

Morning fog



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English edition

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Morning Fog of Alejandra Retana Betancourt and María José Retana Betancourt was developed as part of Movements and Moments – Feminists Generations, an initiative of Goethe-Institut. The project aims to make visible Indigenous feminist activisms and protagonists from the Global South by relating their life stories in the highly accessible format of comics.



This is Milpa Alta, love: the spring
taking each hard-earned pulsating jog
from the pear's lukewarm cheek.

And in the heart of the fog,
the jaguar's emeralds and wood seek
to overtake the peasant dawn.

Abigael Bohórquez



Over 500 years ago Malacachtepec Momoxco was founded. It was a confederation of pueblos that were located in the southmost region of present-day Mexico City. After the Spanish conquest, those pueblos went from being tied up to the Mexica empire to being Spanish empire vassals, who recognized their legitimate ownership of their lands. In that moment, their name changed to Milpa Alta, as it's still known today.

In the 20th century, with the consolidation of the Mexican state, an accelerated process of deindigenization took place in Milpa Alta which almost caused their mother tongue, Náhuatl, to be lost forever. On that same vein, from the second half of that century onwards, there were numerous attempts of forcibly taking away the communal forests of the pueblos.

Malachtepec Momoxco was made up of 9 pueblos. Today, Milpa Alta has a total of 12.

San Lorenzo Tlacoyucan: One of the pueblos closest to the forest, where our protagonist, Doña Herminia Gutiérrez, is from.

Villa Milpa Alta: It's been the main place of organization for these 12 pueblos and where the municipal government offices are today.



Morelos: The state that borders with Milpa Alta to the south and where Emiliano Zapata, campesino leader of the Mexican Revolution who fought for land and liberty, is from.

Morelos



I hadn't walked up this monte in a while. Not since you were gone.



But today I did, hoping to find you.





Everything is fine over here.



No signs of fire.



And no trace of the loggers.



Hey, look what I found!



Tasty!

Everything here reminds me of you.

The 1950's

These ones, ma?



Just what I was looking for.



Do you remember its name?

It's a cuacoztli.



And this one?

Did you forget?
It's a xoletl.



And this one,
a pitzonacaztli.



And these yellow flowers are from a tzoopotoni.

And this flower,
huitzilinoxochitl.



Why are they called that?

They are náhuatl words.
It's what the grandparents called them.



What was that?
A jaguar?

No, no. A wild cat,
maybe.

We better go.

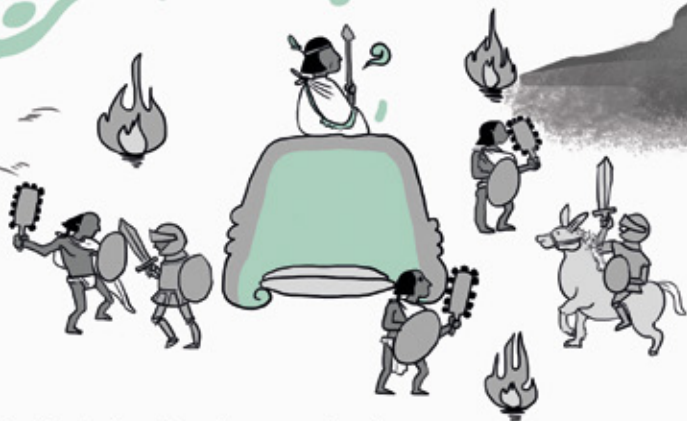


Don't be scared.



I'm gonna tell you
a story.

A long time ago, Hueyitlahuilli, the ruler of the
momoxcas, defended our land from the Spaniards.



Hueyitlahuilli died without seeing his hopes
realized: the momoxcas living without the
fear of losing their homes.



