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ZAPATISTA VOICE, VISIBILITY AND VISION: AN-OTHER AESTHETICS OF NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

In January 1994, the international press, among them many veterans of Central American conflicts of the 1980s, came to these Indigenous territories looking for the past—and found the future.

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Introduction

Since their insurrection on January 1, 1994, the EZLN-Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional [“Zapatista Army of National Liberation”] in Chiapas, Mexico, has promulgated an incisive critique of the colonial character of capitalist accumulation and violent dispossession led by globalized finance capital and enabled by state force. With their

¹ Carrigan, Ana. (2001). Chiapas, the First Postmodern Revolution. In Ponce de Leon, Juana (Ed.). *Selected Writings of Subcomandante Marcos*. New York: Seven Stories, 417.

international grassroots organization, the new Zapatista movement has transmitted an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial worldview to the urban and rural communities around the world. This was possible not only through the strategic use of cyberspace, alternative media networks, and close dialogue with civil society, but with an alternative understanding and production of aesthetics that uses language, visual symbols, humor, and stories through which they communicate to the world their historical struggle and worldview.²

Not only do the Zapatistas bring fresh perspectives into the modern concept of democracy—that is traditionally defined within bounded national spaces and rooted in national sovereignty—, they also set in motion a worldwide discussion about the current state of class struggle and a new way for grassroots mobilization on the cultural front.³ Moving along this path, Zapatistas have challenged the paradigms of post-modernist and poststructuralist emancipation strategies that have not communicated well with the lived experiences of diverse Indigenous communities and their historical struggle to recuperate their land from agro-export farmers and cattle ranchers across Mexico.⁴ It is thus a very poignant observation by Maria Saldaña-Portillo who argues that the Zapatistas fills in the empty content of the signifier ‘Indian’ with ‘Indian specificity’.⁵ To overcome centuries-old prejudices, ignorance, and idealization of Indigenous identity, culture, and resilience, the Zapatistas

² I prefer to write “Zapatista worldview” instead of “Zapatista ideology” as they are not ideologues.

³ Harvey, Neil. (1998). *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

⁴ Veltmeyer Henri. (2000). The Dynamics of Social Change and Mexico’s EZLN. *Latin American Perspectives*, 27(5), 88-110, 96.

⁵ Saldaña-Portillo, María J. (2003). *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*. Durham: Duke University Press, 236-237.

have had to establish Indigenous peoples as actors in forging a new relation to the state. They did this by establishing a leading role in the process of intense mobilization of Indigenous peoples across Mexico.⁶ The challenge that the contemporary Zapatistas brought forth for the theory and practice of revolutionary change included a careful construction of unique forms of visibility, speech and image-making strategies that enabled them to build a struggle in the cultural as well as the political front. The performative force of their alternative aesthetics, including the fabrication of a leader figure and its corresponding persona, being identified with the iconic ski masks, as well as carefully thought out visual gestures that mix national and Indigenous symbols, have resonated nationally and internationally, and have, to a large extent, protected them from extermination.

The “people the color of the earth”, as they call themselves, say, “we chose words to be heard and symbols to be seen”. Zapatistas strategically build their vision of an “other politics” by constructing a visual and aural world that is hard to articulate in the traditional vocabulary and imagination of revolution as it is a unique encounter between libertarian/autonomous Marxism and historical Indigenous resistance. The aesthetic pastiche of old forms of Indigenous struggle for land under the influence of Mayan cosmology and new anti-capitalist activism not only prepares the ground for an alternative conceptualization of radical politics; it also captures the imagination of the activists, revolutionaries, civil societies, intellectuals, and peasant struggles around the world. It is thus challenging to frame this movement in comparison to the aesthetics and politics of previous anti-capitalist movements. What is striking is that its

⁶ *Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinos* (State Council of Indigenous and Peasant Organizations-CEOIC) led by the Zapatistas in 1994 mobilized some 100 Indigenous organizations with more than 800 land petitions.

power is embedded precisely in its broad ideological and social appeal.⁷ However, this broad appeal has its cost. To manage to wrench their collective memory and historic resilience from the grasp of the Mexican government and global powers, the Zapatistas have constructed their public image on a double-edged sword: attracting national and international public attention, while risking popularization in a way that could reduce the movement to a commodified rebellion in popular culture. For almost four decades, their image-making as well as communication strategies have carefully maneuvered through their global recognition towards building grassroots collectivism across Mexico and the globe. Through a dialectical perspective, this article discusses the layered identifications, representations (both visual and aural), meanings, and strategies that reconstitute a neo-Zapatista aesthetico-political space in centuries-old colonized territories.

Land, Revolution and Social Networks: The Representation of the Neo-Zapatismo

Zapatismo constantly oscillates between the particular (e.g., being included as a part of the Mexican Nation as Indigenous peoples seeking autonomy for two hundred years) and the universal (e.g., the larger world movement against neoliberalism). As opposed to patriotism or nationalism, Zapatistas forge a type of cosmopolitanism that advocates for equality and solidarity among all human beings. In their demands for autonomous land, they do not seek to reconstruct the meaning of “nation” as in official nationalism but as a commitment to Indigenous

⁷ Gills, Barry K. (2000). *Globalization and the Politics of Resistance*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 25.

economic, political and social rights being collective rights. This alternative approach to “nation” inspires the anarchist, environmentalist and anti-globalization activists across the globe. It also forges the implementation of the *San Andrés Accords*—the agreements designed to provide Indigenous peoples throughout Mexico with autonomous powers over their lands and territory, as well as the right to self-government.⁸ However, it should be noted that to date the Mexican government has failed to honor the agreement.

