park
Until the wolf comes
If they steal millions for themselves
I will denounce them
I will denounce them

*Juguemos en el parque
Hasta que el lobo esté
Si me sigue enganando
Yo no los votaré
Yo no los votaré*

We are playing in the park
Until the wolf comes
If he continues to fool me
I will not vote for them
I will not vote for them



*Juguemos en la vida
Sin que el lobo esté
Lobos tenemos muchos
Y yo ya me cansé
Y yo ya me cansé*

We are playing in the park
Until the wolf comes
We have so many wolves
And I am already fed up
And I am already fed up

This *ronda* was not only one of the mottoes of the March, but also its climax; it was the last song which was to complete the demonstration, and to crystallize it into a symbolic image. It was sung by the whole organization in exactly the same way children would do with a carousel: everybody joined hands and moved in a circle around 'a woman'. The latter was the Statue of Freedom which is at the centre of the Plaza of the Government where the President has his seat. "We are all dancing around Freedom!" María Escudero explained to me.

Marching through the streets and circling the plaza is important as the telling and performing of a powerful 'counter-tale'. By this I do not want to diminish the importance of the March as a real, important, and very effective event. On the contrary, I want to underline its significance. The March is so important because it is a cultural and symbolic event. Moreover, if the March were not such a meaningful story, it would not engage the participants so deeply in conjunction with their lives.

Interestingly, in this story the issues of class, of power relations, and of alliances enter, to borrow Barthes' words, as a "guest", as a "figure in the carpet" (Barthes 1986 quoted in Steedly 1993: 19). Barthes and Steedly use this image to indicate the simultaneous being and not being there in the text, and I borrow it to highlight the contradictory relation of these issues to the March as a symbolic event. These issues emerge as commentaries and "supplements", yet they are not just added. They come in - so to speak - through the back door, and shape the space of the narrative and the articulation of its meanings. "Supplements", as Derrida (1976) argues, point to something in the very structure of that to which they are added. They reveal that the *Taller*, women's lives in it, and the articulation of political and social struggles are also built upon and shaped by these tensions. The issue of class itself is here something like a "third" meaning, but as such it

does participate in the narration (and counter-narrations) in very powerful ways. In more general terms, I tried to point out a subtle way in which narrations are central and not just added to the work of the organization, although they do assume the character of commentaries, explanations, and 'gossip'.

What I have tried to delineate is the complex interweaving of lives and activism within the *Taller*. Moreover, if I follow participant's stories in what I present as one possible reading not only of the March but more generally of the organization, I encounter narrations which can be read as actions, and actions which can be read as narrations. Here, from the point of view of their political significance, I have to take into account the movement between them and the instability of their difference. This relationship effectively shifts the location of the political within the work of the organization.

As I indicated in the Introduction, social movements generally distance themselves from the realm of institutional politics to attend to struggles over meanings, identities, and power relations within daily life - in the home, in the neighbourhoods, and in community actions. From these locations it is then possible to analyze differently, to rename, and to counter⁶ the political, cultural, and economic contexts these movements confront, as well as dominant conceptions of gender and of 'development'. In this chapter I argued that in the *Taller* these spaces of political engagement exist also in the fluid practices of narrating and imagining both the organization as a locus of involvement and the lives of the participants within it. In other words, in the organization, the redefinition and creation of political spheres takes the shape of an opening of multiple narrative spaces and enunciative subject positions. Here issues such as gender and class are commented upon, debated and enacted, and the concept of 'women's experience' itself is negotiated and made into a double sided ground for action and solidarity.

⁶ Although I do recognize that many social movements are not necessarily progressive or liberatory.

Narratives are interesting in this respect, because in this context it is also possible to speculate that they represent a 'feminine' form of social action. By this I do not necessarily mean the fact that women have been traditionally excluded from the institutional realm of politics and thus have tended to participate in alternative ways. Rather, these narrative practices, without being confined to women, particularly refer to women's place in the dominant imagining of subject positions. Women in Latin America have tended to find themselves marked by the divide between private and public as two domains constituted in dominant discourses on gender, the family, and the nation (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 137 ff.). Cuví Sánchez and Martínez Flores, for example, find that the Ecuadorian women they interviewed conceptualize gender differences also in these terms. They see their role and identity as wives and mothers associated with the domestic realm in which they feel themselves relegated as well as empowered⁷. The public domain, on the contrary, is perceived as men's prerogative.

As I indicated previously, an interesting aspect of many social movements by women is, on the one side, how the dichotomy of public versus private shapes women's redefinition of political action and, on the other side, how women, through popular organizing, rename and reshuffle the concepts associated with these domains and the relationships between them. The participation of women in social movements is in fact shaped by their actually inhabiting both the private and the public sphere. In the *Taller* women can be seen as 'border jugglers', engaged in both domains in different and contradictory terms. It might be useful to think of the relationship between these domains as 'borderlands'. The relation of the personal and the political, and of individual lives within public movements does not just denote a duality of positionalities. Rather, it is a space of negotiation of unequal power relations and of alliances, as well as a space of

⁷ Cuví Sánchez and Martínez Flores write: "They know that the men, for the very fact of being men, are free to meet outside of the home, a freedom negated to them [women]." At the same time, "the home is a secure shelter, and their [women's] space of power, their kingdom" (Cuví Sánchez and Martínez Flores 1994: 13-14).

creativity and of cultural production. It is through these borders that the participant's stories are located - as story tellings which have a particular relation with both personal and public, individual lives and political action. In this aspect then, the shifting field of narration can become a complex site for women's participation.

Chapter Three

Picturing Women

The *fotonovela* is the most beautiful thing we have done.
(María Escudero)

Throughout this thesis, I have been emphasizing how the *Taller*, as a popular social movement, is a project largely based on recuperating and re-valuing women's experience. The latter, however, can not be thought of as something foundational and essential, but rather it makes visible a shifting and unstable ground of mediations. This "tricky space where lives are told and stories lived" (Steadly 1993: 15) is an important *political* space.

In this chapter I will switch from the participants' narrations to the organization's and staff's retelling and representation of some women's stories in one of their media productions. Narrative as a political and strategical tool is central to this project. I will thus return to the organization and its most visible aspects by looking at the *fotonovela La Venada*¹. The *fotonovela* is a medium similar to comics. It is constituted by a sequence of photographs which are combined with text, dialogues and graphics to tell a 'story'. In the case of the alternative *fotonovela* of the *Taller*, the photographs are - with a few exceptions - always of persons from the *barrios* and particularly of *barrio* women involved in the organization. Here I will look at this *fotonovela* in relation to its goals, to its philosophy and theory, and to the ways it seeks to represent and strategically deploy 'women's experience'.

