

The Imagination to Listen: Reflections on a Decade of Zapatista Struggle

*Mariana Mora*¹

*“In the poetics of struggle and lived experience,
in the utterances of ordinary folk,
we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future,
of the world not yet born.”*

—Robin Kelly

Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination
(2002)

Abstract

This essay is a reflection on a decade of struggle by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. By providing snapshots of important political gatherings that have taken place nationally, as well as by providing ethnographic accounts of political practices in the EZLN autonomous municipalities, the author highlights what she considers to be key political interventions of the Zapatista movement. Mora argues that Zapatista political practices have been a response to the complex interactions between physical violence and political, cultural, and economic forms of exclusion. Zapatista cultural politics center on constructing expressions of radical democracy and for “*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* [a world where many worlds fit].” In this essay, Mora focuses on the following interventions of Zapatismo: a politics of listening and dignity; the struggle for autonomy; and claims to traditions, including the right to change some traditions as part of a gender critique of culture and power.

¹ Mariana Mora (e-mail: marmora@mail.utexas.edu) is a Ph.D. student of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. The author would like to thank Alan Gómez for his valuable comments.

On January 1, 2003, during the commemoration of the ninth anniversary of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) uprising against the Mexican government in the state of Chiapas, more than 20,000 Zapatistas, their faces covered with ski masks and red bandanas, marched into the central plaza of the colonial town of San Cristóbal de las Casas. From the main avenue of Insurgentes, the Zapatistas poured into the town's center in a procession that lasted several hours. As they arrived, each person raised machetes in the air so as to remind the world that the rebellion continues despite the lack of solution to the protracted conflict. After six years of mobilizations exclusively focused on the recognition of indigenous rights, this historical march served to resituate the Zapatista demand for the recognition of differences as an integral part of broader anti-globalization struggles, and to reinforce the rebel army's participation in such global processes. In the words of EZLN *comandante* Mister, one of the seven *comandantes* present,

The *mal gobierno* [the evil, corrupt government] thinks that we, as indigenous people, don't think about what happens globally. But we know the world, because we have met the women and men from all the countries that have come here and that have spoken to us about their struggle, of their worlds. With their words we have traveled. For that reason we tell the powerful of the world that if they are to globalize with the globalization of death, then we will also globalize for freedom. For that reason, rebel brothers and sisters, we struggle for democracy, liberty and justice for all the *pueblos* and nations of the world.

With these words, the Zapatistas broke an almost two-year silence and positioned themselves in dialogue with anti-neoliberal social movements in Mexico and around the globe. These words echoed a sentiment proclaimed a decade ago when, on January 1, 1994, the same day NAFTA took effect, a primarily indigenous army declared war on the Mexican State. The government responded by sending troops and, after numerous clashes and hundreds of thousands

of people throughout Mexico calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, a ceasefire was achieved 12 days later. Since that time, the EZLN has carried out various attempts at negotiating with the Mexican government while engaging in a continuing series of dialogues with what is loosely referred to as a national and international civil society—that amorphous entity once described by Mexican cultural critic, Carlos Monsivais, as "community efforts of solidarity, the space independent of government, strictly speaking the zone of antagonism" (Monsivais, 1987: 79). Ten years of dialogues with members of civil society have contributed to the construction of political practices and discourses against neoliberal relations,² in pro of radical democracy, and for "*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* [a world where many worlds fit]." This has taken place despite the presence of 60,000 elements of the federal army, the constant harassment and even assassination by military-trained paramilitary groups, and by a context of low-intensity warfare.³

One way to reflect on the past decade of failed negotiations with the State, dialogues with civil society, and a low-intensity warfare would be to describe the transformations and challenges of Zapatista-State political relations. A reflection of this sort, one typically presented in the media, would simply narrate the interactions between the State and the EZLN by focusing on the suspended peace talks and on the eventual unilateral State-initiated constitutional reforms.

² Neoliberalism refers to a series of policies produced by a logic of transnational capitalism that include the opening of markets, a reduced State role as a social service provider, and increased individual responsibility (Phillips, 1998).

³ According to a document published by the human rights organization Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez, low intensity warfare operates through a combination of strategies designed to disrupt cohesion, enclose dissent factions, harass civil society sympathizers, generate a climate of distrust and fear amongst the local population, and justify military intervention as a pacification force. It does this through tactics such as surveillance, selectively targeted development programs, manipulation of mass media, and occasional use of violence (Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez, 1998).