In the social memory of Indigenous Mexicans, the struggle for land symbolizes a common resistance and constitutes a foundation for a strong social bond that connects villages and communities. While land rights and democracy compose the core agenda of the Zapatista political struggle, the image of Emiliano Zapata marks the personification of this agenda. Since the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the aesthetic configuration of Zapata’s dignified figure—with cross-cartridges and riding on a white horse—embodies the ideological symbolism based on the amalgamation of cultural myths of the Zapatistas. Although the horse was introduced in South America by Spaniards, its meaning as a symbol of victorious strength has been appropriated by the Zapatistas and, combined with the crossed cartridge belts, has come to symbolize the eternal existence of the hero and ongoing resistance. Art historian Teresa Avila states, “As the horse is associated with the conquest of Mexico and the agrarian elite of Mexico, when Zapata took a seat on a horse, as a rider

⁸ *San Andres Accords* were signed on February 16, 1996, with the presumption that they would become law but the Mexican legislature modified them, changing the language in ways that further weakened the rights and the autonomy of the Indigenous peoples. As a result, the Zapatistas refused to have any relations with the government.

of Indigenous ancestry, he inverted the sign of conquest and oppression”.⁹

In 1910, under the command of Zapata and Pancho Villa, rural peoples rose outraged for “land, freedom, and justice”. During the combative phase of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), these slogans also generated unique visual symbols. Zapata and Villa almost immediately became icons of the revolution, and with their horses and cartridge belts, they represented a dignified image of the peasants. Zapata’s representation as a symbol of liberty and justice grew and spread during the revolution through popular songs (*corridos*), stories, and photographs. The body of the rebellion was the peasant, and the representation of the peasant was Zapata. In the reconstructive phase of the revolution (1920-1940), this expressive dimension of Zapata’s agrarian revolution became the greatest inspiration for the industrial proletariat and, later, for some of the progressive artists who became the revolutionary vanguard. According to Avila, “The fundamental meaning of the image of Zapata correlates with the concepts of the egalitarian distribution of land, the decentralization of government, and rebellion in the name of justice. These concepts, however, have been converted over time to mean liberty and social justice for the popular classes”.¹⁰

That the new Zapatista uprising began on the day that NAFTA was ratified was no coincidence. The movement coalesced in the Lacandon jungle after ten years of military as well as ideological preparation. In order for the NAFTA agreement to be signed by all parties, in 1992

⁹ Avila, Teresa. (2005). *Images of Zapata and the Construction of National Ideology*. MA thesis, University of New Mexico, 13.

¹⁰ Avila, *Images of Zapata*, 49.



[Fig. 1]. Subcomandante Marcos and Subcomandante Tacho Leading the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Source: www.revistaamatauta.org, accessed August 22, 2010.

Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution had to be eliminated. This article ensured the reform of collective *ejido* landholdings for which Zapata and his peasant revolutionaries fought during the Mexican Revolution.¹¹ The main aim of the reform was to incorporate the strategic location of Chiapas and its rich resources into the international market. As Noam Chomsky noted in his book, *Profit over People*, the president of Mexico's leading environmental organization, Homero Aridjis, sees the NAFTA agreement as the third conquest that Mexico has suffered and concludes "[...] the first was by arms, the second was spiritual, third is economic".¹² NAFTA has not only condemned the Indigenous communities to extreme poverty, but has also destroyed the conditions of their communal social

¹¹ With the amendment of the Article 27 in 1992, the Mexican government eliminated the guarantee of communal property of *ejidos*, allowing them to be sold, rented, or mortgaged.

¹² Chomsky, Noam. (1999). *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 127.

life that depended on communal decision-making processes—an Indigenous democracy of direct representation, and in the Zapatistas' words, "an opportunity to practice a different life".¹³ The spokesperson of the Zapatista movement, formerly Subcomandante Marcos, now Subcomandante Galeano, explained: "The moment the agrarian land distribution is closed, the Indigenous farmer loses his means of production, but he also loses his history and culture".¹⁴

The representation of the resistance of the landless peasant against state repression repeats itself not only as a means of political rebellion but in the visual (as much as oral) language of the Zapatista rebellion. An iconographic photograph shows EZLN soldiers marching to one of the meetings in August and September of 2005, where plans for the *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* were prepared.¹⁵ Marcos, riding the white horse, embodies Zapata and generates an impression of formidable strength and leadership. Arrivals at those gatherings from the jungle or other remote places often involved a march, not just of the EZLN but also of Zapatista peasants and Indigenous groups elsewhere, along with the civil society activists and NGOs who joined them. One of the commanders on the horse carries a large Mexican flag, which often adorned the reunions. Although they frequently use the EZLN flag that

¹³ De Angelis, Massimo. (2005, August 5). *Zapatista's Voice*, *L'acéphale*. <http://libcom.org/library/zapatistas-voice-massimo-de-angelis>.

¹⁴ Blixen, Samuel and Fazio, Carlos. (1995, October 12). Interview with Marcos about Neo-liberalism, the National State and Democracy, *Brecha* (Author's translation). <http://chasque.apc.org/brecha>.

