

# Autonomy, Representation and *Lekil Kuxlejal* in Highland Chiapas

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**W**hen I stayed in the indigenous communities in the highland region of Chiapas, Mexico, I would always be the first in the particular group I was working with to go to bed. Then in the morning, the same group would wake me up, smiling and making breakfast. I should have felt disoriented, I guess, but everything and everyone was as familiar as I had left them when I fell asleep, only the sun was up. It was never clear to me when a day ended and when a day began in the tiny indigenous communities. Chiapas must follow the same cycles of night and day as the rest of the world. But if day is also something

between periods of sleep, then that makes things trickier, because in my stays in the communities I never saw anyone in the act of sleep. I don't know if I would go so far as to say that they did not sleep, because I have heard that without sleep one goes crazy. And I don't want anyone to think that the indigenous of Chiapas are ghosts. There are too many people who think that already. Still, one's original impressions of Chiapas are that space and time are something inherently different there. Somehow a night of sleep for them fits in between the late night festivals and the early morning routine of *campesino* life.

One morning while staying in Guaquitepec, I hoped to catch everyone in the community in

bed and witness their awakening. I woke up at 4:00 in the morning, but most of the community was already preparing for the light. The sun began to penetrate through the mountains, dispersing clouds

and warming the chilly air. It illuminated fields where men and boys were already working with machetes, it came through the cracks of wooden houses, making lines of light on dirt floors where children played and women fried tortillas. Groups of men were already digging out trenches alongside dirt roads and speaking a locally specific dialect of Tzeltal. They wore sheepskin cloaks and milk-white robes. The robes are cut off just above the knees, like short kilts. Others wore less traditional collared shirts. Women walked past the men without speaking to them. They led children by the hands and wore brilliant satin purple blouses with heavily embroidered yokes. Narrow coral-colored stripes laced their skirts just below the place where tightly knit belts held them in place. Other women wore an entirely different traditional black sheepskin skirt. They all clung to shawls which fell over their shoulders.

To the few people I spoke with there the air was nice and cool, but it made me shiver. They laughed at the *gringo*. Parts of Chiapas are more highly elevated than many of the United States' white-capped mountains. Its hills have little headroom under low clouds. The physicality of this region, squeezed in a tiny space between mountains and sky, follows its

own laws of proportion. Small plots of corn, beans, coffee, peaches and peanuts, and tiny indigenous communities of little brown cabins cling to mountainsides above clouds. Taxis and beds of trucks so full of people that some cling to the outside share the same narrow roads with stray dogs, children and small indigenous men and women carrying enormous sacks of wood and corn on their backs by belts secured onto their foreheads. I find myself looking down when I speak with many of them. One comments in Spanish to another about how tall I am. Yes, I bump my head on the door frames, I say.

Besides proportion, this part of the world defies physics and scientific explanation as well. My first exposure to this phenomenon left me secretly making last minute deals with God as I drove through the northern highlands region with fellow volunteer Pablo one evening. I felt embarrassed being so cheap about faith, but I could have sworn there were some other forces at play there, and I was afraid for myself. The forces seemed to erupt as we passed an overturned truck in our car. A man lay beside it, bloody in nothing but his underwear. Medics had him strapped to a gurney, and they were holding his neck to

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protect his spine. Pablo mumbled something. I kept nervously wondering what out here in the mountains had ripped the man's clothes off like that. While I tried to figure this out in my head, a rift in the hills opened up again, and a car flung someone off a cliff. We drove past where the car had come to a stop against a guardrail. A group helplessly looked over the edge, a man comforted a child and another screamed into a telephone. As the fog thickened, I hoped that the woods wouldn't open up and suck us into it as well. My palms were sweating and left a streak on the window when I touched the glass.

In a pinch-me-I-think-I'm-dreaming sort of way, I later asked my friends in the communities if my superstitions were correct about Chiapas. Their responses would suggest that I had merely scratched the surface. However despite the tangibility and often times violent nature of what one might call magic in Chiapas, it didn't seem to confuse other people as much as it did me. I thought the myths I heard from people to be bizarre, weird and folksy. But slowly I began to see that I was the crazy one, and everyone else was sane.

There is humanity in all of the madness there. It is important to stress that the indigenous people of Chiapas themselves are human. They are always growing, changing loving and struggling. They are active individuals in their culture and society. Every time I blinked my eyes in the communities I reopened them to a completely different world. This might seem obvious to some, but to others it is surprising that the indigenous of southern Mexico are not actually timeless statues, relics of Mayan

history. I doubt those others would admit that they think this way, or are even aware of it. My experiences with them tell me I need to start from scratch, from the basics, to show that the indigenous communities are made up of people with needs, desires and meaningful lives.

### **desde San Cristóbal a Guaquitepec**

In Chiapas I worked with Red de Comunicadores 'Boca de Polen' (The 'Pollen Mouth' Communicators Network), a group based in the small city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas that provides resources for indigenous communities that are developing their own forms of independent media. I helped the organization to translate films and documents, seek out funding and develop educational materials on the topic of migration. With the materials I gave workshops in communities where Boca de Polen sought to maintain close relationships with community radio stations, video producers and a school.

Many of the indigenous people that Boca de Polen works alongside are in resistance, in a struggle for the autonomy of their own systems of governance, economy, culture and self-representation. Boca de Polen means to develop this last area by providing technology and training. They have helped to set up radio stations in the indigenous languages of Tzotzil and Tseltal. The Las Abejas station, Radio Chanul Pom, is a computer and some audio equipment stacked on a small wooden table, all in a small cabin. Outside the cabin a mangled wire serves as transmitter. Radio T'sumbal broadcasts from a small cement house at the

edge of a field where horses and cows graze. Communities are developing films about their lives and struggles in local languages as well and Boca de Polen has a tiny but growing video program.

I gave a workshop with Boca de Polen to students in Guaquitepec, a larger community in the Ocosingo Municipality of Chiapas, where Tseltal is the primary language. The community's secondary school, Bachillerato Técnico Bivalente Bartolomé de Las Casas, is autonomous. It is made up of four buildings, which form a rectangle around a courtyard full of ten-foot leafy agronomy projects and a muddy irrigation system that makes its way to the lower corner of the school, spilling out over exposed rocks. During the day the buildings are not lit by electricity, but by an arrangement of windows and open shutters. In one room the light coming in makes skewed triangles and quadrilaterals, framing desks and chairs in a constellation of light and weathered, cracking, empty furniture on the dusty cement floors. The walls are nearly barren but for chalkboards and a length of construction paper, scribbled with class notes, hanging sadly by a last remaining tack. When I arrived there late one morning, echoes of a film in Spanish came in through the window along with a warm breeze that caused the shutters to shift restlessly and slam against each other.