Such a narrative would begin with the Peace Dialogues of San Andrés Sak'amchen de los Pobres at the end of 1995, discuss the eventual signing of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture on February 16, 1996, describe the reasons behind the suspension of any further negotiations, and finally conclude with the Mexican Congress approving constitutional reforms in 2001 that recognized a limited set of indigenous rights. A narrative of this sort would limit the understanding of all the practices of resistance, including mobilizations, *encuentros* (political gatherings), and daily forms of resistance to simply strategies employed to put pressure on the State, therefore reinforcing the State's centrality and authority as the most important terrain of political power. Such a path is counter to my interest in writing this essay.

I am interested in reflecting on the past decade by locating at the center of the struggle these practices of resistance, with State negotiations forming a necessary, yet secondary, strategy. In this essay, I describe these practices as multidirectional forces of mobilization that constitute central interventions of the Zapatista struggle. Rather than analyze them as the initiation of a path from which an outcome could serve as a measurement of their success, I describe specific events as both the launching of a process whose multiple directions had not been previously defined, and as a moment at which various social forces converge. Such a decision best captures a shift in ways of doing politics because these practices reflect a fundamental element of *Zapatismo*: the movement is not about usurping State power so much as about transforming power relations through the creation of democratic spaces for collective discussions that allow people to take part in decisions that affect their lives. It is this fundamental understanding of power that emerges from the lived experiences of indigenous communities in the highlands and jungle regions of Chiapas, a necessary historical trajectory to understand post-1994 processes.

Theorization of a Long Practice

Ignacio, Hermelindo, and Marisela, Hermelindo's wife,⁴ were in their kitchen in the community of Morelia, center of the Zapatista autonomous municipality 17 de Noviembre,⁵ remembering what life was like before 1994. I had asked to interview these Tzeltal Zapatistas about the conditions in communities prior to the 1994 uprising and the reasons that led them to transfer their political participation from a *campesino* (peasant) organization, in which they were very active, to the ranks of the EZLN. After explaining how despite years of marches, meetings with government officials, petitions and other actions waged through legal channels, their claims to land, health and economic markets continued to fall on deaf ears, Ignacio brought forth memories of the feelings that silence and abuse created:

They [government authorities] would never take us into account, they would never listen to us, only when they wanted something. Like when it was time to vote, it wasn't an option, it was by force. The rancher would come and pick us up on voting day and take us by bus to Altamirano. At the ballot box, it was an obligation. They would say, put the X [your vote] here. It is better the PRI, they would say. Then they would give us a jug of pox [alcohol] and a ball of bone with a tortilla. And once the municipal president was in his chair [in office] he would forget about us. It would be all lies, only lies. (Interview. June 24, 2000)

Hermelindo continued,

⁴ All names have been changed to protect identities.

⁵ 17 de Noviembre is one of the autonomous municipalities that constitute EZLN's main geo-political division in Chiapas. Each municipality, which groups together anywhere from 15-70 communities, is engaged in a series of practices that include the creation of its own governmental, educational, and health systems.

And so we started to organize ourselves, first in open struggles, but the government never paid attention because they never saw us as part of Mexico, what they wanted was to do away with us, and kill all indigenous people. They did that in many ways, by letting there be so much sickness in our communities, by not letting us find good markets for our products, by forcing us to learn Spanish in schools and by letting the *rancheros* have all the land they wanted, leaving us only with land in the mountains. (ibid)

Marisela, who had been listening as she heated coffee on the wooden stove, interjected, “*Da rabia* [it gives us rage]. We could see with our own eyes how those lands were for just a few families [of ranchers] and we couldn't get land for our children. We couldn't even go into the ranch land to gather firewood. The rancher would shoot at us, as if we were animals” (ibid).

With these words, Marisela, Hermelindo and Ignacio speak to the multiple forms of oppression leading to a decision by the civilian support bases of the EZLN to rise up in arms, a decision that they took at the beginning of 1993. Their voices point to the complex interactions between physical violence and political, cultural, and economic forms of exclusion. These include a nation-building project centered on the homogenizing *mestizo* (mixed-race) ideal; political-economic policies resulting in a vast economic disparity and a high concentration of material resources; and the squelching of voices through a corporatist and clientelistic State, the “perfect dictatorship” as Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa once described the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).⁶

However, the collective practices of marginalized groups attempting to alter their living conditions never surface solely as a direct response to forms of oppression. To understand marginalized people's actions as mere reactions against negative conditions created by the State

⁶ After being in power for 70 years, the PRI was defeated in the elections of 2000 when Vicente Fox, a candidate from the National Action Party (PAN), won the presidency.

presupposes that persons are objects who only have things done to them, and that conflict should be directed towards the canceling out of that negativity as opposed to an organized people's power emphasizing the creativity and subjectivity of the participants. *Zapatismo*, as a set of discourses and practices of struggle, emerges out of a series of transformations following various trajectories that involve new political practices and a collective positive drive for change.