¹⁵ *Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona* (The Sixth Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle) is a manifesto issued by EZLN on June 28, 2005. With this manifesto, Zapatistas move from a critique of neoliberalism to a more comprehensive rejection of capitalism as a system of exploitation. With this attempt, the Zapatistas also stepped ahead of the anti-globalization movement and embraced the anti-capitalist movement along with worker's struggles around the world.

has a black background with a red star, their use of national symbols, such as the Mexican flag and the national anthem, has generated criticism for binding them within the politics of national struggle. North American criticism of the Zapatistas as a nationalist movement or, at best, as “cultural nationalists” begins by ignoring an enormously complicated and multi-perspectival play of different narratives and contradictory conceptions of nationalism. On the other hand, it ignores the social and cultural meanings underneath their representation of the “nation”.

Since 1994, through their declarations and other forms of communication, the Zapatistas have been placing their struggle in the trinity of democracy, liberty, and justice for the *patria* (Mexico). In Tzotzil, earth (*tierra*), land (*tierra*) and homeland (*patria*) are the same word: *balamil*, a common word across other Mayan language groups. The Zapatistas use it interchangeably not to highlight their nationalism but to emphasize their cultural ties to the land. The word *patria*, when used in place of *tierra*, also cosmologically connects the Mayan past, present, and future. The autonomous lands of Zapatistas are the experimental lands for radical democracy, and they imply the Mayan relationship to the land (and earth) that does not recognize any institutions or individuals reclaiming it as a property or ruling over it. Thus, they often emphasize the Indigenous sense of “place” and “belonging” when they use the concept of “land (*tierra*)”.

The Tzotzils, Tzeltals, Chols, Mams, Zoques, and Tojolabals in Zapatista communities—like other non-Mayan Indigenous communities across Mexico and around the world—believe that the land was passed on to them as a gift from their ancestors, and not only it is vital for the continuation of their existence, it also constitutes their identity. In the autonomous communities, the Zapatistas allocate the land as communal

property, not allowing its transformation into private property. They form agricultural cooperatives and initiatives to cultivate and work the land collectively. Hence, on the other hand, for the Zapatista communities land also constitutes an existential and cosmological link to their pre-conquest past and it constitutes the core of their responsibility to both nature and society. As Gustavo Esteva explains: “Their cosmic attitude toward nature, in which they feel immersed, prevents conceiving the possibility of appropriating it in an excluding way: how to ‘own’ your mother?”.¹⁶

This cosmology on the ownership of the land is also prominent in their demands to establish an organic link to the Mexican Nation (the homeland—the whole) through direct political representation. Massimo Angelis explains: “The Zapatistas refer to this organic unity as ‘nation’. Marx calls it *Res Publica*, or true democracy or communism, but they all mean the same thing: people recognizing each other as human beings and therefore governing themselves”.¹⁷ Since the *First Declaration*, the Zapatistas say that they are, after all, Mexicans. Yet, being a Mexican—as narrated in their poetry, storytelling, and the visual world—is not a territorially bound identity; it refers to the multitude of people struggling for the three pillars of Zapatismo: justice, freedom and democracy.¹⁸ As explained in their words:

And then we also said we wanted democracy, liberty, and justice for all Mexicans although we were concentrated on the

¹⁶ Esteva, Gustavo. (2011). *The Zapatistas and People’s Power*. Multiversity: United States Chapter. <http://vlal.bol.ucla.edu/multiversity/Gustavo/Zapatistas.htm>.

¹⁷ De Angelis, Zapatista’s Voice.

¹⁸ Faramelli, Anthony. (2018). *Resistance, Revolution, and Fascism: Zapatismo and Assemblage Politics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 105.

Indian peoples. Because it so happened that we, the EZLN, were almost all only Indigenous from here in Chiapas, but we did not want to struggle just for our own good, or just for the good of the Indigenous of Chiapas, or just for the good of the Indian peoples of Mexico. We wanted to fight along with everyone who was humble and simple like ourselves and who was in great need and who suffered from exploitation and thievery by the rich and their bad governments here, in our Mexico, and in other countries in the world.¹⁹

The neo-Zapatistas, by extending their struggle from Indigenous land rights to all oppressed people, have also avoided essentializing their culture and emerging as a coded identity to be corrupted by the state politics or (as dangerously) by the rampant multi-culturalism of the 1990s.²⁰ Subcomandante Marcos explained how the movement has refrained from the corruptive character of national politics: “If we asked for an independent Mayan state, we would immediately be recognized by the UN, the IMF and the World Bank. They’d say to us, look, we recognize you, we will finance you, we will give you weapons and soldiers, and whatever you want because it is what suits us”.²¹ This could be understood as just the political rhetoric of a leader; however, many scholars have argued that by rejecting any attempt to take national power, the Zapatistas establish themselves as a struggle of a “non-power” that constructs the path of both Indigenous direct democracy and

¹⁹ The Zapatistas. (2005). *Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona*. Enlace Zapatista. <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org/sdsl-en/>.

²⁰ Faramelli, *Resistance, Revolution, and Fascism*, 104.

²¹ Subcomandante Marcos. (2001, February 2). Globalization Doesn't Break Down Borders, It Creates Them, *La Jornada*, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-lat-0102/msg00060.html> Nafalloa: Tlalaparta.

anti-authoritarian Marxism.²² Their fight for equal representation and Indigenous autonomy rejects and challenges the legitimacy of the nation state as the authority in political representation.²³ This ideologically ties the Zapatista movement to the Italian labor movement and autonomist Marxism that are embedded in the concept of new internationalism—all the while creating a political bond across Indigenous people in Mexico. In so doing, they seek specific democratic transformations in Mexico, on the one hand, and build an underlying logic of change that calls for universal activism, on the other.