I walked into the cafeteria where the students were watching a movie on a giant screen at the end of the room. I had picked up the film in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas where I was based in Chiapas. I walked toward the TV and sat down, facing the students. There were over

50 of them, straddling window sills, standing against walls with their arms crossed, sitting on benches, sprawling on the floor and peering in through the windows. Every face was fixed on the screen, which was barking rapid Spanish. All at once the faces smiled, made

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confused faces or chuckled. Then they all laughed. Then all at once their jaws dropped, they grimaced or covered their eyes. I turned to Miguel Cruz, a young man in the community with whom I worked and pointed out that everyone seemed to be friendly with each other there. Although I would later find this to be the norm, it had struck me that the two boys sitting across the table had been trading affection.

This surprised me for a place uncomfortable with homosexuality. They were both straddling a bench, one in front of the other. The one in front was leaning back, the one behind holding him around the waist and saying something softly into his ear. In the communities men and boys sometimes put their arms around each other and comfortably rest their heads in each other’s laps. Girls are friendly too. They joke with each other and giggle, but rarely talk with boys. The only clear divide I could see in the students is that of gender, and there was almost nothing of cliques. Miguel whispered back to me that everyone in the community was friendly and pretty much got along together. I found it hard to believe exactly that, but then again I also grew up in an environment of exclusive groups and merciless gossip.

Contrast the colder, more impersonal institutions of our school systems to the profoundly personal and warm system there, and it is clearer why the students seem mostly genial, why they wrap their arms around each other, and discipline and organize themselves. The Bachillerato school in Guatepec is voluntary and works independently of government funding – it is autonomous. The only sign of government presence in the school are the diplomas that are handed out to graduates every year. The documents make it easier for students to get into college. But this doesn’t mean that the school wants the students to leave the communities. Every year the students take a test, which asks them what they want out of life. Do they want to drive a taxi in the city, or be a farmer or doctor in their community? Do they want to make money for themselves, or provide for their family and friends? Do they want to live with the Spanish-speaking mestizos, or the Tseltales? Students who say they would prefer a more urban life are encouraged to leave for another school. Those who finish are encouraged to go to college and come back, if it is possible.

By taking control of the school’s curriculum ten years ago, the community vowed to strengthen itself, rather than continue a path of disintegration. Students are taught material that is useful to maintaining the economic and political vibrancy of the community. Rather than study only basic chemistry or biology, which have little application in the communities but are part of paternalistic government curriculums, the students learn sustainable agriculture. Members of the community, which meets to make decisions about the school routinely, are elected to design the curriculum and are liable to the community’s demands. The community empowers itself by forming the education of its young people. On one hand they strengthen the knowledge base in creative and productive ways. On the other they cut their ties with the outside forces that have long determined the dissolution of communities.

The students ate together after the film and I ate with them. After we finished our meal of beans and tortillas, I stayed as the students trickled outside to talk with some of the teachers and counselors, most of whom were barely older than myself. I asked them why they chose to work there over more high-paying and high-status jobs in the city. The question seemed to give them a little bit of anxiety. Work in the cities was a marker of high-status in the more capitalistic and class-oriented paradigms there. Where they felt this pressure, they seemed to have faith that staying in the community was something noble. Some of the counselors there said they stayed because they never wanted to leave after graduating, despite the low pay. Because the school refuses funding from the government, it always needs to seek funding from donors and barely gets by. But in this place where the line between community and educational institution is blurred, the warmth of the school and its struggle for autonomy draw them into it.

### **Iekil kuxlejal**

Before the end of 1993, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari made an appearance on Mexican television. Sitting perfectly upright next to a Mexican flag and speaking slowly, he announced that Mexico was finally going to be given the opportunity to rise up in the world. Mexico was about to enter into the North American Free Trade Agreement, also known as NAFTA, with the United States and Canada to free up trade in the region. According to Salinas, the new free market doctrine would help to stimulate trade with the other countries by eliminating trade barriers, helping the Mexican economy to grow.<sup>1</sup> Mexico would finally become, according to Salinas, a “First World country,” leaving its humiliating “underdeveloped” status behind. The words “First World” indicated a league of nations characterized by economic independence and power. They resonated well in the ears of people accustomed to playing little brother to one of the world’s most wealthy and powerful countries.

But the convincing language that sold NAFTA broke apart on harsh realities. On January 1, 1994, the day NAFTA was instituted, images of bandana and balaclava-clad indigenous rebels called the Zapatista Army for National Liberation appeared on the news. Images were broadcast of the rebels kicking in doors and sneaking around city alleys with crude rifles, sticks and WWII-era machine guns. The guerilla army captured three towns and San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Chiapas, claiming that the trade liberalization written into NAFTA would lead to increasing economic problems for indigenous communities. As some of the poorest people in Mexico, they claimed the right to the basic necessities that had historically been withheld from them. Mexicans “were shocked.”<sup>2</sup> Much of the West had been capital-happy following the Soviet Union’s collapse and had begun to believe that market discipline would solve problems of “underdevelopment.” But the rebellion, timed perfectly to coincide with the institutionalization of the terms in the agreement, revealed the sobering underbelly of economic globalization. As Mexico’s outcasts, riff-raff, marginalized and forgotten peoples came pouring out of the jungle and the forest, they crashed in on its day of renewal, its day of rebirth, its entrance into the high society of the “developed” world.

Within a few days the Mexican military chased the rebels back into the mountains, and NAFTA remained. The message of the rebels fell on stubborn ears. Mexico’s government is like many others in the “underdeveloped” world, in that the elites in charge have a history of fixation and even fanaticism for modern development schemes in hopes that they will elevate their status. In these projects there is sometimes enough logic and flexibility to succeed at meeting the real needs of people. And sometimes not. For example, between 1973 and 1976, Tanzanian officials forced country-dwellers, most of whom were pastoralists and subsistence farmers, into agricultural settlements. They believed that by moving the country toward agricultural production they would accelerate

its progress, moving it to a more superior level of development. But the project failed, in part because of its dedication to a symbolic idea of what a development project should look like rather than flexibility to the existing economic situation. The settlements were organized into perfect grids to appear modern, despite the impracticality of such a scheme.<sup>3</sup> Likewise the capital of Brasil, Brasilia, was designed with bland, flat colors and enormous boxy buildings with no flair or character, to convey a seemingly rational, and thus advanced exterior. The city is shaped like an airplane when seen from the sky, giving literal presence to the development scheme of “takeoff.”

