Pertenencia Mutua: Dignifying Death and Honoring Mother Earth in Zapatista Discourse

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Translating Zapatismo: Zapata como Alimento y Abono de los Indígenas

In reassessing the writings of Subcomandante Marcos, and more generally Zapatista discourse, from within the framework of ecocritical approaches to Latin American literature, two things should be emphasized. First, Marcos’ writings can and should be analyzed for their literary value, as distinct from their political function (Stephens 2008). And second, an ecocriticism capable of engaging Zapatista discourse on its own turf must be situated within the larger phenomenon of *indigenismo*, of which a quasi-native version of *environmentality* (Buell 2005: 24) is central. My approach to the portions of Zapatista discourse that deal explicitly or implicitly with environmental concerns is twofold: a) an analysis of how the Zapatistas to some degree perform a role shaped by the expectations amongst their international audience about the “ecological Indian” (Krech 1999); b) an analysis of the Mayan mythopoetics of corn culture, via an ethic of “pertenencia mutua.”

The mediated form of Mayan environmentalism which Marcos and others voice has two components of particular value within a revisionist second wave of ecocriticism (Buell 2005: 22), or what in a global context Martínez-Alier (2002: vii) refers to as a “third current” of environmental justice movements. The first is a move away from the perception or reality that environmentalism is a sort of exclusive club for privileged Westerners (as satirized in Boyle’s *The Tortilla Curtain* [1995]), and towards alternative variants of environmental values, of which the quasi-indigenous expression of the Zapatistas is our present case study. The second salient feature is an environmentalism rooted in work rather than leisure (White 1996): a labor without which the Mayans could not survive, either culturally or physically.
The literary quality of the discourse of the Zapatistas of Mexico, primarily penned by their mestizo spokesman Subcomandante Marcos, attracted the support of many literary elites from 1994 on, including Eduardo Galeano, and the Nobel Prize laureates José Saramago and Gabriel García Márquez. It has been evident to many writers and intellectuals that this phenomenon was indeed “something truly new” (Paz 1994/2001: 30; Le Bot 1997: 299-211; Womack 1999: 316-26).

A Literary Property—Marcos interviewed by Gabriel García Márquez

Part of this “really new-ness” has to do with the re-imagining of revolution (through autonomy, rather than taking state power) (Holloway 2005). And part of it has to do with the quasi-indigenous forms through which the myth of Zapata as a revolutionary leader was translated, or re-imagined, through indigenous eyes. But although the relationship of Marcos to the Zapatista movement, and the degree of indigenous identity in Zapatismo have received extensive comment, less attention has been paid to environmental consciousness in this discourse. I want to focus on two articulations of an environmental ethic of “pertenencia mutua,” or mutual belonging. This first is one of Marcos’ Old Antonio stories in which the movement of waters rushing down a mountain is used as a parable in which death and sacrifice are given dignity, and memorialized. Secondly, I will close with a broader discussion of how Zapatista expressions of belonging to “nuestra madre tierra” align them with a similar discursive history throughout the Americas. One can point to the deeper roots of the ethic of mutual belonging in Quirroga’s fictional descriptions of “mutual colaboración” between humans and animals (Acevedo 1979: 82, Gunnels 2006). In the case of indigenous concepts of land use, as will be evident with the Zapatistas, one sees the centrality of biocentric rather than anthropocentric worldviews (Love 2003)
Although most observers of Zapatismo have focused on the writings and speeches of Marcos, the fair-skinned spokesman for the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), the poetic tone of the movement, as well as the importance of metaphors taken from nature, have been in evidence, from the bottom up, from the first moments of their uprising.

When the EZLN took the “Indian capital” of Chiapas, San Cristóbal de las Casas, on January 1, 1994, a tourist with a videocamera asked a young Zapatista soldier why they had taken the name of General Emiliano Zapata when Zapata was from the state of Morelos. The soldier responded: “Porque Zapata, aunque esté muerto, es el alimento de los indígenas…Es el abono de la gente de esta tierra, el que nos nutre y nos hace fuertes” (Carrigan 2001: 444, my emphasis). (Zapata, although he is dead, is the food of the indigenous. He is the fertilizer of the people of this land, and he nourishes us and makes us strong).

This sense of Zapata as fertilizer or food for los indígenas, and for all peoples who think of the earth as their mother, points to the interpenetration of historical memory and nature: an on-going sense of belonging to, and being nurtured by, the land, and social movements nurtured by the earth. Zapata enters the consciousness of los indígenas in delayed form, via the earth they profess to be their spiritual mother. Since los indígenas are earth-centered, Zapata entered their lives and consciousness, metaphorically, via a rebirth. It is as if Marcos had (trans)planted Zapata into the Chiapan soil, where he germinated, bore fruit, and was consumed by the Mayans, who were then transfigured, as if Zapata were a religious host that only achieved new life by being ingested in a new (cultural) body and a new earth.