Indeed, the Zapatista rebellion has at its heart the confrontation between Indigenous traditions of self-organization and the Guevarist-inspired model of guerilla warfare against the state. Considering the first ties of EZLN with the Forces of National Liberation (*Las Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional* or FLN)—a leftist guerilla group that formed a coalition with liberation theologians in Chiapas in the 1980s—, a third component can be added.²⁴

²² Holloway, John. (2005). *Change the World without Taking Power*. London: Pluto Press; Khasnabish, Alex. (2008). *Zapatismo beyond Borders: New Imaginations of Political Possibility*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Mentinis, Mihalís. (2006). *Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt and What It Means for Radical Politics*. London: Pluto Press; Pitarch, Pedro. (2004). The Zapatistas and the Art of Ventriloquism, *Journal of Human Rights*, 3(3), 291-312; Ross, John. (2006). *¡Zapatistas! Making Another World Possible: Chronicles of Resistance, 2000-2006*. New York: Nation Books.

²³ Collier, George A. and Quaratiello, Elizabeth L. (1994). *Basta!: Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*. Oakland, CA: Food First Book, The Institute for Food and Development Policy; Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*; Holloway, John and Peláez, Eloína (Eds.). (1998). *Zapatista: Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*. London: Pluto Press.

²⁴ Neil Harvey and John Womack Jr. trace the long and complicated history of Indigenous leftist struggles for land and representation in southern Mexico. It was from these movements, especially the leftist urban guerilla organization, the National Liberation Forces that the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) emerged in 1983. See Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion* and Womack Jr., John (1999). *Rebellion in Chiapas: An Historical Reader*. New York: The New Press.



[Fig. 2]. Mural on the wall of a middle-school building of the Zapatistas in *caracol* Roberto Barrios. Roberto Barrios, Chiapas, Mexico, December 12, 2015. Photo: Tijen Tunali.

The Zapatistas have intentionally revived iconic revolutionary combatants to emphasize the strategic armed rebellion and to provide a critical stimulus to at least twenty years of struggle by diverse Indigenous peasant organizations at local, municipal and regional levels. In the Zapatista communities, it is typical to see images of Che Guevara, Emiliano Zapata, and Marcos next to each other on community murals where they represent a trinity of revolutionary symbols: Che Guevara, the military commander of Marxist guerillas; Zapata, the symbol of warfare for agrarian revolution; and Marcos, a masked persona representing the EZLN both as an army and as a political collective (figure 2). By situating themselves among the armed struggles in Latin America, the Zapatistas call attention to the direct action of guerilla warfare as a part the continuity of the struggle against imperialism, on

the one hand, and as an effective means to force the government to enter dialogue and negotiations with the EZLN, on the other.

Zapatista murals function in part as a conscious image-making strategy of the movement, helping to boost the revolutionary spirit and solidarity of the Zapatista communities and their supporters.²⁵ When the mainstream or alternative media covers the “intergalactic” gatherings of thousands of people around the world in Oventik, the murals are always shown in the background. During these gatherings, especially the most recent, known as *dignia rabia* (dignified rage), participants from around the world painted murals on the walls of new buildings (i.e., halls added to the secondary school) in a ritualistic way, to show solidarity. The websites of Zapatista solidarity groups around the world include the images of these murals to show “the Zapatista world”.²⁶ At present, visiting the murals is a major tourist activity in San Cristobal de las Casas. The Zapatista murals, although their physical life is temporary, circulate and become permanent and accessible in the photographs of tourists and activists.

Visual images of solidarity with the Zapatistas often take the form of the posters and postcards sold in the Zapatista cooperatives in Oventik, as well as various venues in San Cristobal de las Casas that sell the products of the cooperatives to tourists. One of those is the *Solidaridad Chiapas* (figure 3) poster. The bottom of the image reads, “*Los Zapatistas no están solos*” [the Zapatistas are not alone]. During a street march in January

²⁵ As expressed by Gustavo Chávez Pavón, the artist who painted dozens of Zapatista murals in Zapatista communities, as well as in Scotland, Denmark, Chile, and Palestine. Author’s interview with Gustavo Chávez Pavón, Mexico City-Mexico, September 12, 2015.

²⁶ See appendix for the main websites on the Zapatista Movement.



[Fig. 3]. Anonymous, *Solidaridad Chiapas* [poster], 2010. Photo: Tijen Tunali in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, January 10, 2014.

2014, the image was carried as a banner to represent solidarity with the movement. In the Zapatista cooperatives, this image—among the works of other artists—was available for the tourists to take with them to their own countries in exchange for a small donation. Featuring a typical representation of Zapatista aesthetics that mixes folkloric and dreamlike sensibilities with a realistic representation of the world, the poster calls for solidarity with the Zapatista movement.

In the center of the poster are peasants in a colorful village in colorful costumes—a common visual language with a naïve painting style that is used as visual material to be sold to tourists sympathetic to the Zapatistas. This part of the image is borrowed from a painting by Beatrix Aurora, who is a Chilean artist/activist based in Chiapas. Her paintings portraying Zapatista communities are reproduced on many postcards and posters to be sold to help fund the movement. Aurora's utopian

image of an ideal co-operative and happy society is disturbed by the photomontage of two black and white images. The colorful and peaceful life of the village is shown surrounded by a photograph of two hands stopping bullets, which provides a stark contrast between mundane and peaceful elements of peasant life along with the shocking, tragic, and violent events that also reflect the daily life of the Zapatistas. The realism of the hands and the rifles disturbs the pleasant depiction of the rural world in the middle of the work; hence, it serves as a reminder of the reality—constant military and paramilitary danger—that surrounds the autonomous communities.