The EZLN was officially founded 20 years ago on November 17, 1983 through the combined forces of a small contingent of indigenous leaders from Chiapas and the National Liberation Forces (FLN), a primarily urban-based guerrilla group.⁷ In an interview with French sociologist Yvon Le Bot, *subcomandante* Marcos explained how at the beginning of the 1980's a handful of urban guerrilla members, including himself, went to live to the Lacandon jungle where they lived in isolation for a few years before coming into contact clandestinely with local indigenous leaders. As a result of these dialogues the EZLN was formed, though it was not until a couple of years later that they actually established relationships with the surrounding communities (Le Bot, 1997: 146).

In Chiapas, according to *subcomandante* Marcos, the Marxist-Leninist tradition of struggling for redistribution of wealth and the expropriation of systems of production undergoes a fundamental change as it gets reinterpreted through the lived experiences of local indigenous communities (ibid, 147). From these initial clandestine dialogues a new discourse emerges that emphasizes moral-ethical claims, such as the right to dignity, and a focus on transforming power relationships through political processes rather than the end goal of taking State power. In his essay, "*Revolta a la Dignidad*" (Revolt to Dignity, 1997), John Holloway links these two points in what he describes as a politics of listening, a cultural politics emerging from *Zapatismo*. "Dignity is to listen. The tradition of talking by revolutionary groups emerges from a Marxist-

⁷ The FLN, comprised mostly of urban university students of Marxist tendency, emerged as a result of the 1968 student massacre at Tlatelolco in Mexico City and by a regime operating with impunity (Monsivais, 1998: 6).

Leninist tradition, where theory is brought to the masses. To learn to listen implies incorporating new perspectives and concepts, and it implies learning to speak again, in a different form” (Holloway, 1997: 12).

This politics of listening emerges from the numerous encounters between local populations and members of the FLN that occurred from 1983 to the 1993 decision by the base communities of the rebel army to prepare itself for war. It then shifts on January 12, 1994 when the EZLN listens to the demands of civil society to struggle for peaceful solutions to the conflict. The politics of listening can also be traced through the course of the following years, despite (and perhaps due to) the constant pressure of low-intensity warfare whose objective is to encircle, enclose and isolate. The politics of listening, just like Zapatismo cultural politics in general, cannot, in fact, be understood outside this context of low-intensity warfare.

The Dignity of Listening

Encounter EZLN-Civil Society. November 20-22, 1998. Violent State-sponsored military incursions defined the first six months of 1998 and pushed the conflict between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government to a virtual breaking point, reaching a level of tension not seen since the first few days of 1994. Shortly after the massacre of Acteal on December 23, 1997,⁸ in an attempt to ensure that the PRI would reestablish control at the local level, then governor Albores Guillen launched a campaign designed to generate a climate of fear amongst the local population prior to that year's municipal elections. Over the course of several months, local security forces and federal soldiers systematically invaded dozens of communities with the objective of dismantling the EZLN autonomous municipalities and spreading terror amongst the population. The autonomous municipalities were seen by the State as a direct threat to the consolidation of local

⁸ On that date, a local Tzotzil paramilitary group stormed into the church of the village of Acteal where members of the social organization Las Abejas and support bases of the EZLN were praying for peace, and started firing indiscriminately. Forty-five people, primarily women and children, were murdered.

political power. This brutal campaign resulted in the deaths of at least eight Zapatista supporters, the detainment of hundreds of political prisoners, the destruction of dozens of homes, the physical injury of several hundred people, and the expulsion of 120 international human rights observers (CDHFBC, 1998: 5).