La Venada is perhaps the most visible instance of the *Taller's* project of incorporating women's stories and women's daily lives in its movement for social justice. Many aspects make it into a very important project. It aims at uncovering low-income

¹ The name *La Venada* is interesting in itself because, according to the staff, it represent a 'gendered impossibility'. *La Venada* is an nonexistent word, or better said, a word out of place, which signifies the erasure of the feminine. Only the male form of this term exist, *el Venado*, meaning the deer both male and female.

women's realities which are erased in other mainstream media, and thus permits the discussion of urgent topics, such as violence against women and children, the unequal construction of gender roles, and the effects of poverty on the lives of women. Ideally, the *fotonovela* in itself is also a practice of empowerment for it represents a possibility for low-income women to talk and then discover themselves talking. In this way, it combines critiques about the status of women and about aspects of Ecuadorian society with an empowering, collective process of production and reading (see below).

The *fotonovela* therefore is deeply rooted in daily life. Yet by its very representations it calls for different ways of looking at daily life itself. It seeks to present women's images and stories for recognition and empowerment, while questioning the very category 'woman' at the same time. Looking at the *fotonovela* as a popular theatre praxis will help us discern this link between representation and deconstruction. (Theatrical) narration in this context becomes a strategical tool for redefining and questioning the very realm of identity. Reading the *fotonovela* will thus add to the complex issue of that 'dangerous yet so useful' (cf. Spivak 1989 quoted in Steedly 1993: 25) concept of experience in its relation to narrative within a project for social change.

Fotonovelas are very widespread in Latin America as a mainstream mass media and, to a far lesser extent, as alternative productions. Among the mainstream ones, themes range from romantic, fairy tale encounters, to middle-class lifestyle plots, to more realistic stories of murder, mystery, and soft pornography cast in lower class settings (cf. Butler Flora 1982). These different topics can almost be seen as stages in the history of the Latin American *fotonovela* from the sixties onward (cf. Hill 1985: 67). Butler Flora writes that during this time, *fotonovelas* have generally evolved into depicting more realistic plots as well as scenarios pertaining to the lower classes. However, this shift does not imply a commitment to social change:

All [*fotonovelas*] reinforce passivity as a desirable characteristic among those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, legitimizing oppression by ritualizing it in print (Butler Flora 1982: 24).

Even when class consciousness is depicted, there is no social imaginary of solidarity, nor of collective actions and solutions. Butler Flora summarizes this aspect as follows: "There are no happy endings. As in life, the poor suffer, the poor die" (Butler Flora 1982: 25).

It is expressively against the background of these mainstream productions that the *Taller* produces *fotonovelas* for social change. The staff thinks of the *fotonovela La Venada* as an alternative media differentiated on the ground of its intentions and goals from the mass media. The latter, writes the staff

have as basic objectives the maintenance and reproduction of an unjust economical and political system, which does not represent the wide majorities - amongst whom are women (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, e: 1).

The alternative *fotonovela* of the *Taller*, on the contrary, is centered on recuperating women's lived conditions as objects of discussion and of transformation. The aim of the organization is to allow the media to become close to the very lives of the women in marginalized *barrios*, and to encourage discussion on the daily problems they face. Keeping with this vision, the *fotonovelas* so far have dealt with topics such as violence against women, child abuse, women and work, virginity, identity, wife beating, solidarity amongst women, gender roles, and the scarcity brought about by privatization.

The focus on (low-income) women's experiences cannot be overstated. According to the staff, in fact, this is the main trait which makes *La Venada* different from the other productions. Another important difference to the mainstream versions is that the *fotonovela* of the *Taller* persistently points to collective discussion and action as the way to strive for a solution (see Fig. 1). The question at the end of the booklet "And you, what do you think?" is typical in this respect as it is meant to encourage the women's groups in the *barrios* to rethink important issues and to mobilize around them.

These characteristics make the *fotonovela* of the *Taller* into a whole project of social mobilization and renewal:

We think about alternative media as contestatory. They question, mobilize, denounce, initiate change, develop creativity, inform, communicate, spark critical sense and the need for participation and protagonism. Its contents,

topics, and forms of expression are as unlimited as the sectors to which they are directed and the creativity and audacity of those who produce them (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, e: 2).

Furthermore, the staff points out that *La Venada* rather than just being an opposition to the mass media, is intended to be a subversive appropriation and refunctioning of the latter. During the shooting of a *fotonovela* in February 1996, María Escudero and the photographer and staff Juan De La Roche explained to the women who would become the protagonists of the episode that the *Taller's* media production is of the same genre as the other *fotonovelas* and *telenovelas*. Its contents, however, are totally different. The other productions, said María Escudero, are “like dreams, fantasies, they are not reality”. The ones the *Taller* produces, on the contrary, are about real stories and real life, so that they would not be “a distant, alien medium” (María Escudero) but rather something that would mirror the life and experiences of the women like them: “the media seems to be such a far and removed thing, but no, on the contrary, *it has to be you*” (María Escudero). In another occasion, María Escudero told me that the *fotonovela* is so important because it “enters in women’s real life, and places itself there”.

The question as to what extent the *fotonovela* achieves this goal and whether the women perceive it to be indeed close to their lives, is outside the scope of this research and would require another study on the reception of this kind of literature by women of the popular sectors. For the women I talked to, however, the *fotonovela* is “beautiful”, “it is like an example”, and it is a very important tool for their women’s groups. They indicated that it informs readers about issues, problems, and stories in the *barrios*, as well as about the *Taller* and the affiliated *barrio* women’s groups. They also indicated that the *fotonovela* is a sort of legitimation for the activities and meetings of the women’s groups as well as for their individual participation, because it ‘proves’ to other people in the neighbourhood that ‘organized women’ are doing something concrete and useful. The staff also indicates that some women use the *fotonovela* as a message - they purposely leave it somewhere in the home so that their husbands would find it and read it.

The structure of *La Venada* is important in relation to its functions and it differs significantly from mainstream *fotonovelas* in some of its aspects. Rowe and Shelling write that the Latin American *fotonovelas* are related, in their genre and style of imagery, both to cinema and to *folletines*. The latter are magazine serials which

served as a mediation between literature, consumed only by a small educated elite, and the masses. The time-structure of the serial, continually interrupted by the wait for the next installment, generated a fragmented manner of reading, interrupted by everyday life and thus porous to its experiences (Rowe and Shelling 1991: 98).

La Venada does maintain some important affiliations with the *folletín*. It is very easy to read, and thus it can be consumed also by people who do not have high levels of literacy. The *fotonovela* of the *Taller* also shares with the *folletín* a particular relation with daily life. This is perhaps due less to the interrupted reading as in the case of the *folletín* (having "to wait for the next installment" in the quote above) and more to the fact that the stories the *fotonovela* depicts are repeatedly discussed and read in the women's groups and the organization's workshops (see below). In fact, although the *Taller's fotonovela* is a serial, it is not as continuous as a *folletín*. It is not produced very frequently (varying from once to three or four times per year) and its stories are contained within themselves: they are not directly connected to each other, indeed they feature different characters and different topics altogether.