The aesthetic of modernism gives away the ideal that developers have in mind; that of advanced technology and industrialism. The initiative to achieve this ideal, at however superficial a level, can supersede all other needs and agendas. It can come to the forefront and trample all other priorities underfoot. Politicians risk their careers and lives for it. Populations are threatened in its name. Embedded in the language of NAFTA was this jewel that needed to be obtained. The promise of this ideal, the temptation, lay in the free market rhetoric of economists, U.S. leaders, developers and a technocratic president. Mexican officials quashed dissident and marginalized voices to finally reach the first day in 1994. Salinas, a less popular candidate, rigged his 1988 election to push forward economic reforms that threatened the livelihoods of small producers. NAFTA representatives agreed to remove tariffs that protected southern Mexican corn producers from flooded markets and displacement. The indigenous in Chiapas found these decisions were made beyond their reach, but the effects were intimate.

There is frustration with the indigenous autonomists and rebels in Chiapas among many strata of Mexican society, not only politicians and policymakers. While speaking with my Spanish teacher in my first week there, she explained to me why she thought

the movement, although justified by existing conditions of poverty, was flawed. She said, “Even though people are starving, they refuse help from the government!” When I talked with conservative Mexicans, they expressed frustration with the movement. I was told that the indigenous were confused, like children. Because they simply did not know what was good for them, they did not deserve self-determination.

In their ideas of development, I heard resonance of W.W. Rostow’s standard model for human progress that follows a linear process of industrialization toward a free consumer society.<sup>4</sup> By not falling in line, it was thought that the indigenous rebels of Chiapas retarded this process. To some they were only a burden, slowing the nation down from arriving at its idyllic end of history, which was somehow always receding over the horizon.

It seems that to a lot of the indigenous in Chiapas, this attitude is overbearing. They feel caught in an economic and political dragnet, which they have little control over. José Alfredo Jiménez Pérez, a friend I worked with, said,

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*The kind of globalization that we fight against is the kind that wants to impose. For example, Coca-Cola. The clearest and most well known example is Coca-Cola . . . Yeah, we're against capitalism and neo-liberalism in general. Because all of it is politics. The economy, all of it. It comes in one package. That's its objective – although they don't say it like this. It all comes disguised. Like, "Drink Coca-Cola. It's so good. You need it!" But really when you buy a Coke, you don't know what you are drinking. And the money that you pay – you don't know it goes to a foreign county. A lot of people don't know where the money goes.<sup>5</sup>*

The economic changes facing indigenous communities in Chiapas come in through the back door like this. According to José Alfredo, before people know it they are endorsing mainstream capitalist markets through their participation in them. This onslaught of change seeks to rearrange life in the communities.

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Since the 1994 uprising, the Zapatistas have put down their weapons. Civilian elements of the movement have stepped up, developing schools, community centers, clinics and agricultural and apicultural cooperatives that strive for an ideal of independence and self-management. Since 2003, life has been organized around a network of political centers called *caracoles*, meaning “snails”

in Spanish. In the same way that a snail shell spirals inward, power is ostensibly supposed to flow inward from the individual communities into the autonomous government centers. The Zapatistas are part of a larger movement. Also involved is the Las Abejas (The Bees) Civil Society. Begun in 1992 as a pacifist Christian organization, Las Abejas have organized their own autonomous infrastructural base as well. Both Las Abejas and the Zapatistas have strong independent judicial committees that oversee dilemmas within the region. Although many of their members are extremely poor, they refuse government aid that is oftentimes awarded to other indigenous communities. These groups as well as various cooperatives, communities and schools are struggling for the ability to exist independently of the encroaching modern capitalist economy and state. They want to choose their own progress, or pluralistic forms of progress that will give them economic stability and increased control in their lives.

They follow a different ideal, what has been called a “world in which all worlds fit.” Many times I heard people claim to seek little more than a dignified life, or as they say in Tseltal, *lekil kuxlejal*. This life doesn't render other forms of living impossible; rather it turns in toward itself, looking inward. Many of the Mayans I spoke with talked about the virtue of being oriented inward, toward the heart of the community, rather than outwardly into other communities. This is not to say that nobody is concerned with the outside world. But for the outsider, this inward focus among many in the communities puts up a blank impenetrable exterior. Coming to indigenous communities for the first time, I found myself looking over a lot of shoulders, trying to follow exactly what was going on. When I would ask questions about people's communities, their answers were short, polite and blunt. They left these conversations out to dry but I struggled to revive them. A few times I felt like the only one excluded from some huge elaborate secret. The symbol of the *caracol*, popular in many more aspects of Mesoamerican Maya life than just the Zapatista political centers, also represents

this model of community. The outside shell is solid, protecting the interior. The idea is that an outsider has to work his or her way to the heart of the community, just like a snail's shell spirals into the center.

What is it that many people are facing, turned inward away from outsiders? In an interview with Miguel Cruz I tried to find out. In the sound room at Boca de Polen, he sat across from me, sitting upright and seeming more fidgety than usual. Normally I wouldn't be putting him on the spot like I was then. He began to speak when Vladimir, a tall and lanky *coleto* (person from San Cristóbal de Las Casas) threw the door open and greeted us both, grinning. We humored him for a minute, chatting, and then I held up the tape recorder so that he could see we were doing an interview. He jumped, apologized and closed the door behind him. Miguel started,

*So, the question is “What is lekil kuxlejal?” It is a word we say in Tseltal, and that has a lot of meanings, no? It can mean, “for a good life,” or “a good life,” or “living better.” You are content and happy. It represents a series of values that encapsulate everything. Lekil kuxlejal expresses absolutely this: a life of harmony and dignity. We say that in the communities this is what we strive for. They replace it a lot with “autonomy of lekil kuxlejal.” Because this is what they want. This is equality within the community. There is a good deal of respect. This is what lekil kuxlejal stands for. Because if you have respect for the people that live within the community, everyone will respect you. If you show affection, you show confidence, you show some of the values that the people share and help to coexist in this context, then in this way you demonstrate that you have lekil kuxlejal – a good life. A good respect. It's a life more, as we say, dignified. Well done, then. Well lived.<sup>6</sup>*

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I heard this rhetoric quite a bit—that a community *needed* a degree of self-determination. Autonomy was not a marginal political cause, but instead essential to the collective dignity and fulfillment of *chiapaneco* indigenous communities. In the faces of neo-liberals who want to impose outside development initiatives, they demanded control of their own communities. To them it did not demand any explanation of what they would do with their control because outsiders had no stock or role in the communities in the first place.

That day Miguel and I had recently returned from Guatequepec, having given our workshop on migration. In an interim break I had sat down where several kids were talking. I spoke with them for a little bit to get to know them personally. I asked about their community, the school and autonomy. Why is it important that the school is independent? Even after becoming accustomed to short and sweet answers, I anticipated more than what they told me. They explained to me simply that autonomy was best for the school because it could respond directly to the community's needs. Being in control of the school, they were proud of it and it dignified and validated their identities.