The plethora of images, by known and unknown artists, that circulate in tourist shops and online, as well as the Zapatista's sophisticated use of World Wide Web and international media, ensured that the world would be watching as the Mexican state continued its military and economic repression of the region. Through the twentieth-year celebrations in 2009, and on every occasion, Zapatistas chose to perform their struggle in front of the cameras. For some analysts, the Zapatista rebellion was a public performance version of a declaration of war. A well-known analyst of Zapatistas, Andrés Oppenheimer, notes:

As Zapatista military leader Sub-commander Marcos himself would concede to me later, his military strategy consisted of surrounding San Cristobal with elite troops armed with AK-47 rifles, Uzi submachine guns, grenade launchers, and night vision devices, which he placed on the four major access roads to the city, while allowing lesser-armed rebel foot soldiers—some of them only armed with sticks, machetes, and hand-carved wooden toy gun—to march toward the center of town and take the

municipal palace. [...]The television cameras would focus on the [...] ragtag army of landless Mayans mostly armed with toy guns [...] it worked exactly as planned.²⁷

For the past two decades, as the Mexican government have deployed more troops in the region and paramilitary activities haven taken hundreds of innocent lives, international solidarity and support has remained crucial for the survival of the Zapatista communities and other municipalities sympathetic to the movement. Hence, creating a good public image is not enough to build international support. To provide for the continuation of the movement and the survival of the autonomous communities, the Zapatistas have “masked” themselves and created “a new concept of solidarity that involves a reconfiguration of the relationship between the local, the national, and the global.”²⁸

Masked to be Seen

When the Zapatistas took up arms in 1994, it was a revolt against their political invisibility. On the Zapatista rebellion, Naomi Klein wrote: “Yet the paradox of Marcos and the Zapatistas is that, despite the masks, the non-selves, the mystery, their struggle is about the opposite of anonymity—it is about the right to be seen”.²⁹ The most known representation of the Zapatistas is the image of their faces covered either with a *balaclava* (ski masks) or a *paliacate* (a type of red handkerchief), hiding their faces but not their identity as a Zapatista/Mayan peasant (figure 4). They have declared: “We cover our face so that we can be seen,

²⁷ Oppenheimer, Andrés. (1998). *Bordering on Chaos: Mexico's Roller-Coaster Journey toward Prosperity*. Boston: Little Brown and Co., 25.

²⁸ Olesen, Thomas. (2004). Globalizing the Zapatistas: From Third World Solidarity to Global Solidarity?, *Third World Quarterly*, 25, 254-269, 256.

²⁹ Klein, Naomi. (2002). *Fences and Windows: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the Globalization Debate*. New York: Picador, 212.

our struggle is the struggle of those without faces”.³⁰ Marcos also said “We cover our faces in order to show the world the true face of Mexico”.³¹ Masking their faces not only protects them from being identified by the Mexican security forces, but it also serves their critique of how they have been invisible to the politicians and denied a subject position within the Mexican nation.³²

Zapatismo is not only philosophically significant for being a representation of the oppressed, but it also has a representational significance articulated in the literary and visual creations of the Zapatistas. According to Thomas Nail, the Zapatista mask plays a symbolic role in constructing “a special kind of revolutionary subjectivity, immanent not to a consciousness who represents an ‘I’ to itself, but to the political event: to Zapatismo itself. [...] It is a symbolism of a visual equality between subjects without leaders”.³³ Many diverse groups around the world that are resisting the neoliberal system gather around the universality of the mask and what it represents. Zapatista masks, along with Guy Fawkes masks, have become the symbols of critique of the state and capitalist representation. The anonymity provided by these masks is the means through which the Zapatistas can construct and perform a transformative collective subjectivity “by hiding that part of the body most clearly connected to one’s identity by no longer existing as individuals. [...] By transcending the individual identity, they become

³⁰ Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 98.

³¹ Subcomandante Marcos. (2002). *Our Word is Our Weapon: Selected Writings*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 265.

³² Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*.

³³ Nail, Thomas. (2014). *Political Theory of the Mask*. The Medes. http://mysite.du.edu/~tnail2/Thomas_Nail/Research_files/political%20theory%20of%20the%20mask%20C2%AB%20the%20medes.pdf, 145.

a revolutionary collective force, a force more powerful than the individual entities”.³⁴ In the opening ceremony of the First Intercontinental Meeting for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism (the first *encuentro*), held 27 July, 1996, Comandanta Anna Maria remarked:

This is what we are. The Zapatista National Liberation Army. The voice that arms itself to be heard. The face that hides itself to be seen. The name that hides itself to be named. The red star that calls out to humanity and the world to be heard, to be seen, to be named. The tomorrow that is harvested in the past. Behind our black mask. Behind our armed voice. Behind our unnamable name. Behind what you see of us. Behind this, we are you. Behind this, we are the same simple and ordinary men and women that are repeated in all races, painted in all colors, speak in all languages and live in all places. The same forgotten men and women. The same excluded. The same intolerated. The same persecuted. The same as you. Behind this, we are you. Behind our masks is the face of all excluded women. Of all the forgotten native people. Of all the persecuted homosexuals. Of all the despised youth. Of all the beaten migrants. Of all those imprisoned for their words and thoughts. Of all the humiliated workers. Of all those dead from neglect. Of all the simple and ordinary men and women who don't count, who aren't seen, who are nameless, who have no tomorrow.³⁵

³⁴ Mentinis, *Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt*, 170; Nail, *Political Theory of the Mask*, 171.