The *fotonovela* produced by the *Taller*, however, rather than calling upon a cinema genre, is closely affiliated with Brechtian and popular theatre. Both cinema and theatre refer to the basic tenet that the persons figuring in the *fotonovela* are not women 'speaking out' - they are not telling about the life conditions, problems and initiatives in their *barrios* in the same way as in the bulletins produced by the *Taller*. They are first and foremost actors, interpreting a fictional story, however close to reality it may be. Similarly to other *fotonovelas* productions, in *La Venada* scenes are 'shot' like in the making of a movie, with the characters playing a certain script. However, in the *fotonovela* of the *Taller* there is a close relation between audience/readers and actors, which is fairly typical of popular

theatre and its educational intent but not so immediate in cinema. This is because one of the central aspects of this *fotonovela* is that the readers are co-implicated, at least ideally, in its production.

According to the staff the making of a *fotonovela* is grounded in discussions with women from the *barrios*. First of all, a topic is chosen and discussed together with all the *barrio* groups, and the women would talk about their experiences on the matter, and on the way "it is part of their lives" (Juan De La Roche). As the next step, the women's group chosen to participate in the role of characters is given a workshop on corporal expression and acting. This is followed by the shooting of the pictures by the photographer of the *Taller*, the actual production, and the distribution of the *fotonovela* to all families in the *barrios* and to some other women's organizations. The last stage brings the production full circle. The *fotonovela* becomes a kind of mirror in which the women from the organization and from the *barrios* more generally can recognize themselves. In this way, this medium becomes a very valuable tool for discussions, especially for those issues which are hard to name and which tend to remain under the surface, such as violence against women or indigenous identity. The *fotonovela* has been used in this way in many meetings and seminars, and has been similarly utilized by other women's groups in the country.

The *fotonovela*, then, connects and includes the communication of certain messages to the *barrio* or to the wider society (like education on gender equality) with a production process which presupposes a close link between speaker/actor and reader/audience positions. Indeed, it is through the continuous transformation of the one category into the other that the *fotonovela* works. What is empowering about *La Venada* - and about the *Taller* more generally - for the women involved is participating in the creation of a public space to speak, and be able to listen/see themselves speaking/acting. Similarly, De Costa (1992) emphasizes how a central characteristic of almost all forms of popular theatre is the continuous exchange between actor and spectator. The effectiveness of this form of theatre/social action relies on the blurring of the distinction between actors and viewers, that

is on the latter intervening in the play, participating and manipulating the process of the performance. This exchange between who speaks and who listens is typical for all popular education models at large (see for example Freire 1970).

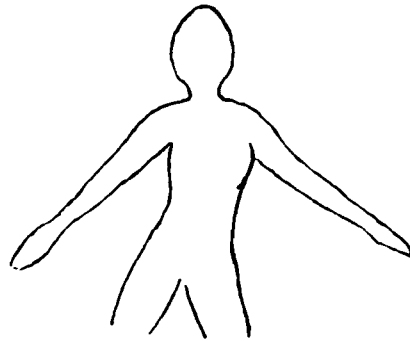
It has to be noted, however, that *fotonovelas* are now reduced in size and that this has also meant a change in the process of production. The *fotonovela* of February 1996, for example, has been atypical according to the staff, as it has been written by the latter, and the women from the *barrios* have only contributed their 'images'. Furthermore, the process of producing and reading *fotonovelas* discussed above represents an ideal, as it does not take into account that the neighbourhood is not a fully homogenous group. In most *barrios* where the *Taller* operates, women in the very worst economical situations, and indigenous newcomers (whereby the latter category would very often coincide with the former) usually do not participate in the activities of the women's groups. This does effectively rule out the idea that every woman in the *barrio* could identify with the image of her neighbours depicted in the *fotonovela*.

The 'ideal process' of production described above, however, makes clear the rationale of the project:

it supports the process of self-esteem [building] in the participants (by being participants and actresses) and in the reader (women of popular sectors, who discover themselves) (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, e: 6).

As this statement points out, the process of building self-esteem works in two ways. On the one hand, the women can experience being the protagonists of a story. Women who actively participate in the production but not as actors would also benefit, from the sense of having been part of the general process. On the other hand, there is the act or rather process of "*descubrirse*" (discovering one self). As I indicated before, the women figuring in the *fotonovela* can participate in the collective creation of a public space from where to speak, and then discover themselves as articulate social actors. This process is empowering for both the women figuring in the *fotonovela* as well as for the other women in the *barrios* who see "discover" their neighbours on them.

As this discussion exemplifies, the dimension of vision or the use of the image represents a very particular and important way in which the *fotonovela* both frames and enables the representation of women's personal lives, and their 'self-discovery'. The staff points out how women of popular *barrios* are *always*, as *a norm* confronted with images that do not represent them - more precisely with images of Ecuadorian white, upper class women, or with foreign/Western images (see also Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 139). "This continent has been so conquered!" explained Nela Meriguez, one of the founders and staff, talking about images. Women from the *barrios* are always confronted with 'universal images' which are distilled out of the negation of their particular identity (*mestizo* or indigenous), cultural heritage and social situation. In other words, they are faced with a universal, unmarked body:



Therefore one of the most important guidelines for the projects of the *Taller* is that, in order to include *barrio* women, it is necessary to use particularized, local images. The images of women's bodies have to be 're-contextualized', that is, recognized as marked by the social contexts and relations of the women. This demonstrates to what extent other particular images such as the blonde, white, rich woman have been made into a seemingly universal and comprehensive locus for the processing of identity. As an expression of resistance, the *Taller* stresses the fact that popular women be both and simultaneously the ones who see and the ones who are seen (see Fig. 2). In this context, to "discover one self" in the *fotonovela* assumes a very deep and contestatory meaning (see Fig. 3).

This *active* project of putting in the foreground *barrio* women and their realities is not a simple, linear process. In this context it is interesting to pay some attention to the way

in which many stories are created. The staff states that a topic is chosen as it “floats around in the organization” and that it “crystallizes” from events and stories of the moment. In many cases, it is based directly on a *barrio* woman’s experience - such as for a *fotonovela* concerning rape, one about ‘madness’, and another one dealing with child abuse. The *fotonovela* about wife beating is, in the words of María Escudero, “the story of the daily life of every woman in the *barrio*”.

It is interesting that there is always a certain substitution involved in this process of storytelling. For example, once a woman told in a meeting how every day she was feeling compelled to move all the furniture in her house completely around, and that her husband was consequently calling her crazy. The *fotonovela* “¡Soñar...quanta locura!” (*Fotonovela La Venada* no date indicated) was created out of her story, and it dealt with a problem many women face. As they work at home and never have the opportunity to exit the monotonous routine to do something more satisfying, many women feel useless, empty and alienated and express this in ways which are interpreted as ‘madness’ from others around them. The woman who actually impersonated the crazy wife in the *fotonovela* was a neighbor who could well relate to this state of mind.