But soon after,
Cuaupetzintle, the

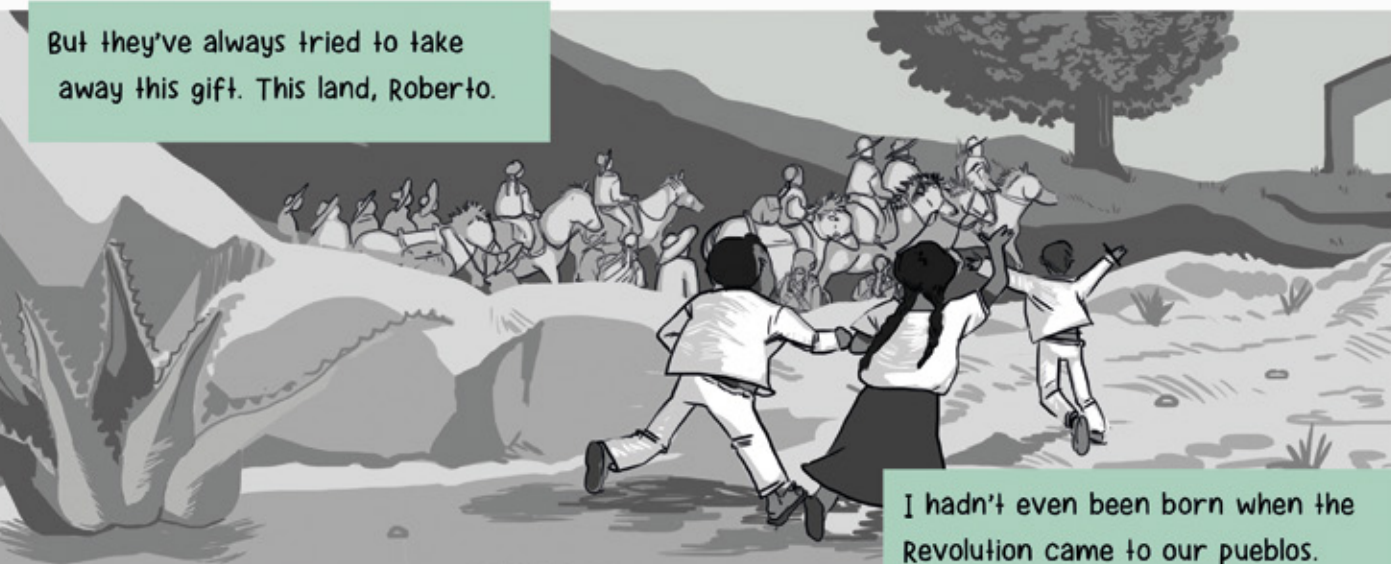
Spanish King's envoy, recognized
that this was our land.



Our grandparents won this land for us.
That's why it's a gift. A very ancient gift.