³⁵ The Zapatistas. (1998). *Zapatista Encuentro: Documents from the 1996 Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 24.



[Fig. 4]. Zapatista man wearing a *paliacate*. Photo: Tijen Tunali in Oventik, Chiapas, Mexico, December 12, 2009.

Indeed, Zapatismo's vision of revolutionary subjects always has a dual connotation: one in the plural as embracing all the oppressed people and one that calls for a micro revolution in your own life and your own home as ordinary men and women. Zapatistas declare to be you so that you can recognize your own revolutionary subjectivity. According to Zapatismo, there is no single historical subject imbued with revolutionary potential; rather, we are all capable of imagining, building, dreaming, and living revolution.

Image, Icon, Representation

The Zapatistas' ability to produce a surprising array of visual images, declarations, *communiqués*, letters, metaphorical stories, and news bulletins has provided political activists, thinkers, radical academics, anarchists, and students an almost unprecedented amount of material for discussion. Such information and analyses were downloaded and circulated as pamphlets, leaflets, newspaper articles, teach-ins and lectures, as well as numerous Internet blogs and discussion sites. In the global communication networks of social resistance, especially one figure has become iconic and circulated widely as the symbol not only of the Zapatista movement but also the anti-globalization movement: Subcomandante Marcos.

For the activists around the world, after Che Guevara, Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman, and Mao Tse-tung, who were the icons of socialist rebellion in the 20th century, Subcomandante Marcos has been the face of the global movement of anti-capitalism.³⁶ His masked images have been circulated in newspapers, magazines, academic and non-academic journals, Mexican tourist shops, and in diverse Internet sources since the armed resurrection of the Zapatistas in 1994.³⁷ In his biography on Marcos, Nick Henck concludes that Marcos's image "elevated the Zapatista struggle from a localized Indigenous uprising to an internationally recognized symbol of resistance to neo-liberalism".³⁸ In this new hero cult of the communication generation, the popularization of a masked philosophy professor in the land of the Mayas created

³⁶ Notes from Nowhere. (2003). *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anti-Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.

³⁷ Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*.

³⁸ Henck, Nick. (2007). *Subcommander Marcos: The Man and the Mask*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 239.

aftershocks that reached the rest of the world, as much as Mexico, and inspired millions.

Marcos is imagined as the face of the Zapatistas as well as of all oppressed people in the world. Ironically and intentionally, no one has seen the face behind the ski mask. Indeed, the Mexican State tried to “unmask” Marcos by revealing his “real” identity with a photo from a driver’s license. This resulted in the “unmasking” of the Mexican State in front of the world during the first negotiations with the State in February 1994, in San Cristóbal de las Casas, when the representatives of the state refused to negotiate with masked people. The Zapatistas famously replied: “The state is always masked”.³⁹

Taken by different photographers between 1994 and 1996, Marcos is often shown smoking his pipe under his balaclava (a black ski mask) and wearing a khaki hat featuring three faded red stars. However, the world first met the legendary Marcos through the photograph taken by Marco Ugarte in 1994 (figure 5). In that iconic image, Marcos smokes a pipe (rather than a cigar) that emits a burst of white smoke, which further eclipses our view of the left upper torso of his body. On his right shoulder is resting an assault rifle that overlaps an ammunitions belt or bandolier, which since 1910 has often signified armed opposition to the federal government and foreign capital. The blurred background of this color photograph—unlike the crisply focused figure of Marcos in the foreground—provides only an indistinct glimpse of EZLN cadres behind him. Looking down almost pensively in a sharply angled three-quarter view, rather than the upward gaze associated to the Che Guevara photo,

³⁹ Taussig, Michael. (1999). *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 246.



[Fig. 5]. Subcomandante Marcos. Photo: Marco Ugarte, AP. Source: www.taringa.net, accessed March 15, 2010.

this portrait of Marcos provides only a fragmentary and almost furtive view of him. It is in a photo—and many others that portray Marcos in a similar way—that Marcos is indirectly perceived and not fully viewed. This discloses a mystical aura around him, which is further accentuated by Indigenous stories and myths, one of which is the *Votán-Zapata*.

Although the image of Marcos alone does not represent the complete social imagery of the Mayan revolutionaries of Chiapas, it embodies crucial aspects of the cosmological and ideological representation of the Zapatista movement. The hybrid image of *Votán-Zapata*, representing the rebirth of oppressed people everywhere, is at the core of the Zapatista social imaginary that combines autonomist Marxism and Mayan collectivism. *Votán* represents the third day of the Tzeltal Mayan

calendar. It is also a mythical symbol that embraces “the heart of the people” and corresponds to the man sent by God to distribute land among the Indigenous.⁴⁰

Marcos typically opens a communiqué by quoting a poet such as Paul Éluard, representing Marxist aesthetics, and finishes with an Indigenous folk tale. This dual-subject position of Marcos, one that is a Mayan rebel and other a Marxist revolutionary, defies any identity discourse that would reduce him to a white intellectual leader of Mayan peasants. In a communiqué commemorating the death of Emiliano Zapata, on 10 April 1995, Marcos intentionally deployed the image of Votán-Zapata within the context of the five hundred years Indigenous resistance:

United with Votán, Guardian, and Heart of the People, Zapata rose up again to struggle for democracy, liberty, and justice for all Mexicans. Even though he has Indigenous blood, Votán-Zapata does not struggle just for the Indigenous. He also struggles for those who are not Indigenous but who live in the same misery, without rights, without justice in their jobs, without democracy for their decisions, and without freedom for their thoughts and words. Votán-Zapata is all who march under our flag. Votán-Zapata is the one who walks in the heart of each and every one of the true men and women. All of us are one in Votán-Zapata and he is one with all of us.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ponce de Leon, Juana (Ed.). (2001). *Our Word Is Our Weapon: Selected Writings of Sub-comandante Marcos*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 21.