This ‘borrowing’ and ‘swapping’ stories and bodies is obviously required for reasons of confidentiality. However, there is more to it: it reveals a project from the part of the *Taller* of ‘estranging’, that is alienating² reality. This is very similar to both Brechtian theatre theory and magical realism.³

² I prefer to use the term ‘estranging’ rather than ‘alienating’ reality or daily life because the latter suggests a sense of distance towards reality. What I want to express is that by estranging daily life, the latter is rendered strange and unusual and that this permits a different *relationship* with reality.

³ Compare Brecht’s statement (in the next page) with this account of García Márquez: “There is nothing that happened to me or that I have been able to do which would be more surprising and strange than reality. ... There is not one line in any one of my books that does not have its origin from a real fact. In ‘Hundred years of solitude ... I thought that the fear caused by the birth of a son with a pig’s tail would be the image with the least probabilities of coinciding with reality. Nonetheless, soon ... emerged from various places of the Americas the confessions of men and women who had something similar to a pig’s tail. In Barranquilla, a young man showed himself in the newspapers: he was born and had grown up with that tail, but he had never revealed it, until he read ‘Hundred years of solitude’. His explication was more surprising than his tail. ‘I have never wanted to say that I had it because I was ashamed’, he said, ‘but now, reading the novel

María stresses that hers is and has to be a Brechtian theatre. Brecht has had indeed a major influence in Latin American popular theatre, having developed a theory and practice for a theatre of revolution (cf. De Costa 1992; De Toro 1984). Brecht thought that the classical, “Aristotelian”, tradition was not adequate any more for the representation of contemporary issues and social problems, and he sought to establish a form of theatre which would be not only entertaining but also educational. In classical Aristotelian theatre, the spectators are traditionally presented problems and dilemmas, and in the end these are resolved via a “catharsis”, which constitutes a fictional, emotional solution to real life problems and conflicts. In this process, the spectators are called to identify themselves as much as possible with the characters in the same way as the actors try to ‘melt into’ the personages. This process however, does not allow the audience to think critically about the topics and problematic represented.

The “epic” theatre developed by Brecht, on the contrary, relies on a very different model. It does not build up towards a catharsis, but instead has a linear narrative, with each scene containing in itself a picture of the situation and conflicts at stake. In each scene, the spectator is confronted with certain issues and is encouraged to assess them critically. To this purpose, it is necessary that s/he does not fully identify with the characters. If this happened, the former would be unable to judge and to think about the behavior or identity of the latter. Consequently, the actors themselves are also not to identify fully with the part they are playing. Ideally, they are just “demonstrators”. They keep at a distance from their character, and, as María Escudero describes it, they “engage in a dialectical relationship with it”.

To prevent spectators from identifying with the characters and to create criticism from the part of the audience, Brecht's theatre attempted to

and listening to people who have read it, I realize that it is something natural” García Marquez 1981 quoted in Sánchez Ferrer 1990, my translation).

bring about a form of representation in which the familiar would convert into something surprising and the habitual into something strange. Things which are common in everyday life would have to produce a peculiar effect, and many things that appear natural would have to be recognized as being artificial (Brecht 1963 quoted in De Toro 1984: 29, my translation).

The substitutions operated in the *fotonovela* can be considered as having a similar effect. In a sense, they create a duplicity: the image matches and thus reinvents bodies and stories, as much as it separates them and makes them into a double, creating a dialogical relationship between them. They make the image into a place of splitting and thus open it up for the possibility of a theatrical representation and a play with identity. In other words, they estrange the readers from the unity of image and stories, or image and identities - the 'real' identities of their neighbours figuring on the pages - and remind them that, in the words of María Escudero, "we are all, always, characters, and every day we put on a character."

The *fotonovela*, then, is not characterized by a theatrical genre only because it represents actors impersonating a particular, fictional story. Rather, it can be thought as a theatrical praxis because it gives, so-to-speak, 'theatricality' to lives and identities. The *fotonovela* that most heightens and best shows this 'theatricality' is the one titled "¿Y si fuera cierto?" (*Fotonovela La Venada* no date indicated). In this satirical commentary on the sexual division of labor, we follow a day in the life of a family. Surprisingly, the roles of husband and wife are reversed. While the latter goes to work, the former attends to the children, does a multitude of house chores, makes bread to sell on the streets, and even laments with a neighbour that he is pregnant. He says: "So many times I told her that we had to protect ourselves, but nothing. She says that it is my responsibility" (*Fotonovela La Venada*, no number, no date indicated: 8) The day continues, depicting, in this reversed form, typical events and schemes: the husband manages to prepare only a meager dinner, because the wife spends most of the money on drinks, the wife goes out at night and comes back drunk, she beats the husband, etc. The last scene is the same as the first one: husband and wife are sleeping and the alarm clocks goes off. The fact that it is the wife, this time,

who gets up to wake up the children shows to the reader that the whole story was part of the wife's dream.

This *fotonovela* is particularly interesting because there are two layers of acting. Not only is the male protagonist impersonating the husband, Modesto, he is also representing the role and the figure of a Woman. He talks in a supposedly woman's language: most of the times he uses expressions such as "my love" to address his wife, while she just calls him, screaming, "man!". He never uses the imperative as she does. His facial expressions and gestures also evoke a female image: he smiles, he appears calm and caring (see Fig. 4).

This double acting expresses the suspicion that what a man like Modesto would do in real life, the language he uses and the way he relates to others, is, in a sense, also an act, an impersonation, a performance (cf. Butler 1990). This suggestion is strengthened by the questions for reflection on a leaflet included with the *fotonovela*: if this (reversed) situation depicted in the episode were true, would it make a real difference? Would the swapping of the sexual division of labour be the solution to women's problems? With these questions, the staff and the women involved in the production of this episode indicate that the solution to the problems outlined in "*¿Y si fuera cierto?*" does not consist in the substitution of one identity and one gender role for another. Rather, it begins from the attention to the very processes of gender and identity constructions themselves and to the way these make gender roles into such a 'normal', 'natural' and common-sensical aspect of daily life. In other words, a solution would start from the question: how is the category "woman" made into "a pertinent distinction in social relations? and how are relations of subordination constructed through such a distinction?" (Mouffe 1992: 373).

There are then, two parallel readings on what the alternative *fotonovela* of the *Taller* is about. For one, the *fotonovela* is a way of recuperating low-income, urban, *mestizo* (and indigenous) women's experiences. The daily life of women in popular *barrios*, and their views on the issues which affect them are 'forgotten' in mainstream representations of

reality. While the (unmarked) female body is discursively deployed in nationalism in its role of birthgiver and nurturer, low-income women's actual bodies, marked by specific social conditions never figure. Similarly Lind (1992) argues that while the very concrete needs of women are discussed in Ecuador, their views and their agency is replaced by their supposed dependency on the state and its institutions. The *fotonovela* seeks to actively foreground women's erased experiences in order to empower them. This happens as women can claim a space of participation, and recognize themselves in/through it. Here the concept of self-discovery refers to the apprehension of a gender identity, and the creation of a women's memory and *herstory* in daily life.