When I sat there speaking with the few of them I was not satisfied with their answer. I thought maybe something had been lost in translation because of my inability to completely articulate what I was thinking in Spanish. Accustomed to the theorizing of activists where I live, I had expected long conceptual and abstract answers to my questions. How does someone come to understand a society's needs, let alone the things that should be done to fulfill them without a lot of theorizing and arguing about it? The need for autonomy to them was somehow self-evident in a puzzle I hadn't really assembled entirely. For me it lay in an intellectual blind spot. Either they didn't want to talk about it at length, or they thought it simply didn't need any explanation. Although people within my context generally come to this from a different angle, it is common knowledge within the communities that autonomy is part of a fulfilling good life.

## la otra

Influence does not flow in only one direction from outside communities onto the Mayan communities of Chiapas. In the summer of 2005, the Zapatistas decided they would broaden their scope to all of Mexico. While presidential candidates would be campaigning for the 2006 elections, the indigenous group would send its major spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, on a campaign to every state in Chiapas. Instead of encouraging people to vote, he would advocate for participation in local organizing efforts, "another form of politics." Marcos is not indigenous by blood, but joined militant indigenous groups in Chiapas in the early 80's after leaving a teaching job at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). He has since worked alongside the Zapatistas through the uprising, rumored assassination attempts and the movement for autonomy.

Smoking a pipe through a hole in his ski mask, Marcos sat in the back of a stage in an auditorium on UNAM's campus in Mexico City. Wearing fatigues and enormous black boots he blew clouds of smoke that lingered around his head. He stared through them pensively toward the floor. In front of him a table of activists with microphones flipped through piles of documents and notes. In front of them on the floor a line of farmers, sex workers, queer activists, anarchists, students, punks, communists, middle-class activists and unionists waited for a microphone that was currently in the hands of a man raising his fist and yelling. In front of him a barely attentive audience of a few hundred people talked amongst themselves and walked around. Occasionally someone would yell back at the speaker, disrespectfully but necessarily interrupting his rant.

I walked in with dozens of activists, volunteers, academics and indigenous men and women from San Cristóbal, crossing the middle of the auditorium slowly, disoriented and stiff. We had left for Mexico City 23 hours before, packing into three decrepit buses. Until we finally pulled up to the

auditorium in Mexico City, we slept against the metal frames of tattered seats, sang songs and stomped down the floor hatch that occasionally popped open a crack until we finally pulled up to the auditorium in Mexico City. They were there for a meeting to plan a march on Mexico's election day as part of the Other Campaign, advocating popular, participative democracy while everyone's mind would be on electoral politics. In this election the left-leaning candidate would lose by a tiny margin, pointing to evidence of fraud against him and calling for a recount. The election committee's refusal would catalyze a several-month-long standoff, with protesters overtaking the city's central plaza and over one million people protesting in the streets.

I sat down in the Chiapas section toward the back of the auditorium. People on the floor in front were each speaking on behalf of their own demographic, talking about their struggles and suggesting ways in which the march should represent their interests. Those sitting at the table on stage made proposals to the assembly. I couldn't always understand what they were saying through the echo in the speaker, but it elicited furious responses out of some people. One man across the auditorium was possessed and screamed at the table, waving a trembling fist. The anger took over his entire body, and he lunged his weight into every word from his seat, falling over the people in the row in front of him. Those at the table shifted uncomfortably. Marcos puffed his pipe.

Moving closer to the floor I could hear that the issue on the table had changed to whether decisions should be made by votes or consensus. I chuckled to myself at this realization. It seemed that the voting vs. consensus argument is pretty common among the left, regardless of place.

As I was standing against a handrail, a familiar face passed me. It was Marino Astrada Aguilar, a man I had met at an indigenous film festival in Oaxaca. His eyes lit up when he saw me,

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and he pulled over to where I was standing. He was an indigenous filmmaker from the Palenque area in Chiapas. He talked about his work. I asked him what he thought of the ensuing voting vs. consensus debate. This clearly set in motion something in his mind that had built up and had needed to be let

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out. He smiled and thought to himself, wondering how to start. Then he said that in some of the Mayan communities in Chiapas, decisions were made by consensus. The mutual agreement of everyone was generally a priority. However in other communities, decisions tended to be made with votes. A majority was enough for a decision to be made, even if it excluded some opinions. However even when using votes to make decisions, communities were sometimes still thinking about catering to the needs of

everyone. As he put it, people needed to have a consensus mentality, regardless of whether it was possible or not.

Trying to come to consensus that day with hundreds of people probably would have been impossible. Although many people seemed reasonable, a few in front were pushing their own agendas, only to get booed from the microphone or invite responses from other fiery egoists conceited enough to try leading

the vastly diverse group in their own specific direction.

After a while the meeting seemed to be going nowhere. As the meeting grew increasingly stale and the people around me began to grumble, I thought about Mikhail Bakunin, who said that someone seeking revolutionary change, “does not find another man’s (sic) freedom a boundary, but a confirmation and vast extension of his own own.”<sup>7</sup> Working to understand others and come up with creative ways to reconcile difference would allow for dynamic, individual expression within the whole. But I think there is an inevitable drama in our interactions with other people that comes out of our anxious need to impress, manipulate, control, dominate. The potential for unity that is collectively empowering lies in people’s ability to overcome this, rather than exploit it. Rather than trying to realize one’s own rigid, dogmatic vision by convincing other people, there is the potential for a vision that is shared. In the auditorium, the power that supposedly comes with numbers kept crumbling as individuals tried to harness it but could do little but let it slip through their fingers. I thought that undoubtedly the Maya of Chiapas faced some of the same problems that I was seeing in the auditorium, but were onto something in following a mindset of consensus.

Marcos continued to blow smoke throughout the scene that began to look like a nightmare. He stared ahead through the hole in his ski mask. His eyes looked older than in most photos. From a distance it seemed that age marks mere appearing above his brow. Also he had clearly put on weight. What was he doing there? I wondered. What was anyone doing there? The Zapatistas had decided to use their moral legitimacy to bring various isolated groups from the left together. Unfortunately, putting vastly dissimilar people in a room doesn’t guarantee that anything constructive will come of it. But I also knew that I shouldn’t assume that the Zapatistas had such demanding or simplistic expectations.

I sat down beside a woman who looked to be a middle-class soccer mom, and together we listened to a sex worker talk about how all of our struggles were bound up together. In what other context would a *gringo* student, a Mexican soccer mom and a sex worker be listening to each other talk about their own struggles? How else would we learn what all the rhetoric about collective liberation really meant if we were not first forced through an excruciating process of watching each other’s egotistical behavior hit brick wall after brick wall? I could only be sure that we had to be put at the helm, in control of everything. But I couldn’t think of another way to continue from there, and I doubt Marcos could either. He just patiently smoked his pipe.