As opposed to simply reacting to State strategies, the EZLN turned its gaze towards that amorphous web of solidarity linkages called civil society. In November of 1998, the EZLN held a gathering in San Cristóbal, the Encounter EZLN-Civil Society, where for three days over 3,000 people discussed the EZLN proposal to hold a popular referendum, a *Consulta*, on indigenous rights and culture. In March of 1999, it was proposed that 5,000 Zapatistas would travel in pairs to each of Mexico's 2,500 municipalities in order to speak with local groups and interested individuals about the San Andrés Accords, on the significance of recognizing indigenous rights and to listen to people's opinions. The process of the *Consulta* was explicitly defined as forming part of a broad strategy and not as a single event reduced to the day of the referendum. As *comandante Zebedeo* stated on the first day of the *Encuentro*, "We aren't calling for one act only. We're making a call for mobilization" (Communiqué, November 20, 1998).

During a fast-paced three months, organizations and individuals from all corners of Mexico formed brigades in order to spread information about the *Consulta* in their local churches, schools, plazas, and assemblies and to organize the logistics necessary for the arrival of the Zapatistas. Perhaps the only other massive mobilization taking place through social networks independent of political parties and the Catholic religious institution was the spontaneous response of Mexican society after the 1985 earthquake. The *Consulta*, however, was not in reaction to an emergency situation; rather, it was strategically designed to construct temporary fluid spaces through which voices and opinions could be shared, listened to and acted upon. The *Consulta* was organized at a completely grassroots level, that is to say, it moved through the collective work of individuals outside of institutions, it survived and was fed by the beans and rice of people's cupboards and by the stubborn determination of individuals. I even remember how some brigades, working on almost no resources, managed to collect sufficient *pesos* to

photocopy the ballots for the *Consulta*, the most essential material element of a referendum, by passing a collection can around on the street and among friends.

The mobilization resulted in more than 2.8 million people voting in the referendum thanks to the efforts of thousands of brigades that organized not just nationally but at an international level. More important than the statistics, however, is the implication of defining the process of the *Consulta* as a mobilization, as it implies movement, the launching of something, the setting of the ball rolling without knowing exactly where it will head, and knowing that it will head in many directions simultaneously. In this sense, the *Encuentro* served as a temporal convergence of forces and their re-launching into multiple directions for the *Consulta*. The impact of this mobilization cannot be empirically ascertained because the indicators ride on an affective plane as well as on the temporary unity of individuals. As asked in the communiqué of May 10, 1999, “How can you count the dignity, will, memory and commitment of all of those workers, peasants, indigenous people, students, punks, social activists, members of NGOs, artists, gays and lesbians... men, women, children and the elderly?” (ibid).

However, it is precisely on that plane where new cultural political processes, centering on redefining democratic practices, are being proposed. This plane is made visible, if not altogether tangible, by centering such events as the focus of analysis. These political practices are based on a politics of listening, expressed in part through the launching of mobilizations without directing participants towards an end point, and emphasizing processes that seek to recuperate dignity. The combination of these cultural politics points to ways in which the term democracy is being injected with new meanings, hence attempting to affect changes in political culture.⁹

After the *Consulta* ended and the Zapatistas returned home, I interviewed Zapatista delegate Amalia on the significance of the mobilization for her. Her words illuminate possible dimensions of how a politics of listening and dignity feel:

⁹ The *Encuentro EZ-Sociedad Civil* and the *Consulta* are two of many events organized between the Zapatistas and Civil Society that have been held virtually every year.

The brigades took me from one event to another, so many people and all this food! I would go and talk to them about our struggle and that we, as indigenous people, want to be part of Mexico. I wasn't trying to convince but to share ideas. They [the people present] had many misconceptions of us [Zapatistas] and I was scared of how they would treat me. It was scary to speak in front of people and wait for their reactions, but how beautiful it was to share stories. I felt like a person and not like an animal. (Personal communication, March 30, 1999)

I do not want to suggest that from such practices an ideal has emerged, nor that deafening words, imposed silences and aggressive disruptions are not still present. Political practices visible through EZLN *encuentros* and *consultas* are constantly subject to encounters and dis-encounters, reproducing both authoritarian and discriminatory speech, and are injected with assumptions that someone else will take the initiative or lead the way. But this does not take away from the fact that such cultural politics of listening and dignity point in directions different from corporatist political practices of the past decades and beyond recent liberal democratic shifts, which reduce democratic practices to such spaces as the electoral arena, mass media polls and “democratic institutions.” Since 1996, when the EZLN focused its energies on peace talks with the Mexican government on indigenous rights, it has been possible to locate the politics of listening and the construction of dignity in the numerous mobilizations and daily practices demanding the recognition of differences.