Yet the *fotonovela* mediates this discovery through a montage and a *play* with identity - in both senses: as a theatrical performance and as a game. This posits a project of self-discovery as estranging. The *fotonovela* is a way of proclaiming that the personal is political without essentializing the personal as a foundational experience. The *Taller* engages in a project of solidarity and change based on women's stories while attempting to critically historicise women's experiences. My two parallel readings of the *fotonovela* suggest that, for the project of the organization, as much as representing and reclaiming women's experience is *necessary*, the questioning of how the latter is socially constructed and prescribed is *strategic*. This is allied with a practice of representation which would have no claims of being a transparent medium but rather an opaque mirror, through which it is possible to see daily life differently (see Fig. 5).

In this context, I would like to refer back to María Escudero's words which suggest such an attention to representation and narrative as strategic tools for social and political action. The following story she recounted can be read as an anecdote about the concept and significance of estrangement. One day María Escudero and her theatre group were performing Brecht's (1964⁴) play "Leben des Galilei: Schauspiel" in a street of Quito. And

⁴ This date refers to the 1964 edition of the play written in 1938/39.

just in the precise moment in which the protagonist was saying the famous phrase: “And yet it moves!”, the worst earthquake in the recent history of Ecuador came: ““And yet it moves!”, said the protagonist ... and everything began to shake, ... we all had to flee ... we could not walk [from the movement of the ground]” (María Escudero).

From María Escudero’s telling of these anecdotes (a technique she has also been using in her theatre) I learned that it is important to look actively for the places and times in which theatre/fiction and lives intermingle and collide. These are valuable moments of estrangement, which go against the grain of social interaction and which represents loci for a possible redefinition of identities and a different ‘authoring’ of stories.

Another one of these anecdotes is the following account (and trenchant critique) about the first and only time María Escudero travelled to the North of the Americas.

I could not stay, I had to leave. ... When I came out of the plane, the first thing that stroke me was the colour of the sky ... it was GREY! ... I went ... for breakfast. ... All the fried eggs looked exactly alike, they were completely round and perfect. You know, when you fry eggs, they come a bit with this form, a bit with that ... here: all exactly round ... I went to the kitchen ... they had a stamp to make eggs. All the eggs, *even* the eggs, when they were frying, were put in a stamp! ... I had to leave ... I left after a day.

These stories estrange reality as common-sensical and natural in order to make room for different meanings and viewpoints. Embedded in María Escudero’s ‘surreal’ stories is the suggestion to start seeing with different eyes. Parallel, in some *fotonovelas* we find the paradoxical idea - half joking and half serious - to start seeing and thinking with ‘animals’, ‘dream figures’, and ‘plant’s eyes’. Through these devices, the audience is confronted with a situation where the habitual is impossible. As such, it denotes an alternative way of seeing - in which the color of the sky and peculiar cooking habits *are* important. And as these anecdotes are based on the impossibility of being subsumed into the usual structures of discourse, they also signify a particular enunciative position, as well as a way of authoring different stories.

This concept of narration as strategy and as action is here a key to understand narrative practices (both the ones underlying the *fotonovela* and the participant’s stories) as

a way of engaging in politics and as an attempt to redefine the realities women encounter. In the next chapter I will return to some participants comments and narrations - more particularly, I will present the story of a woman I named Silvia - to attend to this concept of owning and authoring of stories.

Figure 1: Examples of images depicting collective solutions:

The March for
International
Women's Day,
(from "Foto Historia"
In *Chaquiñan*, no number,
[March 1996])



and women
organizing following
the rape of a woman
in their *barrio* -
they are making leaflets
to distribute to warn
their neighbours.
(from *Fotonovela La
Venada*, no. 7, no date
indicated).

Figure 2: The Taller stresses that popular women be both the one who see and who are seen ... :



This picture brings together two very strong images- the panoramic view of Quito from the marginalized neighbourhoods with which the *Taller* is involved, and the picture of two *barrio* women staring at the reader (from *Fotonovela LaVenada*, no. 7, no date indicated).

Figure 3: 'Discovering oneself' :

"You think that I am not worthy,
because I am no longer what they call a virgin?"



"We women are worth
for many things."

"No, mother. No! I am able and I am
alive. I work and help to maintain the
household ... And I will even get a
scholarship to continue my studies ..."

(from *Fotonovela La Venada*, no. 6, no date indicated).

Figure 4: ... impersonating the role and figure of a Woman:

"Man! where did you put my shoes?"

"Here, my love, here they are ..."



"Do not beat me ..."

"I am expecting another child"



"I will kill you!"

(from *Fotonovela La Venada*, no number indicated, no date indicated).

Figure 5: An opaque mirror, which makes us see reality differently :
(from *Fotonovela LaVenada*, no.8-9, no date indicated).



Chapter Four

'Silvia'

I. A Woman's Story

Silvia is a worker in one of the daycares of the *Taller*, as well as a member of the *barrio* women's groups which manages and organizes it. Like all the other women who work in the daycares, Silvia expresses all her tiredness. She resents the continuous screaming of children (too many of them in too little a place), the long workdays, and the hard physical labour necessary for her job. "When we started ... we were young and had a lot of enthusiasm," she says, "but now we are so tired."

I came to know about Silvia primarily from the 'chatting' which took place every day in the daycare during the lunch breaks. Bits and pieces of Silvia's life story came to light from the conversations between the daycare workers, from references to her in talks I had with other women involved in the *Taller*, and from Silvia herself who one day - also during the lunch break in the daycare - told a volunteer and me a condensed version of her life:

I married when I was very young. ... I fell in love with a man my family did not like at all. In the *barrio* in fact, everybody was saying that he was not good for anything. But I fell in love! And then we started to get intimate, like all other couples do [virginity before marriage is considered to be important]. And I got pregnant. When I found out that I was pregnant, I went out of my house, living with him. After a while we got married.

Some years ago, Silvia separated from her husband. He had been seeing another woman and eventually Silvia had broken up with him. She explains that during this time she has been in another relationship. The same pattern however, seems to have occurred again: recently she discovered that her current partner is also being unfaithful. "This puts me in a rage," she says. "But now, I think it was my fault too. A woman cannot deny herself to her man many times ... without compromising the whole relation. If you often

negate intimacy, to a man, he would naturally go away with another woman.” And she adds: “I still think I should have fought harder for my husband.”

Milena, who also knows Silvia, says how she always remembers and thinks about “her story”: “It gives me such a pain - my heart still aches from her story. So I always talk about it with her.” Milena recounts how Silvia’s husband was involved with another woman.

And what happened? The organization put pressure on Silvia. They said ‘You are an organized woman, you have to leave him. For this we are organized.’ So Silvia left him. But what a suffering! ... And now she always says how she should have fought more for her husband. Reality is different than this utopia of ‘being organized’.