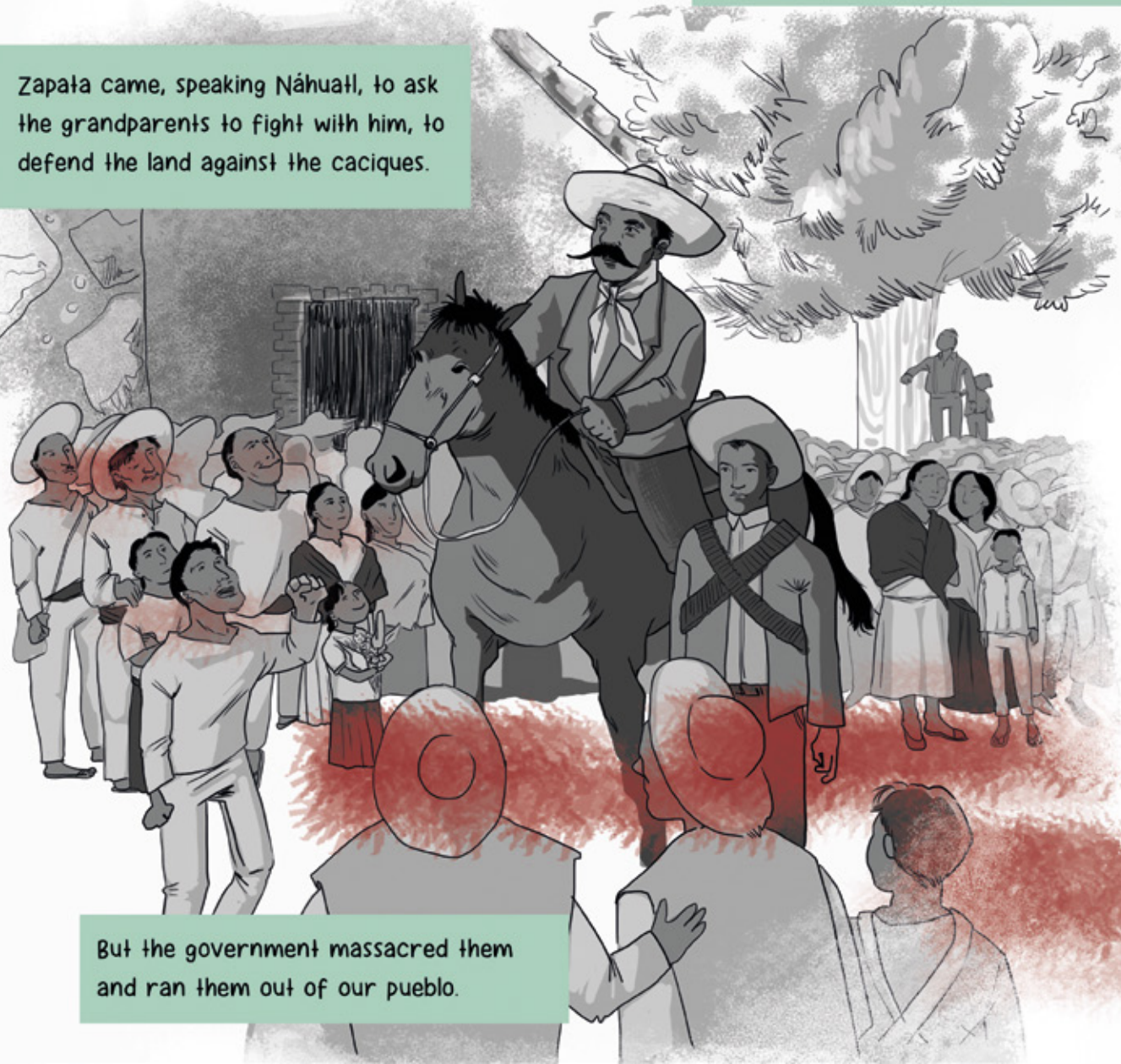


But they've always tried to take away this gift. This land, Roberto.



I hadn't even been born when the Revolution came to our pueblos.

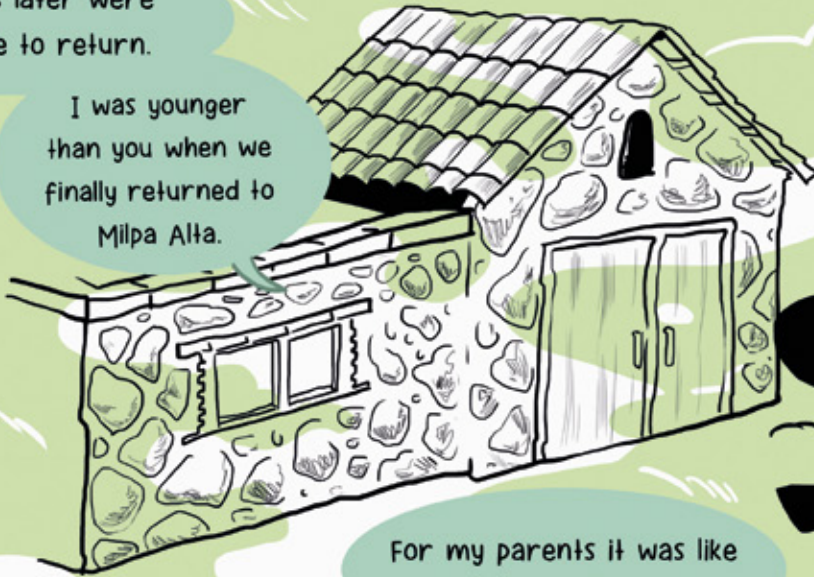
Zapata came, speaking Náhuatl, to ask the grandparents to fight with him, to defend the land against the caciques.



But the government massacred them and ran them out of our pueblo.

Only years later were people able to return.

I was younger than you when we finally returned to Milpa Alta.



For my parents it was like returning to paradise.

They missed their homeland so much.



Look at all of the good things the forest provides us with, Roberto.