We Aren't Asking for Handouts, but the Right to Dignity

National Indigenous Congress. Nurio, Michoacán. March 2-4, 2001.

We declare that we are still alive and continue to honor in our communities the dignified memory [of our ancestors]: those who came from the earth we live on; from the corn we

eat; from the color of dignity we dress. Those are our true brothers and sisters. (CNI, 2001)

In Nurio, over 5,000 delegates from virtually all of Mexico's 56 indigenous peoples gathered to celebrate the third National Indigenous Congress (CNI), a political body that began in 1996 to bring together a central part of the indigenous movement aligned with the Zapatistas. Transforming an abandoned school yard into a rustic "convention center," women and men met to strategize ways to pressure the Mexican Congress into passing constitutional reforms on indigenous rights and culture, as stipulated in the San Andrés Accords. Not only did the delegates decide to carry out a national peaceful uprising until the Mexican Congress complied with the Peace Accords,¹⁰ but they also agreed to "construct autonomy by practicing it in our communities and regions. We are going to recuperate [our autonomy and] our forests, waters, and sacred sites; we will recuperate our territories" (Pérez and Rojas, March 5, 2001).

A few days after the CNI, while the March for Dignity was in Mexico City, I was waiting for an event to start outside the National School of Anthropology and History and began talking to Miguel, a delegate from Guerrero. He offered his impressions of what the discussions at Nurio implied for the communities where he lived. Miguel said:

We met and decided that we aren't going to wait for the government to make up its mind or see if it will listen to us. Our priority is to construct our autonomy in our communities and build how we want our way of life to be, based on our traditions. Like in my *pueblo*

¹⁰ In order to comply with the San Andrés Accords, the Mexican Congress would have needed to approve the COCOPA bill, the constitutional reform initiative drafted between the EZLN and the Commission of Concordance and Pacification (COCOPA), the government mediating body.

[town], there has been so much corruption and violence from the State that several villages got together and expelled the municipal police; they [the police] weren't stopping crime, they were creating violence. Now we are discussing what form of justice works best for us. We don't know exactly if it will work to get rid of corruption, but we won't know unless we try. (Personal communication, March 22, 2001)

With his description of this emerging regional process, Miguel describes autonomy as a rejection of those State practices producing negative effects in the community and as an attempt to re-interpret traditions as an integral part of locating alternatives. He refers to autonomy as a collective reflection of community practices, such as those actions that create a sense of justice, so as to solve problems of daily life. This is a grassroots approach that attempts to impact State-indigenous relations, which in this case, took place first through collective reflections on what justice meant to them and then by community decisions to alter practices, which resulted in the expulsion of the municipal police, consequently forcing the state to respond.

Members of Zapatista support base communities created the autonomous municipalities in 1996 as an expression of similar practices, and have consequently faced heavy repression by numerous forces aligned with the State. The approximately 40 autonomous municipalities include populations that are against the Zapatistas—be they *Priistas* (from the PRI), paramilitaries, or members of independent peasant organizations. They exist in highly contested political terrains that are wrought with animosity and are primary targets of counter-insurgency campaigns. Margarita, from the Zapatista community of Francisco Gómez, describes how these expressions of violence permeate into daily life:

You try to forget but they are everywhere. I am feeding the chickens [outside my home] and the helicopters fly by, we go to the river to wash clothes and the soldiers are there with their women, then sometimes the army cuts the wire fence [separating their village from the military camp at a 400 meter distance] so that our cattle escapes. Sometimes the

radio starts to say that the military are coming, they are coming, but then nothing. How are we to feel? (Personal communication, May 28, 1998)

In the midst of this context, Zapatista community members are engaged in dynamic practices of autonomy that simultaneously reject various forms of State presence (such as populist development projects or locally elected political party officials) and construct sets of social structures designed to respond to collective needs and desires (the naming of autonomous government councils, creating alternative education and health systems, and holding community assemblies). These latter practices represent another central element of autonomy: the reaffirmation and re-understanding of a sense of collective (which is not to say un-disputed) self as part of the rejection of historical forms of oppressive State-indigenous relations. As stated by Javier, ex-member of the autonomous municipality of Polhó:

Before we would ask the government to give us everything, and they would give us only handouts—some housing material, a little bit of money, a few sacks of corn. But now we realize that we can solve our necessities ourselves. That is why we decided to resist, to give birth to our ideas. The communities created the autonomous municipalities so we could be free to create what our thoughts told us, to create what we wanted according to our needs and to our history. We are not asking the government to hands us clothes but rather the right to dignity. (Personal communication, February 14, 1998)