### **la grabación**

Speaking in terms of the mass media in Mexico, *mestizos* and whites generally control representations of indigenous people from outside of their communities. The outsiders’ control has given them the upper hand in defining the Native American in Mexico. After its 1910 revolution, Mexico underwent a period of heavy industrialization and increasing nationalism. In this transition to a more modern economy, iconography of indigenous people played an important part in the creation of nationalist identities. Most Mexicans were a racial mix of white and Indian, *mestizo*. The two identities needed to be reconciled. Mexicans sought to explain what it meant to have indigenous blood inside of them and live on native land. The indigenous identity was generally embraced, although the actual people were left by the wayside.

There is an inherent contradiction in this, where the person is ignored, but what they represent is embraced. I was told in Chiapas that until the 1994 uprising, walking down San Cristóbal’s narrow sidewalks was humiliating for indigenous people. They were expected to step into the street to allow whites and *mestizos* pass them. Also it was only recently that the word *indio* (Indian) had stopped being

used with derogatory connotations.<sup>9</sup> Images of indigenous people became symbolic of Mexican nationalism while many indigenous people remained poor and discriminated against.

Films from the industrializing period tried to distill the identity of the Indian, to pin it down and categorize it. In the 1931 film “¡Que viva Mexico!” indigenous people are shown wearing next to nothing, posing alongside ruins. The filmmaker blurs the line between statues and actual people by making the latter mimic the former. Their nakedness evokes a certain sense of commonality with the bare stones around them. Their lifeless expressions are as cold. A boy poses alongside a statue of a man. The figure lies comfortably on its side, propping itself up onto its elbow. The boy is reclined in the same way, gazing out into the same direction with a serious expression. Instead of dynamic individuals, the indigenous are presented as relics and the sense that there are people behind their expressions is left out. In the film they took on the quality of spirits in other ways as well, like through their romanticization. A later segment portrays a group living in an utopian Garden of Eden. We only see the protagonists in an environment full of love, abundant resources and free time. Children in colorful dress perform elaborate dances and lovers lie together in hammocks. Their society is free of blemishes, which is partially to say free of evidence of Western conquest.<sup>9</sup> Many Mexicans idealize natives before conquest, before they were forced to change course at the hands of imperialists.

These images are deceptively beautiful; they seem perfectly benevolent. Likewise the filmmakers’ intentions may have been benign, even as they carried racist undertones. But regardless of intentions or the aesthetic value of the images, they were not taken by indigenous people themselves but by other people who meant to convey something by taking control of the representations. Historically, when in the hands of colonial and post-colonial outsiders, representations have been presented in such a way that serves their

positions of power. The representations are not situated in a manner that helps to understand indigenous people on their own terms.

Traditions and worldviews are not looked at within their own contexts, and much of the time they are not represented as dynamic, complicated humans with individual needs. Rather outsiders have sought to *explain* the indigenous people in the terms of the outsider. They are fit within the outsider’s worldview in order to reinforce it. This generally means redefining indigenous people within a dominant logic of legitimacy and power.

It should not be completely surprising that a society concerned with the advent of industrial capitalism sees those who are supposedly “lagging behind” this form of progress as either immature people or ancient relics. In the film just mentioned, they were not depicted as people, but instead as archaeological remains or idealized children. With films like these the humanness of the Indian is written out of the national consciousness, and an essential identity takes its place. In Mexican society the actual people are marginalized, but the ideal they stand for remains. Even when it takes seemingly benign forms the inequality of representation can be harmful.

But what happens when outsiders mean to represent indigenous people for the purpose of doing good things or representing them in a positive light? Leftists from outside indigenous communities have certainly idealized the Indian as well. In the song “Tierra Humeda,” Amparo Ochoa sings,

*In the damp earth he was born  
In the damp earth he was born  
The Indian Manuel  
In the light of the morning  
With the skin of mud  
And obsidian eyes*

*On the damp earth he grew  
On the damp earth he grew  
In a sea of colors, coffee, and beans,  
Silence, incense and pain*

*On the damp earth he died  
On the damp earth he died  
For her [the earth] they killed him  
When he wanted to defend the land  
That was his heredity*

*To the damp earth he returned  
To the damp earth he returned  
And it rains, rains  
It’s the sky that cries  
Today the earth is more fertile  
Because of the Indian Manuel’s struggle  
[My translation]<sup>10</sup>*

In this abridged version of Ochoa’s version she romanticizes the idealized struggle of indigenous people, manifested in one man. The Indian’s relationship to the earth is intimate, which is emphasized by the exclusion of any other protagonists in the song. The idealized quintessential Native American male struggles against the invisible imposing outside forces, “they,” that mean to dislodge his natural relationship to the earth. When Manuel dies, justice reveals itself in the tears of the sky, which further life and a struggle between the natural realm (the indigenous and their land) and the unnatural modern European realm.

There is the sense here that there is natural value in the traditions of indigenous peoples that need to be protected. It seems that there is a tendency of representations made by outsiders with good intentions to focus on loss in traditional indigenous culture. And many indigenous filmmakers are concerned with this as well. They portray culture as threatened by processes of economic globalization and Mayan assimilation to modern Mexico. However trying to grasp, recapture and protect culture becomes problematic. It is an uncontested truth that Native American cultures have been changing since contact with colonizers. But is culture lost? Our initial reaction is that yes, it becomes lost within past generations. Indigenous languages disappear almost daily, customs and traditions are forgotten. Their full glory of expression and meaning are cut off from the present day.



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This understanding of loss is linked with an objective understanding of culture. But we should ask ourselves whether culture really disappears like a physical object would, or whether it merely transforms into something different. However different culture seems, it still remains as culture, albeit in different forms. Undoubtedly cultural practices and ways of seeing the world fade out, but as human beings we are culture- and meaning-makers, constantly trying to explain and understand the environments we live in.

After the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* accident, which spilled over 11 million tons of crude oil off the coast of Alaska, Alutiik people living there were no longer able to practice subsistence production. The oil spill polluted the waters to such an extent that sustainable fishing became impossible. The group tried to collect in court for special damages from the Exxon oil company, claiming that the harm done to their economy extended beyond the material effects. They claimed that their loss was distinct from the sufferings of other fishermen in that their very culture had been damaged, being so closely intertwined with fishing. Although the company paid the indigenous group in a settlement, the ruling judge, "refused to recognize cultural differences between native and non-native fisherman with respect to the impact of the oil spill."<sup>11</sup> He sided with anthropologist Paul Bohannon who described culture not as something objective or concrete, but rather as a "strategy for adaptation."<sup>12</sup> According to his theory of culture as a fluid way of interacting with the world, the Alutiik would integrate themselves into a capitalist economy, finding new meaning in life there. In this sense we can never lose parts of our culture, nor all of it, since it is not as much a thing as a way of acting or being. We are always participating in and renegotiating it.