[Zapatista folk art—showing Emiliano Zapata and the neo-Zapatistas emerging from the same corn fields]
The ecological dimensions of what I have called the poetics of indigenismo (Stephens 2008) are evident in the Old Antonio story “Los Arroyos Cuando Bajan.” The Zapatista ecological discourse here, and in my following discussion of representations of their relations with mother earth, are united by the ethic of petenencia mutual. The common theme is that survival requires self-sacrifice, but even more, collective sacrifice that can be sustained across generations—i.e., an ethic of intergenerational solidarity (Castells 1997: 126).

“Los Arroyos Cuando Bajan”: Dignifying Death and Sacrifice

Mayan culture is centered on the cultivation of maiz. The consumption of corn (and the celebration of its omnipresence in their life and work) are the principal modes through which Mayans understand how “eternal life” functions—through death and rebirth. This “forzosamente implicaba el sacrificio de una parte de la vida [para asegurar la] sobrevivencia colectiva,” Enrique Florescano notes (2004: 21; 58-59). ([It] forcefully implicates the sacrifice of a part of life in order to insure collective survival).

Zapatista discourse returns obsessively to the theme of “muriendo para vivir” (dying to live). The ritual repetition of this theme constitutes a crossroads where indigenous culture, Christian theology, and the Guevarist ideology of revolutionary self-sacrifice, come together in a new mixture or relationship (Ramírez 2003: 23; Marcos, Nuestra arma, 17). Marcos’ thoughts never seem far from “the dead among us,” or as he often says, “our dead,” as a presence that guides and indeed disciplines the thoughts and the actions of the living. For example, at the end of a homage to Spanish/Catalan novelist Manuel Vásquez Montalban in 2007, Marcos said that in the mountains Chiapas, “los muertos que somos esperaremos de nuevo el tiempo de morir de nuevo, para de nuevo vivir” (Marcos 2007). (We the dead will wait again the time to die again, in order to live again).

Such a worldview, as mediated through Marcos, often involves translating to outsiders the meaning of death, as an ever-present fact of life, and even as a companion. The
following soliloquy was offered on the Day of the Dead to Canadian filmmaker Nettie Wild, primarily as a way, it seems, of helping her visualize the human sacrifices the Zapatistas have made, and are still willing to make:

En las montañas del sureste de México, la muerte era algo muy cotidiana. Era algo tan común como lluviera o hiciera sol. Y esa convivencia continua con la muerte de los propios, de los familiares, sobre todo los más pequeños. Paradojicamente hace que su muerte se desviste de su carácter trágico, y se convierta en algo cotidiana...
Como un viejo conocido... Como la muerte es tan...proxima, tan posible, su presencia no es tan atemorizadora como para otras gentes. Por eso la posibilidad de salir y pelear y poder encontrar la muerte allí no es tan terrible como pudiera parecer. Para nosotros, lo que es sorprendente...es la vida. Es la posibilidad de vivir mejor. Y de salir a pelear y a morir, y encontrarse que no muere, pero esta vivo y de una y otra forma empieza una a agarrar, sin quererlo, una línea intermedia entre la muerte y la vida. Y a caminar como en el filo de una frontera entre las dos cosas. (Wild 2008).

This “recovered memory” of Marcos expresses an ethical perspective that many Mexican intellectuals and artists have understood implicitly. “Gente dispuesta a dar la vida, no puede ser comprada” (people willing to give their light cannot be bought), concluded Guillermo Peimbert Frias, a sociology professor at the Autonomous University of Morelos, when I asked him to generalize about how Mexicans viewed the Zapatistas (Stephens 2004).

Losing the fear of death can liberate one from bondage to the “everything has a price” antiethic of the market. The omni-presence of death animates the willingness to fight for life.

In Marcos’ recounting of “what I learned on the mountain,” death is a part of nature; familiarity with death facilitates an expanded sense of kinship. These words are directed to a global audience. Their full significance emerges only in comparison to other cultures in which death is hidden, or distanced and made unreal through spectacle. But death is no
distant spectacle in indigenous cultures. Losing its tragic character, it acquires a familial
dimension, the familiarity of an old man in the neighborhood or a guest at the table.

One of Marcos’ most poignant stories, “Los Arroyos Cuando Bajan” (When the
streams descend) examines this close familiarity with death. While “La Historia de las
Preguntas” relates Marcos’ first meeting with Old Antonio (and the start of an indigenous-
mestizo fusion), “Arroyos” memorializes their last encounter. So it distills lessons an older
generation of mentors pass on to the Zapatistas. This story combines what is, for Marcos, a
typical mix of genres: a Mayan creation story, plus a quasi-autobiographical threshold story
about the passage from life to death. It dramatizes the notion of death as a necessary sacrifice
that will replenish the earth, and bring justice to the people who live on it. Originally attached
to a May 28, 1994 Comunicado, the story begins in a sort of dream-time when the Mayan
gods are still going through their stumbling, trial-and-error process of trying to create reliable
human beings. Wanting to create people who were both beautiful and durable, the assembled
gods “hicieron a las primeras gentes de oro” (made the first people from gold). (Marcos 2002:
12-24. Subsequent quotes from this story are cited by page number in the text). They were
satisfied for a while with these strong beautiful golden first people. But they were too heavy
to work or even walk.