As Javier signals, practices forming part of autonomy serve to critique historical relationships of oppression that have imposed onto indigenous peoples particular identity categories, in this case as objects dependent on the State for survival and as those lacking the ability to create understandings of their own reality. By linking dignity to the production of “our ideas,” Javier points to autonomy as a process of constructing different understandings of indigenous identity that emerge from the reinterpretation of particular lived histories. The right to

dignity is fundamental in the process of reinterpreting a sense of self given that no external agent can define what dignity means to a collective; it is a word that can only be claimed by those generating the very content of its meaning.

While severing ties with current forms of State relations, expressions of autonomy also highlight how claims to dignity, control over knowledge-production and the right to take ownership of decisions over daily life establish new terms of inclusion into the broader society. These elements form part of practices visualizing *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* (a world where many worlds fit), a phrase pointing to a radical respect for differences where identity is understood, not as a desire to return to an ahistoricized past, but rather as a perpetual process of becoming that draws from lived experiences to create an understanding of a collective sense of self in movement.

Such understandings contrast sharply to homogenizing *mestizaje* (mixed-race) ideals where individuals have had to conform to certain identity categories so as to gain recognition as citizens (see Rosaldo, 2000). At the same time, such fluid yet historically grounded expressions of identity seem to differ from recent State shifts towards multiculturalism, which tend to recreate reified notions of indigenesness. This shift is most clearly visible in the recent constitutional reforms that recognize the right to cultural difference (bilingual education, language, and other cultural practices) yet eliminates key socio-economic rights (collective use of natural resources and right to autonomy). This limited recognition of indigenous rights views identity as a static entity, instead of one produced by historical relationships that result in multiple forms of marginality.

Indigenous Women Defending Traditions and the Right to Change Traditions

Working Group on the Situation, Rights and Culture of Indigenous Women. First Round of Peace Talks in San Andrés. October 18-22, 1995. As part of the larger peace dialogues of San Andrés, a separate working group was organized to discuss the realities of indigenous women and to create a dialogue amongst indigenous and urban *mestiza* women. Such a space created a

historical opportunity for the plurality of indigenous women's lived experiences to take center stage. From the interventions made during those days, a series of resolutions were drafted for the final document of the San Andrés Accords.

During the first day of meetings in the fog covered highland town of San Andrés, those present quickly pointed out that this working group was not a "women's congress but a profound analysis of the violence, marginality and discrimination against indigenous women in the country" (Pérez, 1998: 380). Breaking with hegemonic feminist notions of women's rights represented by urban middle class claims, indigenous women in this forum spoke at length about their experiences and desires:

We want land. It is an insult to our dignity as women and indigenous people for our lands to be taken away.... We want to be listened to and taken into account so that the traditions and customs don't hurt us.... We have the right to choose how many children we want... We want an end to sexual and domestic violence as part of our rights to participate politically in our regions and in the nation.... We are not against men but against the system that oppresses us. (ibid, 378-392)

As noted in these voices, indigenous women participating in the working group made similar claims to those of urban *mestiza* women's demands for reproductive rights and against domestic violence, but also incorporated a series of cultural and economic demands. It is these differences in claims that are the result of particular experiences of racism and marginality suffered at the intersection of ethnicity, class and gender (Hernández Castillo, 2001: 213). Central to their demands has been the right to simultaneously defend and critique traditions as well as to struggle against the political-economic expressions of marginality suffered by indigenous people in general, and indigenous women in particular.

In 1995, more than 400 indigenous women gathered in San Cristóbal as part of one of the first *encuentros* of indigenous women in the post-1994 period. These women gathered to discuss

traditions and customs with the objective of forming part of broader dialogues held throughout Mexico in light of the future peace talks on indigenous rights. During a popular education workshop, women responded to the question, “What traditions don’t we like?” The answers were: “We don’t like the tradition whereby girls are forced to marry at age 10, or the tradition that doesn’t allow women to go to school, or to participate in assemblies. And most of all, we don’t like the tradition of poverty” (K'inál Anteztik, 1995).