The film "Meu primeiro contato" contrasts Amazonian indigenous people before serious contact with white Brazilians, wearing almost nothing but beads, to the present time when they smoke cigarettes and wear

Salvation Army t-shirts. From this standpoint our cultures seem to be standing still and the cultures of indigenous Brazilians seem to be changing drastically. We understand its change in relation to our sensation of static motionlessness. But our own culture is not motionless at all. To use a metaphor, even when we feel physically still, we are spinning around the earth's axis at over a thousand miles per hour. Likewise, although we have the sensation of our culture being still, it is in constant flux. Like the sense of motionlessness we get on Earth, we Westerners are oftentimes not aware of our culture's perpetual movement. We think it is static, although at every moment we are active members in its change.

We have a concept of culture that is in large part developed through seeing other people's movement, not our own. Through colonial processes Westerners have noted differences in other people and defined it as culture. Much of the time we impose this concept where it does not already exist. For instance, the Kayapo of Brazil had no concept of culture until after increased contact with outside Brazilians. Before, they had viewed themselves as the center of the universe. Life was oriented around the creation and recreation of beauty, and the Kayapo as its beholder. But increased integration into Brazilian economies and political systems relegated them to lower status within Brazil's pluralistic society. They began to find themselves no longer at the center of the universe, but at the bottom rungs of a ladder. Also they found themselves in a world of multiple truths where before there had only been one. No longer unquestioned reality, Kayapo worldviews became less true as "culture."<sup>13</sup>

It is not only outsiders who treat culture not as fluid but as static. Different indigenous peoples have done it as well. The Kayapo eventually found themselves as possessors of a culture that was politically valuable to the outside world for its uniqueness and distinctiveness. Along with anthropologist Terence Turner, the Kayapo learned that they could use images of

their traditions, dress, lifestyles and general appearance to their political advantage. Threatened by a dam project that would flood their lands, the Kayapo harnessed their cultural images to show outsiders the importance of maintaining their lifestyles. They filmed themselves and allowed journalists to take pictures of them dressed entirely in traditional clothing and jewelry. Environmentalists used the images of beautifully-dressed natives as testimony as to why their way of life should be protected, attracting international support for their cause.<sup>14</sup>

But are the Kayapo absorbed in some sort of false consciousness of culture by objectifying it, as Paul Bohannon might suggest? If culture is indeed fluid, then is it incorrect to treat it as something that we could grasp, or even draw close to our hearts, as is common to hear amongst the indigenous of Chiapas? Going back to the earth metaphor, a helpful way to conceptualize the question is to ask, "Can we still call the idea of no movement on the earth's surface 'stillness' when everything is spinning around the earth's axis?" Stillness is defined as the absence of movement, but it is experienced as the absence of change in movement. We would only become acutely aware of our movement around the earth's axis if it suddenly slowed down or sped up. We would need to feel the change that would indicate to us that we are no longer stationary in our perpetual, steady movement. Likewise we can experience, conceptualize and define culture's movement with shifts in the speed of change. When cultural traditions and the historical contexts that give them meaning dissipate quickly into the past, the sensation of their absence becomes acute with the memory of their presence. And what is false or less real about our understanding of stillness or objective culture if they are understood within the same logic that we use to understand our physical presence on the earth's surface? Although Paul Bohannon might say otherwise, if we consider our movement around the earth's axis stillness, then even in culture's perpetual motion one

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can understand it as still. Furthermore feeling it pass, its “loss” can also be very real, as we saw with the Alutiik.

### el eco

The office of Red de Comunicadores Boca de Polen where I worked is the second story of a house in the outskirts of San Cristóbal de las Casas. The office was quiet or even vacant sometimes, as most of the people involved with the organization, including myself, spent a good deal time giving workshops in the field. The office’s primary component is a large front room with a computer, several workspaces and Zapatista posters on the walls. The back room is sectioned off as a sound and production studio. Lazy late afternoon aimless wandering, chatting and kicking around the office sometimes brought us all to that dim, soundproofed room, hunched around the computer, camera, microphones, editing equipment and stacks of video tapes.

On a particularly quiet day I sat there, leaning against the back wall while Vladimir and José Alfredo developed a film in Adobe Premiere, speaking softly to each other in Spanish about where to cut and splice certain scenes. Before them the screen took them on a virtual tour through an indigenous man’s field, passing through rows of corn. The frame of view jerked around unsteadily, depicting indigenous farmers working quickly, grasping the stalks and stripping them, then repeating the motions while José’s voice boomed from the speakers in Tzotzil. At one point, José turned his attention to me, smiling and seeking my approval on some aspect of the film. I grinned and agreed with him, but not wholeheartedly. Although I wanted to see the aspect of the film that was so compelling to him, I secretly missed the point and had to pretend the film was as meaningful. From my perspective the film lacked the dynamic of conflict and resolution that made good storytelling and inspiring film. José’s films, however, caught my attention more than some of the other indigenous productions I saw in Mexico.

I was surprised to see the films, and even more surprised that I didn’t find many of them to be personally inspiring. But this is not to say that I had nothing to learn from the films. Instead the films had much more to teach me than I could possibly understand. Comprehending them was largely a matter of knowing where they came from in order to understand why filmmakers chose to highlight certain figures, images and identities.

A common characteristic among the styles of some filmmakers was to show seemingly mundane aspects of life, such as different techniques of farming, town markets or traditional music. One of José Alfredo’s films is a tour through a market where locally grown foods are sold. The camera pans across sacks of beans, corn and women selling their produce. The scenes are explained but the significance and meaning of each shot is allowed to speak for itself. Images of trading locally-grown crops index small-scale markets that are centered around what indigenous people grow themselves. Traditional, or more personal economies are more ideal. The placement of these people and crops in the film, rather than outsiders selling food from abroad, is no accident. They represent the values of an indigenous identity, humble and close to the land and production. Capitalization and corporatization, on the other hand, would probably represent more alienated relationships, between people and people as well as between people and production. So in highlighting positive aspects of Mayan culture, José puts it on a pedestal, treating it as something to be valued.