So these gods (who have a kinship to those of the Mayan sacred scriptures, the Popul
Vuh) had a second assembly in which they created a new breed of people, the color of wood.
These people were real workers, and had no problem walking about the earth. But just as the
gods were about to celebrate, they realized that things were not right, as the people of gold
were making the people of wood do all their work for them, and even carry their burdens.

To remedy the situation, the gods created “las gentes de maíz” (the corn people),
which are described in the ritualistic manner repeated through Marcos’ stories as “los
hombres y mujeres verdaderos [que] hablaron la lengua verdadera” (the true men and women
who speak the true language). With that, the gods went back to sleep, leaving the corn people to go into the mountains and make a path with heart for the people. (20)

At this point in the narrative, Marcos inserts Antonio’s interpretive code in an as-told-to form. “Me contó el Viejo Antonio que las gentes de oro eran los ricos, los de piel blanca, y que las gentes de madera eran los pobres, los de piel morena, que trabajaban para los ricos y los cargaban siempre…” (Old Antonio told me that the people of gold were rich, and had white skin, while the people of wood were poor, with brown skin, and they worked for the rich and always carried them…. ). Even a reader unfamiliar with the Mayans could infer that the story speaks symbolically of class divisions, and racism, and even of a form of slavery.

Antonio’s subsequent comment positions the Mayans (“corn people”) as mediators, who like all “people in the middle,” will not always get a warm welcome: “las gentes de oro y las gentes de madera esperan la llegada de las gentes de maíz, las primeras con miedo y las segundas con esperanza” (20). (The people of gold and the people of wood waited for the arrival of the corn people, the former with fear and the latter with hope).

When Marcos asks about the corn people’s skin color, Antonio’s show and tell makes it clear that we are not meant to understand this story, or Mayan culture, in racial terms:

Me enseñó varios tipos de maíz, de colores diversos, y me dijo que eran de todas las pieles pero nadie sabía bien, porque las gentes de maíz, los hombres y mujeres verdaderos, no tenían rostro… (20)

(He showed me various types of corn with different colors, and he told me that me that they represented different kinds of skin, but nobody knew for sure, because the real men and women had no face…)

This passage also echoes the theme of accepting difference that one finds throughout Marcos’ work, most explicitly in “La Historia de los Colores,” but also in political discourse about “La Marcha del color de la Tierra.” Clearly the earth tends to be brown, but it could be almost any color. Thus we have “red earth” (the meaning of Oklahoma), the black forest in Germany, the Blue Mountains in Jamaican, and the white sands in New Mexico. But also, Marcos seems to conflate the Zapatistas with the corn people: both are a people without a
face. This can be interpreted in more than one way, including the literal wearing of masks by
the Zapatistas, or the theme of invisibility (they have no face because society cannot see
them, or will not recognize them).

After that brief paragraph, Marcos cuts the text again with this simple interjection:
“Se murió el Viejo Antonio” (Old Antonio died). And then the rest of the story is a parable
about the death of Antonio, and the meaning of death in Mayan culture, but in particular in
relation to the rebellion of the Zapatistas. In this story of May 1994, Marcos remarks that he
had first come to know Antonio ten years earlier. But he concentrates on an encounter in
1992 when the Zapatistas were holding meetings to decide whether or not to go to war. It also
so happens that Antonio, who “fumaba como nadie” (smoked excessively), was near to dying
of what seemed to be emphesymia. In this context, Antonio took Marcos by the arm and led
him down a path to a river, about 100 yards below the village. While the community was
arguing about war, Antonio was giving Marcos a “last lesson in life,” about the importance of
sacrifice, expressed through metaphorical language about the inter-relationship between
mountains, clouds, riverbeds, and the lowlands.

Sitting beside the river, then only a small green stream, Antonio pointed to a nearby
mountaintop, where a thunderstorm was brewing. Speaking both about his immanent death,
and the brewing rebellion of the Zapatistas, Antonio chose to comment about these coming
transitions by using the language of above-and-below:

Cuando todo está en calma abajo, en la montaña hay tormenta, los arroyos empiezan a
tomar fuerza y toman rumbo hacia la cañada. (21)
(When everything is calm below, in the mountains there is a torment, and the
streams gather force and rush towards the canyons).

This language is symbolic, both for Mexican history, and for the Zapatistas’ localized
uprising. The cañadas, towards which the torrent rushes, were and are the central stronghold
of the neo-Zapatistas. There is also something of a Biblical feel, Moses bringing divine
justice down from the mountain. The opposition between los de arriba and Los de Abajo (a
reference to Mariano Azuela 1915 novel of the revolution) continues to be a part of Mexican political and literary discourse. To some degree, this political, moral, and cultural geography parallels the symbolic import of the division between uptown and downtown Kingston in Jamaican culture. But in the specific case of the topography out of which the Zapatista cosmovision emerges, the roles of up and down, or above and below, are reversed. The torment begins in the heights, where the Indians live, and then gathering force as it descends, crashes into those who “think [there] is peace and safety [but there will be] a sudden destruction” (quote adapted from Bob Marley, “Rat Race”).