⁴¹ General Command EZLN. (1995, April 10). Emiliano Died, but not His Struggle nor His Thinking, *La Jornada*, trans. Cindy Arnold. http://www.struggle.ws/mexico/ezln/ccri/zapata_apr95.html.

In this messianic call, Marcos's role is not just that of a spokesperson and military commander of the EZLN but is also that of "a quasi-mythical persona who incarnates the past, present, and future of the Maya world".⁴² Born to a middle-class *mestizo* family, the Subcomandante was reborn as "Marcos" and baptized as a Tzeltal man in the Lacandon jungle, transforming his role from that of an intellectual bandit into a messianic guerrilla combatant.

In Zapatista communities, Marcos's portrait is in many places, especially in the offices of *buen gobierno* (the good government), where it is positioned above the table where the representatives sit. His image also takes its place in churches next to the icons of Christ and the Saints. In the persona of Marcos, Votán—the guardian of Tzotzil and god of Tzeltal—merges with Emiliano Zapata to symbolize the power inherent in the multitude as one and one of the multitude. Marcos' words explain this: "With this name, we name the nameless. With this flag covering our face, we have a new face, all of us. With this name we name the unnamable: Votán-Zapata, guardian and the heart of the people".⁴³ This hybrid image of Votán-Zapata, which represents the rebirth of oppressed people everywhere, makes up the core of the Zapatistas' imaginary.

The figure of Votán not only talks to Indigenous groups in Chiapas and across Mexico but also engages the imagination of young urban and rural Mexicans who do not have an interest in the Indigenous oral traditions. After a communiqué featuring the image was issued following an April 1995 meeting, Votán-Zapata and the ubiquitous ski masks often appeared as representations in articles of *La Guillotina*, an anarchist student publication of the National Autonomous University of Mexico in

⁴² Mentinis, *Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt*, 166.

⁴³ Ponce de Leon, *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, 20.

Mexico City (UNAM), with the motto “demand the impossible” (*La Guillotina*). Soon after another communiqué was released on Mayday of 1995, a popular slogan *Todos Somos Marcos* (We are all Marcos) was first heard in Mexico City, where more than one million supporters marched. Marcos responded in a further communiqué that his mask is a mirror:

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a prostitute in Rio, a farmer in India, a Mayan in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10 p.m., a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains.⁴⁴

What is appealing to today’s young rebels and activists is not what a “face” represents; it is the anonymity and plurality of this persona. Indeed, in his communiqués, letters, and videos, Marcos represents an icon, an image, a character, a story, a symbol not a person. In May 2014, Marcos appeared for the last time in the *caracol* (cultural and political center) of La Realidad, on the occasion of the memorial procession of José Luis Solís López (known as Compañero Galeano)—a teacher in the Zapatista Little School, who had been assassinated by paramilitaries. He explained why his character had been created: “And so began a complex maneuver of distraction, a terrible and marvelous magic trick, a

⁴⁴ Subcomandante Marcos. (1995). Chiapas: The Southeast in Two Winds. In *Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution* (310-311). New York: Autonomedia, 310-311.

malicious move from the Indigenous heart that we are, with Indigenous wisdom challenging one of the bastions of modernity: the media. And so began the construction of the character named ‘Marcos’.⁴⁵

In his final communiqué (also broadcast through Radio Zapatista), Marcos further explained that the “hologram” was no longer necessary and that the cult of the individual had to be destroyed for the sake of the collective:

Those who loved and hated *SupMarcos* now know that they have loved and hated a hologram. Their love and hate have been useless, sterile, hollow, empty. [...] There will be no funerals, honors, statues, museums, prizes, or anything else that the system does to promote the cult of the individual and devalue the collective. This figure was created and now its creators, the Zapatistas, are destroying it.⁴⁶

The character of Marcos died, only to be resurrected as Subcomandante Galeano. The farewell ended with the Subcomandante going backstage and returning uttering these final words: “My name is Galeano, insurgent Subcomandante Galeano. Is anyone else called Galeano?”. The crowd answered, “We are all Galeano”. Marcos is now only a visual souvenir on the murals, in the photographs and postcards, and in the collective memory of those who followed the movement. This theatrical performance of exterminating the figure of Marcos—after serving its pragmatic purpose—has not only been a tactical move to embrace the new and old Zapatista communities with the spirit of an Indigenous

⁴⁵ From the field-notes of the author. Author’s translation.

⁴⁶ Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos. (2014, May 29). *Between Light and Shadow: Marcos’s Last Words*. Enlace Zapatista. www.enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2014/05/27/between-light-and-shadow/. Accessed May 30, 2014.

martyr, but also a smart answer to the critiques of Marcos situating him in the masculinist aesthetics of Latin American revolutionary movements.