Two fundamental interventions emerge from these responses. By critiquing and demanding changes in traditions, the participating women highlighted *costumbres* (customs) not as essentialized entities devoid of power but as sets of relations deeply embedded in oppressive relations. The *Encuentro* was held as part of a series of mobilizations pushing for the recognition of indigenous rights. However, these women gathered not just to demand the right to traditions but the right to continually analyze, critique and change traditions so as to transform relationships of oppression. Just as importantly, by identifying poverty as a tradition, these women located oppression as not just coming from indigenous men, but as structurally produced and historically generated by oppressive relationships with the State.

Six years later, *comandante* Esther made a similar intervention at the heart of State power when she spoke in the Mexican Congressional Chambers of San Lázaro on March 28, 2001. At the end of the March for Dignity, EZLN *comandantes* and members of the CNI entered San Lázaro through the front door and offered Mexico’s political representatives reasons why indigenous rights must be included in the constitution. *Comandante* Esther stated,

My name is Esther, but that isn’t important now. The only thing that matters is that I am indigenous and a woman. I want to explain to you the situation lived by indigenous women. For many years we have suffered pain, marginality and oppression. We have struggled to change [bad] traditions, and to do so, indigenous rights must be recognized. We must be recognized as women, as poor, as indigenous, and as Zapatista. (Communiqué, March 28, 2001)

In her speech, *comandante* Esther highlighted the right to change traditions by recognizing the right to traditions. By doing so, she described indigenous rights as the collective demand to reconfigure or reproduce traditions and not as a simple return to traditions, as if these were objects rather than relations. During debates held by State officials during the March for Dignity, representatives of the Mexican government argued against the recognition of indigenous rights by stating that to grant collective rights to indigenous peoples signified violating individual women's rights. Such logic places the State as the protector of women from indigenous men. *Comandante* Esther destabilized these dichotomous constructs by placing rights at the intersection of ethnicity, class and gender (see Speed, 2002). By doing so she declared that indigenous women are not asking the State to define how indigenous women are to be protected but are demanding the right to be listened to so that women can redefine practices that oppress them.

Through the words of *comandante* Esther, the voices of women participating in the indigenous women's working group in San Andrés and of those who participated in the *Encuentro* of 1995, I have tried to illustrate ways in which indigenous women's participation in national political movements since 1994 has been fundamental in shaping understandings of the multi-dimensionality of identity and experiences of oppression. Through their interventions, these women have critiqued both urban middle class *mestiza* notions of feminism, essentialized notions of identity surfacing from certain sectors of the indigenous movement, and attempts by the Mexican State at creating dichotomies between women's rights and indigenous rights. These interventions have generated a fundamental critique of culture as embedded in unequal relations of power.

Conclusion: Circulating Struggles and Imaginations

Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism. July 27-August 3, 1996. In January 1996, the EZLN emitted a communiqué inviting individuals and organizations

of the five continents to an intercontinental encounter in the Zapatista's five *Aguascalientes* (Centers of Resistance). In July of that year, more than 4,000 people from 42 different countries met in the highland Zapatista community of Oventic and later divided into workshops by theme—economic, political, cultural, and social—in the *Aguascalientes* of Roberto Barrios, La Garrucha, Oventic, La Realidad and Morelia, where for three days people discussed the effects of neoliberalism and the struggles against it.

During the course of those days, I distinctly remember journalists running madly from working group to working group trying to capture the concrete proposals that would emerge as a new international doctrine to counteract this most recent phase of capitalist development. Those that lacked the imagination to listen, only heard the repetition of critiques and expressed disappointment that few concrete actions resulted; many reporters failed to identify that a central component of the *Encuentro* was an affirmation of the participants' capacity to create an analysis of their reality that did not come from “experts” or intellectuals or policy makers, but that was derived from the daily experiences, practices and observations of each and every one of them. By locating solutions as not existing outside themselves in some transcendent plane to which they must extend their arms and reach out but rather that the possibilities are already living and existing inside the participants and amongst them, the *Encuentro* was an affirmation of their control over their collective realities and ability to imagine new possibilities. Likewise, by temporarily converging in these *Aguascalientes*, the participants were not only witnesses to Zapatista forms of resistance but also agents responding to Zapatista initiatives, circulating the struggle (along with its tensions and contradictions) through the various spaces they continue to move through and occupy.

This essay has been a reflection on Zapatismo cultural politics that have emerged from the movement of the possibilities, ideas, and actions of people in struggle. By providing such a reflection, I have explicitly chosen to redefine the terms under which to scrutinize a decade of the movement's political practices. I could have, in typical fashion, identified the objectives of particular events or mobilizations over the course of this decade and used these as indicators to

evaluate the extent to which the Zapatista movement has met those goals. Such an evaluation would have not only failed to locate prior changes that enabled the event to occur in the first place, but would have also failed to effectively analyze Zapatismo's understandings of power. Likewise, my gaze would have undoubtedly turned almost exclusively towards Zapatista-State negotiations.