Marcos intersperses Antonio’s minimalist story-telling with his own commentary that explains the symbolism of Antonio’s references, using nature to talk about himself and his part in the larger “community of life”:

En la época de lluvias el río es fiero…No viene su poder de la lluvia que cae en sus riberas, son los arroyos que bajan de las montañas los que lo alimentan. Destruyendo, el río reconstruye la tierra, sus aguas serán maíz, frijol y panela en las mesas de la selva. (21-22)

(During the time of rains the river is fierce. Its power does not come from the rain that falls on its banks; rather it’s the streams that come down from the mountain that feed it. Destroying, the river reconstructs the earth, its water will be corn, beans and sugar in the fields of the forest).

The gathering strength of the river is destructive, Marcos notes, but that very destructiveness also replenishes (and in fact “reconstructs”) the earth, winding up indirectly as corn and beans on the tables of those who live near the arroyo. So Marcos speaks of the descending waters as feeding (alimentan) those below. This echos how the EZLN soldier spoke of Zapatista as “alimento y abono,” despite the destruction that los de arriba have always visited on those who ally themselves with Zapata, and his legacy of resistance.

Then Marcos allows Antonio to explain his symbolism in terms that apply directly to the Zapatista uprising: “Así es la lucha nuestra…En la montaña nace la fuerza, pero no se ve hasta que llega abajo.” (Thus is our struggle. In the mountain is born the power, but it is not visible until it arrives below). When Marcos asks him directly whether he thinks it is the right
time for rebellion, Antonio chooses to respond with the same metaphors, in which human relations take the shape of the relation between the mountains and the lowlands: “Ya es el tiempo de que el río cambie de color…Ustedes son los arroyos y nosotros el río…tienen que bajar ya…” (22). (It’s time that the river changes color. You all are the streams and we are the river…the time has arrived for you to come down).

When the color of the water changes--when the winds shift, when the river gathers force, when the right time comes--(Wallerstein 1993), the “children of rebellion and resistance” must go down.

“Antonio hijo” returned and announced that the community had voted for war. When Marcos left at dawn, Old Antonio had disappeared. He next saw Antonio two months later, when preparations for war were in an advanced state. Antonio still used metaphorical language to describe the coming rebellion as a force of nature. “Se creció el río” (the river has grown) (23) he observed, as if his conversation with Marcos had never been interrupted.

When Marcos was marching out with the troops the next morning, Antonio was waiting for him at a bend in the trail. For the first time in ten years, Antonio rejected the tobacco Marcos offered him: “Ahora no.” This was a clear signal that Antonio was preparing for an even longer journey. Once more, he tried to tell Marcos what was really on his mind by continuing to flesh out the metaphor of the river running down the canyons:

“¿Te acuerdas de lo que te conté de los arroyos en la montaña y el río?” (You remember when I told you about the streams in the mountain and the river?) When Marcos affirmed, Antonio continued: “Me faltó decirte algo” (23). (I haven’t told you something). Marcos responded in silence, and then Antonio added his forgotten point: “Los arroyos…” he began, but succumbed to a fit of coughing before continuing: “Los arroyos…cuando bajan….” (When the streams come down). An even fiercer fit of coughing wracked Antonio, but he rejected the medic that Marcos called. And then finally managed to voice his last
words: “Los arroyos…cuando bajan…ya no tienen regreso…más que bajo tierra” (24).

(When the streams go down there is no return, except below the earth).

And Antonio embraced Marcos rapidly and disappeared. Marcos imagined that as he walked off, he could see him crying.

Later he received a letter from Antonio’s son. That same night Antonio’s condition had worsened; he was dying. Marcos should be advised, young Antonio suggested, but his father said: “No, ya le dije lo que tenía que decirle…Déjenlo, ahora tiene mucho trabajo…” (No, I already told him what I had to say. Let him be, he’s got a lot of work right now).

In dramatizing the manner of Old Antonio’s “long goodbye,” Marcos is giving us an “ideal type” both of Mayan peoples, and of “real revolutionaries.” Antonio refuses to call attention to his own death. Instead, he uses his “return to earth” to teach Marcos something about why revolutions, nature, and human life must all follow a natural course.

Aside from the one explicit explanation (in Antonio’s voice) that “you all (the Zapatistas) are the arroyos and we (the mountain Indians) the river,” Marcos, and hence the reader, are left to draw their own conclusions. Without the tempests that move soil down the mountains, we would not have food on our table. That might be a different way of saying something as prosaic as, you can’t cook an omelette without breaking eggs. The rush of the waters down the mountain is clearly meant to represent a form of death (destruction) that leads to new life (reconstruction). But what are we to make of Antonio’s claim that “going underground” is in fact a “return”?

Marcos often cites Che Guevara and Cuban patriot José Martí, so perhaps this story is a gloss on the nature of real revolutionaries. Perhaps Marcos had in mind Martí’s quote, citing Saint Just: “Para el revolucionario no hay más descanso que la tumba” (Mella 1973: 17). (For he revolutionary the only rest is in the grave). But that doesn’t seem to be quite
where Old Antonio’s parable leads, towards “eternal rest” in a grave. No, the Mayan concept of going underground is not a one-way journey.