Conclusion

Theodor Adorno and Horkheimer stated the key challenge for social change decades ago. They wrote: “Our task is not to conserve the past, but to redeem the hopes of the past”.⁴⁷ Beyond the Eurocentrism of the Frankfurt School, this comment is poignant for understanding the resilience of the Zapatista movement. The politics of hope is an issue pregnant with lots of misinterpretations that have haunted the Zapatistas. Their heartfelt ties to revolutionary and folkloric icons have not been to revive the hopes of the past in a romantic manner but to redeem them on a ground upon which the politics of everyday life stands. In their ethnographical analysis of Zapatistas, the authors of *Uprising of Hope*, Duncan Earle and Jeanne Simonelli, note: “Without the overlay of the world of everyday life, the autonomous movement might seem to be no more than impractical rhetoric, a utopian dream”.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, what Zapatistas set in motion has been a worldwide discussion about the current state of class struggle and a worldwide mobilization aimed at finding new and more effective ways of interlinking opposition to capitalism and elaboration of an alternative system.⁴⁹ Analyzing their aesthetic-political strategies, this paper argued that the Zapatistas are

⁴⁷ Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer. (1971 [1944]). *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 4.

⁴⁸ Duncan, Earle and Simonelli, Jeanne M. (2005). *Uprising of Hope: Sharing the Zapatista Journey to Alternative Development*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 292.

⁴⁹ Veltmeyer, The Dynamics of Social Change.

the most enduring and inspiring hopes of the revolutionary past in Mexico as articulated in their insurgent images, their artworks and their unique aestheticism that weave life and struggle as a path to revolution.

Zapatistas strategically build their vision of the “other politics” by constructing a visual and oral world, which is hard to articulate in the traditional vocabulary and imagination of revolution as it is a unique encounter between libertarian Marxism and historical Indigenous resistance. This constituted “a powerful disruption on the original plan and the opening of unprecedented possibilities around which a new subjectivity started taking shape”, as Deleuze articulated.⁵⁰ It further showed that the strength of this form of resistance politics lies in its ability to adapt to visual as well as material demands, allowing it to have a properly global impact.

Appendix: Zapatista Websites (in Spanish)

1. Enlace Zapatista: <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/>. Official EZLN website.
2. Radio Insurgente: www.radioinsurgente.org. EZLN Radio, transmitting from the mountains of SE Mexico. The voice of the voiceless.
3. CIDECI: <http://cideci.blogspot.com>. Universidad de la Tierra, San Cristóbal de las Casas. Autonomous university on the outskirts of San Cristóbal that functions as an intellectual base for the Zapatista movement, as well as other Indigenous communities in resistance.

⁵⁰ Deleuze, Gilles. (1994). *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 190.

4. CIEPAC: www.ciepac.org. Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria, A.C. [Center for Research in Economic and Political Community Activities]. Civil society organization that provides analysis and research, training, and support in social processes.
5. CAPISE: www.capise.org.mx. Centro de Análisis Político e Investigaciones Sociales y Económicas [Center for Political Analysis and Socio-Economic Research]. Civil society organization focusing on research, analysis, championing and defending the collective rights of Indigenous peoples.
6. Centro de Derechos Humanos “Fray Bartolomé de las Casas”, A.C.: www.laneta.apc.org/cdhbcasas. Civil society organization championing and defending the human rights of marginalized peoples.
7. Enlace Civil, A.C.: www.enlacecivil.org.mx. Bridge association linking Indigenous communities in Chiapas and national / international civil society for projects and solidary contributions.
8. SIPAZ: www.sipaz.org. Servicio Internacional para la Paz [International Service for Peace]. International observation program in support of peace culture building, dialogue and tolerance. Communication link between organizations and networks that work for a just peace.
9. SERAPAZ: www.serapaz.org. Servicios y Asesorías para la Paz [Services and Consulting for Peace]. Civil society organization for training, consulting, incidences, and follow-up of processes that contribute to the building of peace in Chiapas.

10. Promedios de Comunicación Comunitaria, A.C.: www.promedios.org. Binational and multicultural organization dedicated to facilitating training, technology, and use of information of the media, with a focus on video production in Indigenous farming communities.
11. Revista Rebeldía: www.revistarebeldia.org. Magazine that publishes news, editorials, and articles on the Zapatista movement and international resistance.
12. Radio Pacheco: www.radiopacheco.org. Autonomous radio that covers *La Otra Campaña*.
13. Center for Independent Media in Southeast Mexico: <http://chiapas.indymedia.org>. Communications network with the goal of disseminating the struggles of Indigenous communities in Chiapas, as well as different resistances in other parts of the country and world.
14. DESMI: www.laneta.apc.org/desmiac/. Desarrollo Económico Social de los Mexicanos Indígenas [Socio-economic Development of Indigenous Mexicans]. Civil association founded in 1969 to support organized campesino and Indigenous groups in the state of Chiapas through the practice of Solidary Economy.
15. Europa Zapatista: www.europazapatista.org. Groups, collectives, associations, organizations, and individuals from the Other Europe who support those who, with dignity, liberty, and just rebellion, inhabit SE Mexico.
16. Ké-Huelga Radio: <http://kehuelga.org/archivos/zapatistas/>. On dial 102.9 FM, a radio station that transmits the voice of the rebel frequency throughout southern Mexico City.

Documents on the First and Second *Encuentros*

1. Zetzainternazional: www.zetzainternazional.ezln.org.mx. So that the Intergalactic encounter is a product of real participation and communication among its adherents in the whole world.
2. Narconews: <http://www.narconews.com/otroperiodismo/>. Alternative online news source. Information on the war on drugs, democracy, and justice in the Americas.

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