If I had written such an essay, I would have focused on the failure of the peace talks, on how the partial recognition of indigenous rights reflects Mexican government attempts at re-appropriating EZLN demands to fuel its own purposes, on the costly mis-calculations made by the rebel army, and on how years of low intensity warfare have severely eroded the social fabric of Zapatista communities. All of these elements form fundamental parts of the movement's history that must not be overlooked and cannot be forgotten. However, paralleling the words of Robin Kelley, to write yet another essay on "how oppressed we are or that merely chronicles the [follies] of radical movements doesn't seem very useful... Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society" (Kelley, 2002: 9).

In this essay, I have attempted to draw glimpses of the poetic imaginations fueling and fueled by Zapatista practices over the course of the past decade. In these pages, I have reflected on what I consider to be central interventions of the EZLN movement: a politics of listening that transforms cultural politics associated with radical democratic practices, claims to dignity and control over the right to change traditions as central to establishing respect for differences, autonomy as both a separation from State practices and as a condition for inclusion, and an understanding that all these elements, while forming an integral part of Zapatista anti-neoliberal struggles, do not produce a recipe to be replicated in a cookie-cutter fashion elsewhere, but are rather topics of conversation with struggles everywhere. It is the ability to listen to these imaginations and to have the imagination to listen that allows us to locate the actions of people slipping through forms of oppression and violence, hence extending, elaborating and redefining

future visions of inspiration. It is my hope that these pages contribute to the (re)circulation of such imaginaries.

REFERENCES

Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez

1998 *Informe Chiapas: La Guerra en Curso.*

Comisión de Defensa de los Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (CDHFBC)

1998 *La guerra que quieren ocultar.*

Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI)

2001 *Declaración por el reconocimiento constitucional de nuestros derechos colectivos.*

Encuentro EZ-Sociedad Civil

1998 *Declaración Política de la Sociedad Civil, November 22.*

EZLN, Communiqué

1998 *Los Zapatistas y La Consulta Sobre el Reconocimiento de los Derechos de los Pueblos Indios, November 20.*

2001 *Ante el Congreso de la Unión, March 28.*

Hernández Castillo, Rosalva Aída

2001 *La Otra Frontera: Identidades Múltiples en el Chiapas Poscolonial.* Ciudad de Mexico: CIESAS.

Holloway, John

1997 *La Revuelta a la Dignidad.* In *Chiapas 5*, UNAM, pp. 7-40.

Kelley, Robin D.G.

2002 *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination.*
Boston: Beacon Press.

K'inál Anteztik

1995 *Mujeres indígenas de Chiapas: nuestros derechos, costumbres y tradiciones.*

Le Bot, Yvon

1997 *El Sueño Zapatista.* Barcelona: Plaza y Janés.

Monsivais, Carlos

1987 *Entrada Libre: Crónicas de la sociedad que se organiza*. Mexico: Era.

1998 “Los Zapatistas.” In *Proceso*, edición especial, November, pp. 6-44.

Pérez, Matilde

1998 “Crónica de las negociaciones entre gobierno federal y EZLN: Primera fase de la Mesa 1, Grupo 4. Situación, derechos y cultura de la mujer indígena.” In Rosa Rojas (ed), *Chiapas: ¿Y las Mujeres Que?* Mexico: Ediciones la Correa Feminista. pp. 378-397.

Pérez, Matilde and Rojas, Rosa

2001 “Plantean indígenas realizar un levantamiento nacional pacífico para alcanzar su autonomía.” *La Jornada*, March 5.

Phillips, Lynne

1998 Introduction: Neoliberalism in Latin America. In Lynne Phillips (ed.) *The Third Wave of Modernization in Latin America*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Books, pp. xi-xxi.

Rosaldo, Renato

2000 “La pertenencia no es un lujo: procesos de ciudadanía cultural dentro de una sociedad multicultural,” in *Desacatos*. Ciudad de Mexico: CIESAS, Spring, pp. 39-49.

Speed, Shannon

2002 “*Rights at the Intersection: Gender and Ethnicity in Nicolas Ruiz.*” Paper Presented at the American Anthropological Association. New Orleans, LA.