Marcos may have recalled Che’s remark that for a true revolutionary, “toda su vida no fue nada más que una vida destinada al sacrificio” (his whole life was no more than a life destined for sacrifice) (Guevara 1978: 75). To be sure, Antonio’s message is that sacrifice is a natural phenomenon, without which life cannot continue, much less be bettered. Antonio’s voice here is of course not unmediated, but is rather ventriloquated by Marcos, and it infers that the Zapatistas are destined to make a sacrifice that will renew the earth. But above all, his story calls attention to the fact that neither his own death, nor the rebellion of the Zapatistas, is an isolated act. They are a part of the Mayan version of the “eternal return.”

In this particularly Mayan form of redemption, the collective sacrifice which is a precondition for survival—the “path with heart”—takes place within the context of being stewards of the earth. Thus the earth is always at the center of the Zapatista/indigenous concept of revolution. The sources of eternal life are “bajo tierra,” and thus the revolutionary returns by following the path of the corn seed, and its cycle of death and rebirth.

**Pertenencia Mutua--Rethinking Relations with “Nuestra Madre Tierra”**

Earlier, I quoted a neo-Zapatista rebel who said that Emiliano Zapata was “el alimento de los indígenas” and “el abono de la gente de esta tierra.” Indigenous Chiapans had come to see Zapata as nourishment, and even as “fertilizer” for people of the land, because Zapata had fought not only to return the land to those who worked it, but more specifically, to legitimate an ancestral, indigenous tradition of a collective custodial relationship to the land, rather than individual ownership of the earth.

Zapatistas have revisioned revolution through the discursive expression and the lived practice of their “pertenencia mutua” (mutual belonging) with the land (Díaz Gómez 2003: 97). Their rearticulation of the bases of a “real revolution” as being rooted in their role as
guardians of the earth directly challenges “Western” views of the earth as private property. I will now look beyond Marcos to demonstrate how this notion of mutual belonging is central to Zapatista discourse, as well as indigenous discourse throughout the Americas.

During the 2001 Color of the Earth March, Major Moisés chose the birthplace of Zapata, Anenecuilco, to deliver this testimony to the relationship indigenous peoples have to the land, and to the threat that the dominant model of economic development represents:

Lo que queremos es que seamos respetados todos, según nuestra cultura y nuestra forma de organización de trabajar, de nuestra creencia, de convivir y de entender la naturaleza. Nosotros somos parte de la naturaleza y respetamos lo visible y lo invisible, respetamos la tierra porque es nuestra madre, nosotros sabemos que la tierra no nos pertenece, sino que somos parte de ella, así lo entendemos nosotros, todo ese derecho nos lo quieren desaparecer, quieren que la matemos y destruyamos a nuestra madre. (La Marcha 2001: 216).

(What we want is to be respected for our own culture, and the manner in which we organize our work; for our beliefs, for our manner of living together and of understanding nature. We are part of nature and we respect both its visible and invisible elements. We respect the earth because she is our mother. We known that the earth does not belong to us, but rather, we belong to her. That’s how we understand it, but they [el mal gobierno] want to take away all of our rights. They want us to destroy, to kill our own mother).

Indigenous peoples feminize their relationships to the earth, and certain forms of respect, and of mutual belonging, flow from thinking of and treating the earth like a mother. I also want to examine the phrase “lo visible y lo invisible” as what indigenous people respect in the earth. It is not just what can be seen that must be respected, but the recognition that this seen world is just the surface, or even a mask, of other forces which remain unseen: “spirits in a material world,” or in indigenous /animist terms, the belief that components of nature--from rocks to warm-blooded creatures--are endowed with the spirit of life, in its fundamental inter-connectedness. And Moisés emphasizes that the dominant model of development being
pushed by *el mal gobierno*, because it is predicated on extracting resources from this land for short-term profit, is inevitably a death sentence for both the earth and for the people who live in *pertenencia mutua* with her.

Comandante Nacho, in speeches at the dedication of the Autonomous Communities in 2003, said something similar: a lifestyle that respected “nuestra madre tierra” was “la única manera de sobrevivir” (our mother earth is the only means of survival). (*EZLN: 20/10 el fuego y la palabra*, Rebeldía video, 2004, my emphasis). This implies a moral responsibility to the dead of the community, who are buried in that earth. To honor the community’s dead means to be caretakers of their land. Indigenous people want to “vivir como nuestros antepasados, no como ellos que sólo quieren enriquecerse. La naturaleza no es de nosotros, somos de ella” (live like our ancestors, not like those who just want to enrich themselves. Nature is not something we own; we are a part of her). Nacho conveys this message to other people of the region, both mestizo campesinos, and indígenas, who are not living like their ancestors did, but who are buying and selling the earth, and participating in the sacking of its resources: “Como campesinos estamos diciéndoles que la tierra es nuestra madre, y no se vende la madre. *Los que venden la tierra, no tienen madre*” (As campesinos we are saying that the earth is our mother, and one does not sell a mother. Those who sell the earth have no mother.” One thinks here of a character in Miguel Ángel Asturias’s *Men of Maize* who warned that treating the earth as a for-profit property “means famine for the men who were made of maize” (Asturias 1949/1988: 301, 6).