María Escudero has yet another perspective on the events. According to her, Silvia’s husband used to beat her. This was very hard on Silvia, because in these years in the *Taller* “she has advanced a lot”. Since Silvia had changed, and expanded her horizons, it became very difficult for her to remain in such a marriage. For María Escudero, then, the *Taller* has helped Silvia to ‘discover her self’, to gain a better awareness of her life conditions, and eventually to leave an abusive relationship.

The events lived by Silvia become the cloth of a narration spun by many people, and accompanied by claims to different meanings, interpretations, and ‘truths’. Milena, similarly to what she did with her own life story, points out the tensions and difficult relationships between an individual identity and life and the vision of a women’s movement such as the *Taller*. The latter is encapsulated in the phrase “being organized”. This expression is used very often in the *Taller* to emphasize that it is essential for women to participate in a *public* movement in order to change the subordinate position of women within society. The following lines from a song used in the March for International Women’s Day 1996, indicates that a woman who is not part of a popular movement has no chance of improving her situation nor the one of other women around her:

*Mujer que no se organiza:
sigue estando sumisa*

The woman who is not organized
goes on being submissive/oppressed

*Mujer que no se organiza:
sigue estando solita*

The woman who is not organized
goes on being alone

*Mujer que no se organiza:
no se safa de la pisa.*

The woman who is not organized
does not get up from the floor.

“Being organized” refers to a philosophical project of building solidarity between women as well as establishing concrete structures in which they can meet, bring forth collectively an analysis of their conditions, and discuss solutions to common problems. However, Milena indicates that being an organized woman is not a simple matter (see also Chapter 2, IV.). Rather, it always denotes a difficult intersection between different discourses and identities.

María Escudero emphasizes the role of the organization as a resource. She sees it as a tool for self-empowerment and as a liberating force in the life of many women living in popular *barrios*. Through the *Taller* the participants can feel that they have more control over their lives and over situations of inequality such as violent relationships. Silvia in particular has been with the organization for a long time and, according to the staff, this involvement has made her discernibly stronger.

The difference between these interpretations points, once again, to the many aspects of the link between an individual life and the organization - a complex relation which cannot be linearly solved or narrated. This(ese) story(ies) in its ambivalence is a commentary on the context of the women’s narrations - both in terms of their and Silvia’s lives in the organization and in terms of the social construction of gender. In regards to the latter, husband and wife relationships make up a central site of inequality from where gender is constituted as well as resisted (see below; see also Chapter 2, II.).

Here I can not regard Silvia’s story as a transparent window into the frameworks of gender and social activism, as every interpretation adds another layer of meaning to her narration. Nor can I look at this story just as a personal account of resistance, as it is firmly positioned in a web of commentary. As yet another audience for Silvia’s narration, I am

thus left with a question: how can I read both the shapes of these discourses which Silvia's account contours and their limits as she reworks, stretches, and occupies these categories? (cf. Tsing 1993: 208 ff.)

II. Spaces of Participation

Within this body of commentary Silvia is constituted and places herself both as partaking in dominant discourses on gender and, as an 'organized woman', at odds with them. Silvia's words reflect to a certain extent dominant conceptions of sexuality and gender, in which a woman/wife is confronted with the myths of the "good woman" and the "good mother" (Cuvi Sánchez and Martínez Flores 1994: 19 ff.). According to these conceptions, a woman is supposed to identify with an ideal of chastity and controlled sexuality, while always being ready to "receive him [the husband] with *cariño* [affection, love]', *no matter what*" (Cuvi Sánchez and Martínez Flores 1994: 20 quoting an interviewed woman, emphasis added). Furthermore, the figure of the "bad woman" which steals other women's husbands with an untamed sexuality (see Cuvi Sánchez and Martínez Flores 1994: 119 ff.), is also an integral part to the plot of Silvia's narrations.

However, I was struck by the strength of her (minimal) accounts and the pleasure she seemed to take in narrating them. Silvia was not recounting these events as a sad victim, but with the pride and authority of a storyteller. She stressed how she made the decision to marry her husband. The very part of her narration about the "negation of intimacy" is also an assertion of will and agency. The indirect statement that she was not and still is not willing to be convinced to have sexual relations against her wishes can be seen as a statement that she owns her sexuality (something she might have learned exactly from "being organized"). In other words, as much as her story is constituted in the enframing space of gender, it is also an act of appropriating the latter as a place from where to speak.

The fact that Silvia tells her story from the kitchen, literally in/from a 'break', a borderline, is an interesting aspect of her narration. The 'kitchen-talk' is here an important locus. The daycare represents the nucleus of the women's organization in the *barrio*, and within the daycare, the kitchen is a privileged place for commentary for all the women who work there. Creating the daycare, a radical and alternative space in the geography of the *barrio*, was a hard struggle for the *Taller* as well as an important part of their mandate. The organization in fact sees itself as an experiment for "creating collectively spaces of participation" (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, *b*: 2). This is so in practical terms, like building structures where women can meet, and helping each women's group to go on small holidays by themselves, without husbands or partners. It is also practiced in symbolic and discursive terms, like re-writing women's participation in Ecuadorian history, and finding ways to voice women's experiences and opinions. Indeed, María Escudero frequently described the *Taller* as a *space* - for thought, for women working together, for developing one's potential, creativity and capabilities.

The kitchen-talk thus denotes a space created through struggle and a borderland. Moreover, Silvia's narration suggests that we see it as an *occupied* space. The *Taller* sees itself carving this space out of (patriarchal) daily life for the women in the *barrios*. In turn, the latter engage daily in appropriating it, and making it into a locus for power and authority. For the participants and for Silvia it is seen as a place in which to talk, and in which to *own* and *author* stories. It is a place where to express what Cuví Sánchez and Martínez Flores (1994) call "the wall within". The latter refers to the complex space of identity constructed both from and at odds with dominant discourses about womanhood. Silvia's account recalls this "wall within" by talking about a "*femenino* [feminine, which is] fragmented and contradictory" (Cuví Sánchez and Martínez Flores 1994: 9). This can then become an occupied space and a comment on the political.

In this occupied space Silvia points to infidelity within marriage as a very important issue for women in Ecuador. Cuví Sánchez and Martínez Flores (1994) also affirm this to

be a central issue not only for women of the popular sector but of better off classes as well. The authors argue that, especially for women in the lower classes, the infidelity of the husband is seen as the epitome of men's freedom, that is of their privilege to live in the public realm. Men can go out of the house at their will, and pursue different activities. While "the doors of the house are open for him" (Cuvi Sánchez and Martínez Flores 1994: 12), married women like Silvia are usually relegated to the domestic realm and have to renounce recreation and education in the widest sense of the words. A participant in a woman's group, for example, told me that it is largely seen as useless for low-income women to do or take part in anything interesting that is not directly related to income generation or homemaking.