Don't ever be scared, because this land is your home and I'll always protect you.



Nothing like a tortilla made from blue corn.

Take more, please.

It's been a rough morning, right?

God no! Some years ago you went up to the mountain

without knowing if you were gonna come back alive

Okay, but the fires and the logging are still happening...

Oh, it was very tough, fighting against the caciques, the logging and the electricity company...

Yeah, that's true, but back then the entire pueblo went out to fight for the forest.

Do you remember, Doña Herminia?

How could she forget? Doña Herminia has a prodigious memory.

That's right, Roberto, I don't forget anything...

May, 1978

Doña Herminia!
Open up!

What's going on,
Lolo? Look at the
time...

They are taking
the wood!

A neighbor of the Villa
saw the trucks on the
road.


They try to use the cover of
the night to get the logs out
without us realizing it.

We have to leave
right now, the others are
heading out there too.

Ma, what's going on?

Go back to bed, son.
I have to go with
everyone.





I swear the logs come from Morelos.

You are not leaving!


We've had enough!

Don't try to make fools out of us,

we know very well they come from our forest.


We'll burn everything down!

Later...



The best thing to do would be to take the trucks elsewhere, before it gets worse.


But where?



To San Lorenzo, over there my women and I will make sure no one takes the wood.

The rest of us will go to the Subsecretaria Forestal.

They have to listen to us.



What happened?

Did they burn down the forest?

Why are those trucks here?

Where's Doña Herminia?

-TAN TAN

As you all know, the logging company Loreto y Peña Pobre has been exploiting our communal forest for years and without our permission.

Today they tried to take more than a thousand piles of wood.

We've tried every legal recourse, but the company and the government refuse to listen to us.

But we are not gonna let them destroy our home!

They chop down our trees, beat and murder our people. They want to take everything away from us.

If we have to give up our lives for this land, we will do it!



12 June 1979

We were desperate. We took the streets to ask our delegado to resign.



EL PUEBLO ES SOBERANO
Y LAS AUTORIDADES
ESTÁN PARA SERVIRLE!!

MEJOR MORIR LUCHANDO A VIVIR
DE RODILLAS // VENCEREMOS!!

We knew he was profiting from the illegal logging by Loreto y Peña pobre.

LA MUJER MILPALTENSE
DEFIENDE SUS MONTES

CONSEJO DE RESPETABLES
EXIGE RENUNCIA DE U. NAVARRO

The Consejo de Respetables was leading our march. They were wise elders who could still speak Nahuatl.

The delegado never came out to talk to us. So we decided to set up camp. We wouldn't leave until he came out to face us.

5:00 A.M.



Suddenly, a group of men appeared and attacked those remaining on the site.



I wasn't there, Roberto, but Aquiles and Raymundo were, do you remember? Luckily they escaped.




When we heard about it, everyone from all the pueblos came down to help them.

¡Neighbors of Milpa Alta, join the resistance!



The hardest part was yet to come.



Now more than ever
we have to demand
Navarro's resignation.

The ones who attacked
us where Chicharo's
men.



We need to organize and
call the assemblies to remove
that traitor from his position as
communal representative

We need to think carefully about
what we are going to do. We are
already being called kidnappers, thieves,
radicals, instigators...



The press is calling
us jealous and
resentful indians.

Even if we didn't get the
representative to quit, for a few
hours, our anger turned to joy.



San Lorenzo Tlacoyucan, 1980

BIBLIOTECA PÚBLICA

They kicked out more lumberjacks today.


And Doña Herminia was there, of course.

You know she likes causing trouble.

Yeah, that woman doesn't know how to stay at home.

Not even to take care of his disabled son.





Mom, are you aware they talk behind your back?

Aren't you hurt?

Aren't you mad?

Do you know what they say?

That I'm a pot stirrer?
A bad mother?

Of course I know!
Of course it hurts!

But someone has to fight for us.