The implications of this cosmovision—the unsellable mother—touch all facets of indigenous life: it shapes their political practice and the tenor of interpersonal and intercultural relations, and it fertilizes artistic expression of indigenous peoples in an archetypal way. Expressions of this template of *pertenencia mutua* can be found throughout
the Americas. But it seems to be especially prominent in Native American literature and oratory of North America (which I would define as including the U.S., Canada, and Mexico).

A medicine man in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* tells a mestizo Pueblo Indian who has been confused and wounded by Western education, wars and land “development”: Deeds mean nothing. “It is the people who belong to the mountain” (Silko 1986: 128).

Alvin Clinton, a Navajo medicine man, described the Navajo Way as “the land is part of us, and we are part of the land.” He said this in the context of a United States federal policy of relocation: attempts during the 1970s-1980s to move native peoples from contested lands where valuable minerals (coal in this case) had been found (McLuhan 1994: 402).

Similarly, in 1977, Chief Emile Nakogee, representing the Cree and Ojibway nations (tribes) in a land dispute with Ontario, Canada, used the words that Chief Joseph had heard from his father, Old Joseph, over a century earlier, in 1871: “This country holds your father’s body. Never sell the bones of your father and your mother” (McLuhan 1994: 396).

Mixtec ethnographer Floriberto Díaz Gómez (2003: 97) describes the *pertenencia mutua* of indigenous peoples in this way: “La Tierra es para nosotros una madre, que nos pare, nos alimenta y nos recoge en sus entrañas. Nosotros pertenecemos a ella, por eso no somos los propietarios de tierra alguna.” (The Earth to us is a mother, who bears us, feeds us, and takes us inside of her. We belong to her; therefore we are not the owners of any land).

What is common to all these examples—from Zapatista commanders, to fictional characters, to real indigenous leaders in the Mexico, Canada, and the U.S.—is that they articulate this non-possessive relationship with the earth in a context of crisis: when their way of life is being threatened by development by government entities or corporations who want to extract resources from the land, and who see indigenous peoples as an impediment.

Clearly this ethic of collective custodianship of the land is widely shared among Native peoples, and was practiced long before the arrival of Europeans. But historically, the
expressions of this ethic—at least in a form to which we have access—all arose out of a need to resist an imminent threat; thus, to some degree, they are also performative.

Moisés did not speak Spanish before joining the Zapatistas. As he learned the culture of the Zapatistas, already being translated into indigenous terms, he in turn participated in the translation of the Mexican revolution to indigenous communities. When Moisés notes with pride that “nuestro EZLN supo adaptarse a nuestros pueblos indígenas” (our EZLN knew how to adapt to the native peoples), he professes belonging to both collectives. Like most neo-Zapatistas, he was stunned and surprised by the massive mobilization of Mexicans shortly after the uprising began. And he interpreted his interactions with activists from Mexico and around the world as a transformative experience. “El diálogo con el gobierno no sirvió para nada pero a nosotros nos enriqueció, porque así vimos a la gente y nos dio más ideas. Nosotros desde la Marcha del Color de la Tierra dijimos que con ley o sin ley vamos a construir nuestro gobierno como lo queremos” (Ramirez 2003: 42, 55-60). (The dialogue with the government was useless, yet it enriched us, because we saw lots of people who gave us ideas. Since the March of the Color of the Earth, we’ve said that with or without the legal support of the Mexican government, we’re going to construct our own autonomous governments just as we want).

The rise of the Zapatistas in Chiapas was closely tied to the arrival of cattle on a massive scale. The conflict between ranchers and Zapatistas is one of the most dramatic elements of the film *A Place Called Chiapas*: their attitude toward the land, their value systems, and their manner of self-presentation, are all clearly incompatible (Marcos, *Our Word*, 423, 425; Nash 2001: 111-16; 131-32; Henck 2007: 63).

So while Mayans like Moisés were learning Spanish, and helping develop the hybrid ideology and communication style of the Zapatistas, they were also confronted with the presence of “settlers”—cattlemen—whose values regarding land use conflicted starkly with
those of indigenous residents. Mayan Zapatistas found it necessary to articulate their philosophy of land use in a language understandable to a broader public of potential allies. When Moisés expressed an indigenous environmentalism at Zapata’s birthplace in 2001, then, it was within the context of a long process of adapting the language of the EZLN: first to indigenous communities, and then to Mexican and international supporters.

What makes Mayan concepts of communal stewardship revolutionary, both in a Mexican context, and globally? The Zapatistas found a great deal of sympathy in Mexico precisely because they forwarded, and translated, the ideas of Zapata himself. If the Mexican state were not to remain “crippled” for failing to incorporate its indigenous citizens into the national project, then the only way to heal the nation would be to embrace Zapata’s ideal of communal ownership of the land, and in neo-Zapatista translation, collective stewardship.