If the films are most meaningful to the indigenous people who make them, what are the prospects of getting the images out to broader audiences? Just because the films are not meaningful in the same ways to most whites and *mestizos* does not mean that the films cannot be interpreted outside of the communities. Public film festivals put on indigenous movies occasionally. In June, I traveled with both Vladimir and José Alfredo to Oaxaca for an indigenous film festival that showcased hundreds of indigenous films,

including films from anglophone North America, Africa and Latin America. Mostly white and *mestizo* audiences discussed the significance of the movies with directors after each film. But the potential to distribute the representations on a broader scale is weak. The grim reality for indigenous filmmakers in Mexico is that avenues of mass communication, broadcast television and mainstream cinema, are largely closed to them. Likewise for radio broadcasters; there is little space on most commercial airwaves for indigenous productions.

So what practical purposes do the films serve, if any? If the finalized representations are to help achieve political ends, they cannot just sit on a shelf and accumulate dust between random screenings in different parts of the world. Like a family photo album, the reordered representations of our collective past can get pulled out to help us see the present differently. Video and radio function politically within communities just as profoundly, if not more so, than outside of them.

In the community of X’oyep I gave a workshop with Vladimir at the Las Abejas autonomous radio station Radio Chanul Pom. That afternoon we, along with the Chanul Pom *radialistas* set up a television underneath the enormous corrugated roof of a partly-completed church. As the community began to file through the empty frame that would later become the church’s front door, they sat on several dozen benches. For reasons unbeknownst to me, they sat as far away from the screen as possible. We showed films on indigenous migrants in the United States, and as the sun began to go down rain started to pour, thundering on the roof. Our films on migration ran out, but we were stranded there in the rain, and everyone still sat on their benches expectantly. Vladimir put in a DVD about Radio Chanul Pom filmed in the region by him and José Alfredo. When words in Tzotzil began to come from the speakers, people leaned in closer to see the screen better, smiling. Where they had originally sat quietly, they began to interact with each other and with the film. A woman

sitting amongst us appeared on camera, working tortillas in her hands and throwing them over a fire as she talked about the radio station. People around me shrieked with joy, turning to the woman and grabbing her by the arm. The film depicted a protest down the road from us in which tiny girls literally shook soldiers with full armor and rifles at their sides, holding them by the collars of their jackets. The room buzzed with excitement at the defiance embodied in young girls who resisted fully grown men. Toward the end of the film a group of curious children examine the camera as it films them, blabbering in Tzotzil. One of the children was present, and people shook him laughing. By the end of the images depicting Mayan cultural practices (for example making tortillas by hand), resistance and community, people were chatting excitedly.

While the consumption of indigenous media can be politically important outside of communities, they are most meaningful within communities. By representing aspects of indigenous life on a medium like film, the represented are elevated to another level. Perspective changes when these images are rearranged and recontextualized to make a point. With indigenous media, merely highlighting certain aspects of life is enough to evoke pride. Just as filming the women in market takes the act of selling produce and makes it tangible, valued by itself, the evocation of local values can elevate and glorify them.

### el gringo

In much of Mexico, the United States citizen or *estadounidense* barely fits the criteria of a whole person. Another Mexican, or Latin American is someone else to whom one can relate, but generally a *gringo* is not, at least not in a meaningful way. It is not just the stereotypical ignorant bumbling tourist that makes Mexicans turn their noses up. The identity of “*gringo*” is hard for Mexicans to pin down – it means many things. The uncertainty, not the certainty, of exactly what *gringos* are complicates their relationship with Mexicans.

On the one hand there is a certain fixation with middle class life in the United States. In San Cristóbal, a man stands in front of a used clothes store, announcing into a microphone rapidly like an auctioneer that the style of clothes there is “American.” Just the fact of their origin is enough to draw people. It is said that those few Mexicans who live close to the border with the privilege to enter the United States sometimes cross it to binge shop in middle class clothing stores. Immigrants often send back clothing, toys and electronics to their friends back home. The family washing machine, video games and milk in a box, all indicative of *gringo* consumerism and convenience, are popular.

But also we represent opportunities to be taken advantage of. When a taxi driver in Mexico sees a well-dressed white tourist walking down the street, that driver feels cheated out of business. We represent capital. *Gringo* tourists are expected to bring capital to the region, but not to give in other ways. Indeed if a *gringo* tourist is doing anything else but spending money, they are automatically suspect. For instance, in trying to explain my purpose to immigration officials at the airport, I stupidly let on that my trip might include volunteer work of some sort. Volunteers and businesspeople have visas different from tourists, but I had applied for a tourist visa. The woman behind the immigration counter looked at me skeptically with her eyebrows cocked. She half smiled and chuckled, turning to her counterpart, a darker-skinned man with thin eyelids that framed dark eyes. He commanded my mind with his stern expression. I stuttered and insisted that I only had intentions of traveling, of staying on the beaten path and of blessing Mexico with my fruitful debit card.

But where tourists can only spend money it would seem that *gringo* businesses do little more than suck up resources. A “*gringo*” is also a symbol of status and an agent of empire, which is oftentimes not at all discernable from capital or the spread of consumer culture. Even before arriving I was familiar with what it entailed to be a part of Mexico’s paternalistic

neighbor located in its own back yard. But still I was shocked when, within 24 hours of landing in Mexico City, I was told that there was no place for me there, that people wanted to chase me out across the border. They said I was loathed not for personal reasons, but for what I represented. Maybe, they said, the Mexicans in Chiapas would be more accepting since the people there are more indirect with expressing the way they feel. However this did not mean that *chiapanecos* would be any less resentful of my identity as *gringo*. They explained to me that all Mexicans, secretly or openly, whether they would admit it to themselves or not, despised *gringos* for the empire we represent.

It is unclear where the word *gringo* comes from, but according to one story, it was first uttered by Pancho Villa, a leader in the Mexican Revolution. Hollywood filmmakers are said to have documented his life for a time, having seen money to be made in his image and name. Apparently their uptight, demanding and hurried ways during filming annoyed Villa. Because they kept shouting “green” to mark the beginning of each scene they were filming, he exclaimed, “Green, go!” drawing from the little English he knew to get rid of the filmmakers. As the story goes the poorly pronounced term eventually became “*gringo*,” although the word’s true origins are unclear. And to whom exactly it refers is at least as hard to say, as it depends a great deal on context. For example, in San Cristóbal, the word usually signified someone specifically from the United States. However in the indigenous communities, even my Mexican friends were *gringos* merely because they were outsiders.