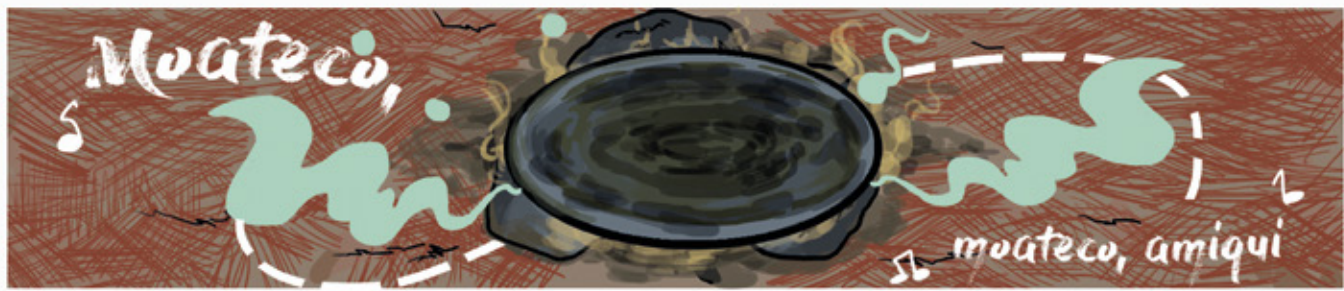
I'm just a campesina doing what she thinks is right.

But I don't want anything to happen to you, mom.

And I don't like the terrible things people say about you.

Don't be scared.
When you were a boy I made you a promise, do you remember?

I promised I would always protect you.
That's what I'm doing.





Fair warning, Doña Herminia, I'm not as good with the camera as Roberto.



Don't worry about it, David, just hurry up.



17 August 1980



This is the photo you took of me the day I was elected comunal representative of San Lorenzo Tlacoyucan. Teodoro is also there, my substitute.




A month earlier, Chicharo was assassinated.

The government tried to blame Raymundo and me.



I stayed because the people of San Lorenzo protected me.



After a while, the government
canceled the arrest warrants.

It took some time, but
Loreto y Peña Pobre declared
bankruptcy and left us
in peace in our forests.

The fight wasn't over after that.

Finding documents to prove right of possession, distributing the lands to all the people who have nothing,



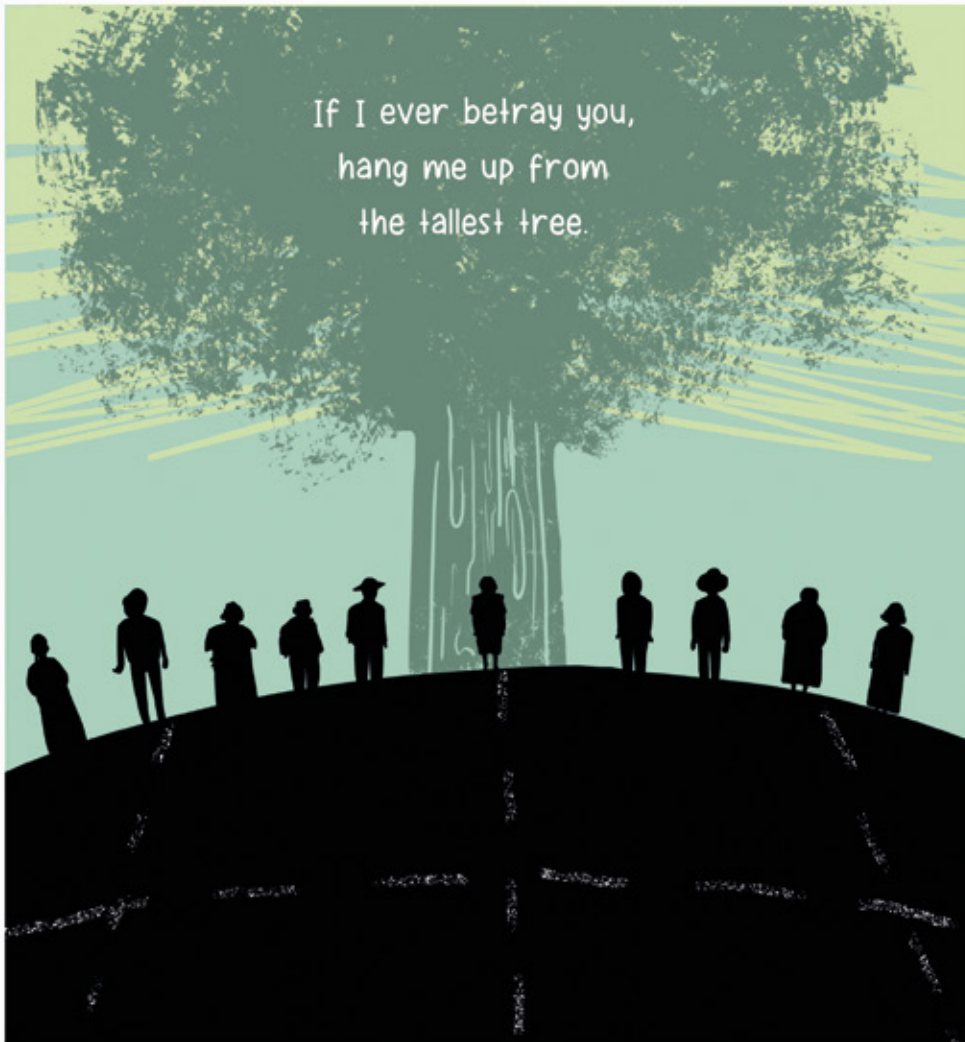
creating groups for taking care of the forest...