But practicing such a philosophy would run counter to most definitions of the individual and national good being preached by economic elites. Becoming a nation of individual consumers was the precondition of Mexico’s entry into modernism. And one should not underestimate the deep desire of many Mexican of all classes to be integrated into the (first-world) community of nations, to leave behind the shame of being held back by its Indians and its campesinos with their outdated communal, non-consumerist ideals.

Those two currents (disenchantment with consumerism; desire to be a modernized nation) find common ground when Mexicans discover that the communalism of “their Indians” is received enthusiastically by a broad spectrum of the international community. Putting into practice the ideals of inclusion and sustainability requires a spirit of resistance that can be forwarded across generations, expressed in a manner capable of crossing the divides of class, nation, ethnicity, etc. Indigenous peoples, in this sense, are at the cutting edge of contemporary definitions of the “real revolutionary” (Stephens 2007).
Many subcultures have claimed to be “real revolutionaries,” and to embody a “culture of resistance.” But indigenous peoples are unique in combining multi-generational resistance with a primary focus on sustainability. Their centuries of resistance wins them legitimacy; their emphasis on sustainability brings them currency in the contemporary world troubled by spectres like global warming. The Zapatistas disclaim any desire to be a model, but they offer their experience as a referent. The forms of autonomy being developed by their communities recognize the limits of the earth, and show respect for the larger “community of life,” and the habitats in which human and non-human members of that community live.

“Comunalidad es el cimiento de la resistencia” for native peoples, writes Benjamín Alvarado (communalism is the foundation of resistance). And allegiance to a homeland/territory with which one feels a pertenencia mutua is “el elemento central de la comunalidad” (the central element of community) (Rendón Monzón 2003: 20, 26). To define communalism as the cornerstone of resistance, and then to center this communal resistance in stewardship of the earth, is a profound challenge to mass consumer culture, in which resistance or rebellion is represented as an individual act expressed above all through spending money.

What are the larger implications of the indigenous expression of a sense of belonging to the earth, as a cornerstone of resistance? Oaxacan anthropologist Floriberto Díaz Gómez stresses that recognizing Mother Earth as the womb from which the whole community of life is born, and to which it must return, implies a larger sense of kinship. “Frente a una madre común, la gente mixe se siente como alguien más al lado de los seres vivos.” (Before a common mother, the Mixtecs feel like they are just one more member of all living beings). This also points to a concept of co-creation: “De aquí que se siente responsable de entender el trabajo como una labor de concreación, que finalmente significa también recreación de lo creado” (Díaz Gómez, 98, my emphasis). (From here one feels responsible for understanding that work is like a labor of co-creation, that in the final analysis we are re-creating what has
Humans have unprecedented powers of creation and destruction, which enforces a responsibility for ensuring that the earth can sustain all the community of life. Since we have the power to reshape what has been created by the Creator (to borrow from religious mythopoetics), then we are Co-Creators (re-creators of the created). We can no longer escape responsibility--by deferring all authority to the original Creator-God--for a lifestyle that amounts to matricide.

This is the context in which Marcos undertook his project of translation and quasi-indigenous re-visioning. As Mexican elites embraced neo-liberalism, Marcos expanded alliances with those who resist “la compraventa del patrimonio cultural” (the selling out of our national inheritance) (*Nuestra arma*, 302). He put indigenous cultures at the center of this process: only through “defensa de la memoria” (defense of memory) could coalitions successfully resist efforts to privatize the people’s heritage (*Nuestra arma*, 303). That defense can also imply a psycho-social recovery: to defend a repressed memory also requires taking pro-active measures to recover it. In a letter to Montalbán, Marcos argued that the nightmare of “destrucción de la memoria histórica” (destruction of historical memory) was precisely what was being sold by *los de arriba* (those on top), who proclaimed that no alternative existed (Montalbán 2001: 30). Who better to serve as guardians of historical memory, and cultural heritage, than indigenous peoples? Small wonder that many indigenous peoples believe that the captains of capital want to eliminate “a todo el que no sea comprador o vendedor” (all that is not seller or buyer) (Montalbán 2001: 23). Indigenous peoples were seen as a threat by economic elites, because their core values were not based on buying and selling. “Los indios no compran, o compran muy poco” (Indians don’t buy, or they buy little), as Guillermo Bonfil Batalla wrote in *México Profundo*; “Ésta ha sido señalada reiteradamente como una limitación escandalosa” (this has been repeatedly painted as a scandalous limitation), from the perspective of development capital (Batalla 2005: 58). Even worse, for
the voices carried by the winds of above: international law often recognized the collective
ownership by indigenous peoples of vast expanses of valuable land: they were in fact sitting
on top of huge reserves of petroleum, among other resources.

CONCLUSION: Eco-criticism and Indigenismo on a Global Stage

Marcos’ evolution from a fan of Che Guevara into something “truly new,” and a re-
visioning of revolution in the post-Cold War world, was shaped by a triangular relationship.
The starting point was a rather traditional Marxism, and later post-Marxist leftist thought has
continued to influence Marcos’ writing. But those leftist elements have been radically
revised. The second point of the triangular relationship is the agency of indigenous peoples,
who “re-educated” Marcos and his leftist peers. Indigenous peoples not only took over
Marcos’ army, but also colonized much of his literary imagination, and one must say that
native and quasi-indigenous attitudes towards nature are at the heart of this process.