Furthermore, the infidelity of the husband is almost always associated with beatings, physical and verbal abuse, and a (partial or total) withdrawal of financial support from his part (cf. Cuvi Sánchez and Martínez Flores 1994: 12). This typical and very threatening pattern is also shown in the *fotonovelas* of the *Taller* such as the one titled "*¿Hasta cuando?*" (*La Fotonovela La Venada* 1990). In this episode, a man beats his wife almost to death after she tries to stop him from visiting his lover and demands from him that he give her money for the family's supper rather than 'spending it on "the other"'. For many women, thus, the husband's infidelity is "an explicit form of exercise of male power" (Cuvi Sánchez and Martínez Flores 1994: 12), whereby 'power' is constructed as pertaining to men and not to women. Husband's infidelity, then, incorporates a whole way of conceiving both women's identities and gender relations and translates a more abstract and general notion of sexism into a whole set of problems which touch very closely the life of most women from the popular sector.

The *Taller* addresses this issue directly as well as indirectly in their activities, projects and goals. However, the way Silvia expresses this problematic seems to form an 'undercurrent of meaning' in the discourses of the *Taller*. Her words embody a difference to the way in which the organization deals with the topic. More precisely, it is a difference

between *enunciative positions*. Her narration is placed *between* individual lives and the programs of social movements, and *between* the public and the private - not so much in its contents, but rather in its location and articulation.

Her story, emerging as talk from a borderline, differs from the gender critique of the organization. According to the latter it is important to analyze the problem, strategically, as an aspect of male privilege and to build solidarity between women rather than to think in terms of 'good' and 'bad' women. Milena refers to this conception and goal with the "utopia of being organized" and María Escudero with the vision of women in solidarity. However, Silvia's narration is not only a life story or simply the account of a broken marriage. Like Milena (Chapter 2, II.), Silvia *uses* her story to talk about the construction of gender and to map the borders and crossroads of women's identities. Her story, repeatedly discussed during the breaks in the daycare, is porous to daily life and is a lived commentary on being all of the following at the same time: an organized low-income *mestizo* woman in Ecuador.

Silvia contours the shapes of - and seeks out the divide between - the enunciative positions of individual experiences and the strategies of women's movements. In a certain sense, we could call this position towards the organization one of resistance. Silvia's words can be seen in the context to what she told me one day: that she might simply leave the organization. As Silvia had told me that the *Taller* "had a special place in [her] heart" when she started to participate, I was really surprised one day when she said that she might be leaving the organization in the future. As I asked her the reasons for wanting to leave, she indicated that as life goes on, she might be simply doing something different, and have no more time for the organization. In a way, then, she seemed to be saying that the *Taller* and its vision can enter only so much in her life.

On the other hand, her 'resistance' is an account of her position towards a particular kind of discourse. Her narration points out the gap which exists between the project of the *Taller* and the experiences of the participants. Social movements in general and the *Taller* in

particular necessarily exist within an emancipatory project and discourse. Keeping up a “passion for change” (María Escudero) and their vision depends on emancipatory concepts and ideas. The *Taller* works towards a vision of women who would be free to express themselves and to shape creatively their own reality. It promotes a concept of the social modelled on justice, freedom, equality, and solidarity. What we can glimpse through the narrations of the participants is then the tension between this emancipatory project and women’s lives which are messy, ‘foggy’, and contradictory. The experiences and lives of the participants which shape and are shaped by narrations are what makes up the organic whole of the organization, what builds community, solidarity and alternative spaces. However, as much as these experiences/narrations nourish and shape the organization, they also fragment it and open in it a multiplicity of perspectives and sites of struggle.

Perhaps we can perceive the same tension, but named differently, from the point of view of the staff. A central debate which informs and underlies the praxis of the organization is the question of what kinds of commitments do projects for social justice necessitate. The *Taller* in this regard participates in a similar debate as most other organizations and activists throughout the globe: how can social change be supported and promoted? What kinds of activism, discourses, and involvements does a philosophical project of social justice necessitate? This is not only a question about the ways in which to theorize and work towards economic, political, cultural, and social transformations. It is also a question about the intersections of ‘private’ and ‘public’ lives and the meanings ascribed to these conjunctures. To express it figuratively, there is a contrast between the image of Silvia leaving the organization, and the staff (temporarily) leaving the *barrios* after each meeting and activity. Although it seems that the *Taller* can simply ‘leave’ the situation and conditions in the *barrios*, in the end it is Silvia who can just ‘leave’ and not the staff as the organization and the *barrios* are such a big part of their lives. The two sides engage in different departures and assume different positions within the *barrio* and within a philosophical project of change. These two very different forms of departures and their

possibility are always already embedded into and express two different kinds (not qualities or amounts) of participation and commitment. In turn, mine, as a 'researcher' and short term 'volunteer', is yet a different sort of departure, as I left in order to write. I will address these issues further in the Conclusion.

Conclusion

... 'but María, I came here to learn from the *Taller*, I did not think I would come here in order to save the world and bring all the solutions....' 'That is wrong, Cristina ... you must change the world, ... have the passion for change ... We always expect very much from people'.

This thesis draws on a concept of the *Taller* as both an 'organization' shaped by material structures and activities and an imagined and narrated space, "a space full of stories ... something like a forest that extends in all directions and is so thick that it doesn't allow light to pass" (Calvino 1981 quoted in Steedly 1993: 23). In this thesis, I have paid particular attention to this net of narratives within the *Taller* as an important, fluid site of women's engagement in the political. The narratives I have presented map some of the links between participants' individual lives and their involvement in a public movement. These imaginings, comments and narratives are not simply added to events and structures, but they shape the very articulation of different meanings, identities, and struggles.

By presenting this perspective on the *Taller*, I have also wanted to underline the significance of storytelling and narratives, in all their non-innocent, intertextual, and dubious authority within much popular organizing. 'Stories' and interpretations are often an interesting and integral parts of struggles and resistance (both 'organized' or not) around issues of social justice. From the participants in the *Taller* I learned that narrative practices are important politically - not necessarily as 'better' versions of truth and 'truer' representation of the world, but as complex negotiations of the place of personal experience in relation to activism, politics, and history.

In the last chapter, I have argued that in the *Taller*, these tensions and negotiations between activism and lives are also part of a larger question within the organization: one of the very possibility of social change vis-à-vis harsh circumstances and of the kinds of actions and involvement this necessitates. The quote above, from a conversation I had with María Escudero, exemplifies an aspect of this debate. In turn, it also shows that my

'ethnographic storytelling' about the conjunctions of lives and activism is itself constructed in relation to this issue.

For the staff the *Taller* represents more than a decade of a very powerful and intense work. They have basically devoted their lives to the project. Such a commitment and interpenetration of activism and individual lives is shaped in opposition to a "culture of crisis", brought about by neoliberalism, globalization, and deepening poverty and marginalization. María Escudero once told me that she has not been able to do theatre any more: for theatre is necessarily a communal thing and in Ecuador "there is no solidarity".