There was so much left to do.



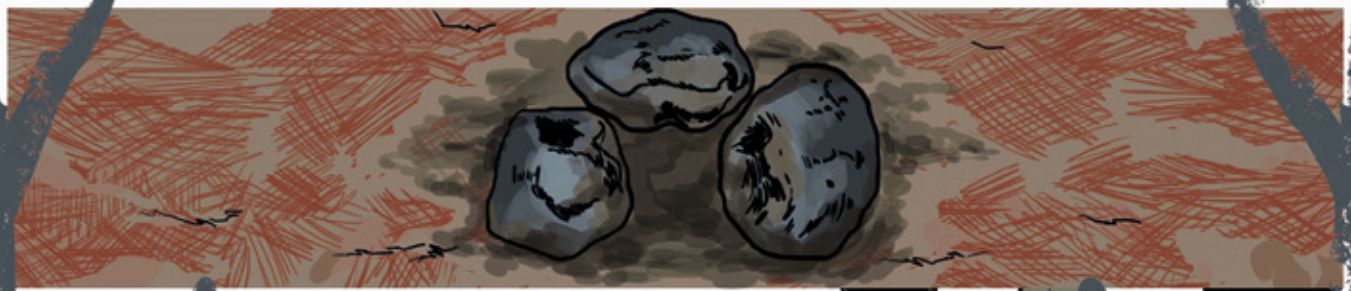
If I ever betray you,
hang me up from
the tallest tree.



You were always
with me.



Thank you



Doña Herminia! Where are you going?

I'll be back. I just want to see something.


Today I came to the forest without knowing if I would find you, son.





But you were here,
waiting for me.





In memory of Doña Herminia Gutiérrez
Valencia and her son Roberto.

And with enormous gratitude to everyone
who fought for the land of
Malachtepec Momoxco.

Note

Doña Herminia Gutiérrez Valencia was born on 25 April 1922. Widowed at 25, she became the head of her family. She toiled on her land and raised her son Roberto by herself in the pueblo of San Lorenzo Tlacoyucan. She was elected communal representative on 17 August 1980, in the presence of the members of the Agrarian Reform. She held this position until the day she died.

The people who knew her remember her as a leader and defender of nature, a woman of prodigious memory and incorruptible principles. Doña Herminia was an active participant of the comunero movement which had its start in the seventies. On the struggle against the log company Loreto y Peña Pobre, Doña Herminia and the pueblo of San Lorenzo Tlacoyucan were key agents in keeping the movement alive for nearly a decade. Though she and her people were called radicals even within the community, the firmness of her actions made the government respect the power and will of the comuneros from Milpa Alta.

Doña Herminia passed away on 27 March 2008, on her hometown, soon after the passing of her son Roberto. She lives and will keep on living for a long time in the memory of the twelve pueblos of Milpa Alta.



Some members of the Comunero Movement, circa late 70s and early 80s. From left to right, Miguel Salgado, Javier Ríos, Herminia Gutiérrez, Valencia, Luz Carmen Alvarado Romero, Elena Romero y Raymundo Flores Aguilar, on 18 November 1979.