By 1994, Marcos’ literary production and political ideology were a fusion of Marxist
and indigenous components. Through interaction with a transnational public, his rhetorical
style and ideology were modified by a third influence, the process of being tutored by “civil
society.” This international support group had its own ideas about revolution and concepts
about the role of indigenous peoples in this process, to which Marcos had no choice but to be
attentive. And this public was particularly keen to idealize “third world revolutionaries” who
also embodied a deeply embedded green politics of practice, rather than theory.

In retrospect Marcos and the Zapatistas can be seen as exemplars of a “shift in locus
of cultural resistance from the localized subject within the nation to the one that reaches
across national borders” (Heise 2008: 382). The ground had already been laid for Latin
American expressions of ecocriticism, such as through studies of Horacio Quiroga’s stories
about human-animal relations (Acevedo 1979; Gunnels 2006), efforts by Chicano scholars to
stake a claim in this domain (Pulido 1996; Peña 1998), and Alicia Rivero’s engagement of
environmental themes in the work of Carlos Fuentes (2004; 2004a). But in bridging the local and the global with literary panache and sophisticated political critique, the Zapatistas were well situated to take advantage of a hunger for new substitute proletariats (Ong 1999: 15) that are both non-Western and environmentally grounded. There is a sense, then, in which the Zapatista invocations of Mother Earth (Gill 1987) are a form of “strategic essentialism” (Buell 2005: 124) which not only express a Native American worldview, but also are intended to garner the support of international audiences who are predisposed to support “ecological Indians” (Krech 1999) who are also in the vanguard of political opposition.

When the Zapatistas began talking to supporters who wanted to to “get to know” them, they found that many of these people idealized Indians. In a 2001, the Mexican actress Ofelia Medina argued that “una de las asuntos más importantes de la lucha zapatista fue nuestra propia indianización.” (One of the most important facets of the Zapatista struggle is our own Indianization). Medina argued that one of the things involved in this indianización was to learn to think collectively, rather than as individuals. She also believed that “si todos nosotros tuviéramos un indio adentro, creo que lucharíamos un poco más” (Medina 2001: 194). (If we all had an Indian inside, we would fight [for justice] a little more). Indigenous peoples, then, are an (idealized) example of collective resistance. Ofelia Medina and other non-Indian supporters of the Zapatistas have come to see the Indians much as indígenas themselves have come to see Zapata--in transfigured form that has been translated, implanted into their heart, and has taken up residence there as a living icon which points to an expanded sense of kinship and community.

In 1995 Medina expressed the same idea to Tom Hayden: “inside of us there is an Indian that we have not allowed to talk because we think it’s a stupid person” (Hayden 2002: 92). Medina is a fair-skinned beauty who had radically changed, studying Mayan languages, wearing indigenous pants while helping distribute food and medicine to Zapatista
communities. What Medina expressed is, on one level, a psycho-social projection: Indians as redeemers for fair-skinned Mexicans. But on another level, she is affirming what a wide range of Mexicans have embraced as the “medicine” for their crisis of national identity. Her critique of prejudice against that inner Indian is similar to the effort of indigenous catechists to overcome the mental slavery that whispers to Indians and mestizos alike: indigenous peoples who speak in their own language and practice their own culture traditions are stupid.

Those who engage with Marcos’ writings, and the Zapatistas’ political theatre, are not just consuming a text. They are also ingesting an icon. Many, like Medina, have come to feel a certain necessity to “Indianize” themselves as a part of their own efforts to engage in the “vueltación” of their social, political, and cultural worlds. They have learned to valorize the indigenous, at least in part, through symbolic interaction with Votán Zapata, the reincarnated or transfigured Emiliano Zapata. The language which has made this new Zapata intelligible to both indigenous and mestizo Mexicans is described by Marcos as a “nuevo discurso” which emerged from “un choque” between mestizos and indígenas (a new discourse produced by a collision) (Montalban 2001: 145). In the resulting “syncretismo cultural y lingüístico” (cultural and linguistic syncretism) (Montalban 2001: 202), many have found a map or a guide for drawing close to “el corazón del pueblo,” the Indian heart which Mexico has long proclaimed, but seldom previously understood, or integrated into national life.

When Marcos speaks in the plural: “We are the forgotten heart of our country,” and “We are the brown blood in the mountains that illuminates our history” (Henck, 345), he makes a claim similar to Toni Morrison’s influential argument in Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1993). Much as blackness, as presence and absence, is a “previously invisible” cornerstone in the analysis of American literature and character, so the Mayan mythopoetics that Marcos and the Zapatatistas have made visible and audible in an unprecedented way will continue to suggest new ways of thinking about the “indigenous heart” of Mexico and Latin
America. That the lifeblood of this heart is a sense of mutual belonging with the earth suggests that the integration of native and quasi-indigenous perspectives will be a touchstone in the development of eco-critical approaches to Hispanic literatures.
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