For the staff, the difficulties inherent in doing the *Taller*'s work as well as maintaining a persistent vision of social change are worsened by the devaluation of these kinds of efforts, as expressed in the cuts to funding in all parts of the world today. While the living conditions in Ecuador do not seem to improve, the *Taller* is seeing its revenues cut as the budgets of most international governmental and non-governmental organizations and agencies are shrinking. The challenges of the task for the staff translate into a set of important questions which circulate in the organization, such as: are women's organizations possible? In which ways can people effect radical change? Which kind of efforts and commitments does social change require? These questions which are necessarily part of all social movements continue at the level of the *barrio* groups. "When we started ... we were young and had a lot of enthusiasm, but now we are so tired", says Silvia about her job in the daycare but perhaps also about the organization itself.

Within (and in spite of) this framework, the staff indicates that a total commitment is a necessary condition for the kind of work they are involved in, which includes a vision of profound change and women's integral empowerment. They write, for example, that nothing can come out of projects in which there is not enough time to develop a relationship with and between popular women. For this and other reasons, "volunteering" is not a very appropriate way of participating:

We critique the work of 'volunteers' because ideologically it presumes 'the rich helping the poor', which in fact marks the kind of relationship which is

established between them ... We believe that the work has to hold professional quality and be economically recognized, because in fact a serious and responsible work with these [popular] sectors requires a permanent contact, insertion, technical skills, a constant renovation and adaptation of scientific and technical knowledge, and basically time, in order to attend adequately to the complexities of the process (*Taller de Comunicación Mujer* no date indicated, d. 7).

This view also refers to 'researchers' like me, who engage in the power-laden practices of writing and representing and who will leave and not be involved to the extent the staffpersons are and believe is necessary. Indeed, the fact that I intended to write an intellectual paper about the organization seemed pointless and meaningless to the staff. My presence (and absence) and my research in this sense interpellates and is still part of the same debate: what kind of commitments and relations does social change necessitate? Do social justice struggles need activists or academics? What are the relations between an academic's and an activist's concern with meaning and representation? The very focus of my writing on lives and activism belongs to this context.

I came into contact with the *Taller* while searching for an organization which would be involved in grassroots struggles and which would be working towards creating audiences in the wider society for the stories and perspectives of marginalized sectors. My intent was to learn from their practices and experiences, in order to gain insight on issues such as identity, representation, and popular organizing. I find these topics not only intellectually interesting but also important in relation to any kind of concern with social justice here in Canada. When I went to the *Taller*, I gradually realized that I was in a very odd position. I was eager to learn from the staff and to participate in their activities, yet there was no particular task I could do, and no particular way I could be involved in the 'main office'. From the point of view of the staff, I was an inexperienced thus useless addition in the context of their work and activities. As much as the staff were deeply engaged and fully committed in working with the women in the *barriòs* and setting up activities, seminars, and demonstrations, they were totally indifferent towards my agenda of learning from the organization and, even more, of constructing academic arguments.

As for the women in the *barrios*, they also welcomed me with great warmth as a volunteer and visitor, and did not care at all about the fact that I was going to write a thesis about the *Taller*. Theirs was yet another kind of indifference, coming from a different speaker position. My writing an academic paper to be delivered in a university in a foreign country was clearly something remote to their lives. However, their indifference, just as the staff's, also shaped their relation to my research project. I do believe that in a sense, they viewed my agenda as just another way of storytelling: insignificant because for another audience, another place, and situated in another context, and yet 'subsumable' as a social practice. I was 'getting to know' the organization by 'plugging in' and listening to some stories, constructing interpretations of the narratives and of the organization, and preparing to engage in another (ethnographic) storytelling.

It is in this sense that I present these stories. Together with much literature on the issue of ethnographic writing, I thus want to remind the reader that as much as 'I was there' and I present at least a trace of their stories, experiences, and events, my descriptions are not meant to be read as transparent renderings of the words of the *Taller* and its participants. It is *my* reading of their stories, whether I want it or not. This does not make this thesis a useless or arbitrary exercise. Steedly writes:

Stories ... may be as much 'about' other stories as they are about events, real or imagined. This intertextuality should no more elide the possibility of experience than the 'eventness' of experience should obscure its narrative production (Steedly 1993: 23).

In other words, the insight of an ethnographic account comes exactly from the mutual shaping of the knowledge and experiences of the researcher and of practices of storytelling to each other. This thesis is valuable at least because of the trace about stories, events, knowledges, perspectives and theories developed by the *Taller* in many years of struggle. At the same time, Steedly's words underline once more the significance of storytelling in both my practices of representation and in these very events, knowledges, and stories.

As I indicated before, much of social activism is pervaded with narratives and stories which are important politically. Most popular organizing entails the creation of collective memory, different forms of representation, and alternative knowledges and histories (see for example Escobar and Alvarez 1992). However, this viewpoint might also obscure the ways in which the *intertextuality* and the *multiplicity* of these stories, alternative truths and knowledges shapes the position of experience in relation to history.

Some arguments raised in relation to oral history are interesting in this respect. Cruikshank (1996; 1994) points out that narratives can not be considered innocent retrievals of facts or 'truths', for many important reasons. What oral history does is to complicate our analysis and to question our frameworks by pointing out that both oral history and written accounts "are part of larger social processes" (Cruikshank 1996: 431). As engaging in narratives is a social practice, taking oral history for facts and truths can erase its appropriation and use for a variety of agendas, including the ones of regimes of control and the discourses of the state. Cruikshank argues that narratives have to be placed within their context, and considered to be complex social practices, which "construct the categories 'individual' and 'society', and especially the process by which the boundaries between those categories are established" (Cruikshank 1996: 449). These are processes embedded in power issues, as the creation and telling of narratives as well as their preservation and use as 'oral tradition' do not occur in a vacuum, but rather in a social and cultural spheres crisscrossed by antagonism and powerful encounters.

Similarly, this thesis addresses how narratives are not substitutions of one truth for another, but rather negotiations of spaces of participation. In this sense stories are political acts, both in their telling and use. Narratives are a way of fashioning identity and lives in relation to history. This is necessarily a complex issue, as history itself is a social and political category, which always denotes the marginalization and/or appropriation of certain stories and not others. The *Taller* as an organization denounces the absence of popular women in the nation's history and attempts in forging different spheres for women's

participation in the political. Their practice of alternative historiography is the reformulation of identity in relation with a past which is being invented by the present. The problem of women's representation in fact is "not simply that they [women] cannot speak on their own behalf in public debate, but rather that public debate constructs a world in which someone else's stories are the ones that count." (Steadly 1993: 185) Through their workshops, public demonstrations, their projects and their media productions, the *Taller* seeks to create structures and spheres in daily life where women's stories and experiences could be the ones that count - in their homes, in the *barrio* community, and in the public spaces of streets and plazas.

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