Glossary

Cacique

Person with great extensions of land under his power, he exploits the laborers who work on them.

Campesino/a

Person who works the earth, usually of humble material conditions.

During the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, it was common for Indigenous people to call themselves campesinos instead of Indigenous.

Comunero

Person with legitimate right to communal lands who participates in their conservation. In the case of Milpa Alta, the comuneros are people born there and who come from families who've been there for generations.

Delegado

Mexico City is divided into 16 municipalities, Milpa Alta is one of them.

They were previously called delegaciones. Each delegación had as its local authority, a delegado. In the seventies and eighties, the delegado was not popularly elected, but appointed by the Jefe del Departamento del Distrito Federal, who was appointed, in turn, by the President of the Republic.

Don/Doña

A respectful way of addressing someone, it's prefixed to the person's name. In Mexico it is used specially to refer to older people.

Granadero

Police body specialized in stopping riots, but in practice it was used to repress social movements.

Judas

Carboard figure, which is burned to redeem the community's sins, usually during Holy Week.

Momoxcas

Another way of calling the people of Milpa Alta which makes reference to their Nahuatl origin.

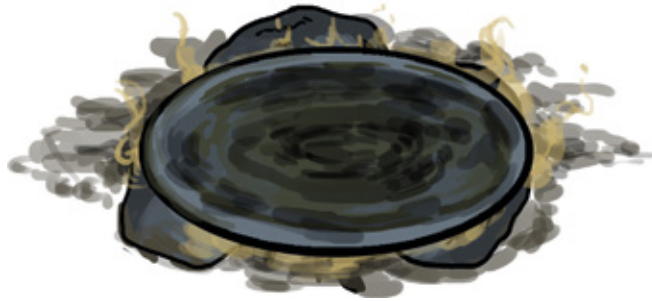


Monte

Natural elevation of land. In Nahua culture, like in many indigenous cultures in Mexico, the montes are not only a source of sustenance but are in and of themselves sacred places.

Pueblo

Town or populated place of a small size. In Spanish, pueblo is also used to refer only to the humble people of a place or to the common populace from which emanates the sovereignty of a democracy.



Tlecuil

A stove made out of three stones over which a comal is placed (a thin plate used mostly to cook tortillas) or pots. The tlecuil is part of traditional Nahua cuisine.

Zapata

One of the main military leaders of the Mexican Revolution. In the country's center, Zapata organized a rebellion of campesinos with the objective of taking back the lands which the caciques had hoarded. Even today, Zapata is still a symbol of the Indigenous and campesino resistance.

Acknowledgement

Because of Morning Fog, we've gotten to know our father's pueblo better and have reconnected with roots that might have been lost to us otherwise. It wouldn't have been possible without the help of a lot of people who shared with us their little piece of this story and who made us feel welcomed here.

We'd like to thank Emiliano Castillo for the English translation, and Temachtiani Alberto Castro for the Nahuatl translation, the language of our ancestors. Our deepest gratitude to teacher and chronicist Raymundo Flores; to Mrs. Elida Flores; to the Chavira family, specially to Mr. Francisco, Flor, and Horacio; to the Brigada Tlacoyotes; Mrs. Remedios Cueto; Mrs. Eréndira Vázquez and Mr. Hugo Lara. We also thank Brenda Meza from the Lunas Milpa Alta, who got interested in our project as well as Itzel Olguin and David Daniel, who helped us in the recording of audiovisual material.

The chronicles written by the Consejo de la Crónica de Milpa Alta were equally helpful; special mention to the chronicle written by Manuel Garcés about Doña Herminia, since it was the first time we heard of her. Even though we couldn't interview Mrs. Concepción Robles, we wish to acknowledge her brave participation in the documentary "Testimonios de la lucha comunal", which lit the way for us.

Lastly, we'd like to thank Jorge Retana, our father, for his unconditional support.

Thank you, everyone, for sharing the documents, photographs, and memories you've safeguarded for decades.

Tlasohkamati miak.
Pepe and Ale





Doña Herminia Gutiérrez Valencia, David Elizalde Sánchez and teacher Crispin Reina.