And how do Mexicans generally interact with *gringos*? Two other *gringo* friends from Brandeis, Josh and Neena, were volunteering and doing research in Chiapas while I was there. They stayed in the hostel where I was located for all of my time in San Cristóbal. A few times we traded ideas or helped each other to find interviews or work, which is why Neena invited me one day to accompany her to volunteer in an indigenous community. Neither

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of us knew anything about the volunteer organization, although it was located only two blocks up the hill from our hostel. Not even the director at our hostel, Carmen, knew anything about it, and she was something of an expert in San Cristóbal's civil society. Neena had simply walked into their office right off the street while looking for volunteer opportunities and with her interest to visit an indigenous community she signed up to volunteer, despite the "sketchy" appearance of the place.

Waiting on the curb with Neena at 6:10 a.m. for the organization to pick us up from in front of their building, you could still see our breaths in the shadows under shop overhangs, but the sun coming over the mountains was beginning to warm our bodies. Having waited for ten minutes and being intoxicated by our early-morning sleepiness, we laughed and joked that the whole organization was really a hoax and we would be waiting there all morning.

"What is this place called anyway?" I asked Neena.

I turned to the building's wall and was startled into sobriety when I read the sign painted there. Around an insignia of a chapel topped with a cross read a halo of words, all of which I have since forgotten except for "*renacimiento*" (rebirth).

"Neena, this is a church group – I think they are Evangelicals!"

She turned from her seat on the curb and frowned, and at that moment a truck pulled up in front of us, with two men in front. They came out and introduced themselves, the fatter man with his hair slicked back the director of the program, the other skinnier man his assistant. The fatter man unlocked the door and led us into his office. Seeing the inside, it was clear that "sketchy" was an understatement. The office was a grey, vacant, single-room warehouse, lit only by a few light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Instead of walls, signs on the ceiling banisters told us where the rooms

were. We walked over to the one that said "*oficina*." The fatter man invited us to sit down in two plastic chairs with Coca-Cola logos on them. We took our seats. A sticker of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which reigned in Mexico for over 60 despotic years of both subtle and overtly violent repression, was on the wall above his head. He spoke to Neena in a suave, disingenuous Spanish in such a way that alerted me I couldn't trust him, even if he were telling the truth. Restless, I butted in and asked if the organization was affiliated with the church. I was suspicious because many church groups in the region have the intentions of maintaining dependence in poor communities in order to draw people into the faith. The question had an obvious answer, which is why I was surprised when he said "no." I waited a moment for him to explain more. He sat there quietly. I burst out laughing at such a poor attempt to convince us. He laughed along nervously, but looked confused, as if I had asked a silly question.

"So then how do you explain the cross painted out front? What affiliations *does* the group have? What will we actually be doing, anyway?"

To all of these questions the fat man had no responses, but according to him we shouldn't have been worrying about it anyway. This resonated with me in a bad way. But despite this Neena and I both had free time. We were both still hoping to see an indigenous community, and I was curious to see what would happen. So we signed on, nudging and winking at each other, partly to express how ridiculous we thought the situation was, and partly to quell our nervousness.

We all stuffed ourselves in the front seat of the truck. Bound for the outskirts of town, the fat man told us that we were on our way to a women's cooperative meeting. I finally felt a bit relieved to know where we were going, but apparently the fat man decided to take us through a detour, and we pulled off the highway into San Cristóbal's poverty belt. Neena and

I were silent as we passed shacks and stray dogs along a dirt road. There was no one out to be seen, but the fat man assured us that the people there were extremely poor.

Then we merged back onto the same highway before we had gotten out of the truck to do anything. Neena frankly and confusedly asked what we were *really* doing. The man assured us that we were going to a meeting of the PRI.

"But you told us we were going to a women's cooperative and that this wasn't a political excursion!" we protested, half laughing. The man seemed confused as to why we *gringos* were demanding so much information. I think he realized, based on our protest, that he had said something we didn't want to hear. Seeing that this lie hadn't worked, he bypassed our questions and changed gears, channeling the discussion in a direction that would likely shut us up. In order to win the favor of us activist *gringos*, he said that he had been involved with the Zapatistas and was shot by the Mexican military for supporting them in 1994. This had the desired effect. Like infants with pacifiers Neena and I quietly chewed on his fantastic stories, staring ahead wide-eyed in awe. They were likely fabricated, considering the history of the Zapatista rebellion, but made their way through back doors into our imaginations.

After driving up into the mountains, we pulled off the highway, again for reasons unknown to us at the time, and entered an *ejido*. The truck pulled up in front of a small white house, more upscale than usual for a mostly poor, indigenous area. By the time we got out of the car, asking each other why we stopped, the fat man had already gone over to the front door of the house and was talking to an indigenous woman. We approached smiling, not wanting to intrude and keeping our distance. Getting closer I could tell that their conversation was more or less pointless and forced by the fat man, as if they were distant acquaintances who met accidentally and were obligated to keep conversation for nothing more than to avoid awkward silence. Except we had come

to this place deliberately and the fat man had engaged this woman in conversation having nothing to say. As Neena and I drew nearer to them, he smiled and introduced us as volunteers for the day. For reasons unbeknownst to us we became the center of discussion.

The man led us to a bowl in the grass in front of the house. Lifting it, a small rabbit bounced toward us from underneath. Neena's eyes lit up, and before I could stop her she had produced her camera from her bag and was taking pictures. The fat man asked if she wanted him to take a picture for her. She said fine, crouching near the rabbit to pose and handing him the camera. But when he took

“Neena turned to the woman and said she didn’t want to bother her. With her eyes the woman pleaded back for Neena to stay away. But the man answered verbally for her that the she would be happy to have her photo taken with Neena. I wondered why it was his place to say that, and not the woman’s.”

it she realized what he had really meant as he motioned for her to stand next to the indigenous woman to get in a picture. The woman looked embarrassed and stared at the ground. Both Neena and I protested politely at first, and then stubbornly said no, but the fat man insisted. Neena turned to the woman and said she didn’t want to bother her. With her eyes the woman pleaded back for Neena to stay away. But the man answered verbally for her that the she would be happy to have her photo taken with Neena. I wondered why it was his place to say that, and not the woman’s.

As we drove further on in the truck Neena and I looked at the end result on her digital camera, completely confused. “That was so horrible!” she said in English. I nodded in agreement. On the screen she and the indigenous woman faced the ground, both looking humiliated and standing as if they were naked.

Along a dirt road the truck stopped again at the bottom of a hill with green manicured grass. Neena and I were already exhausted. We were almost to the point of demanding that we return to the city. However in the distance music beckoned us. As we trudged up the hill and over a ridge we found ourselves facing a beautifully landscaped schoolyard, teeming with indigenous children and several white nuns. Behind them sat a small school. From an enormous loudspeaker protruding from the school’s overhang, a symphony version of “The Sound of Silence” played. The nuns, all of them white missionaries, came to greet us smiling with their bonnets bouncing along as they walked. We were introduced to them as volunteers, although I hadn’t done anything to be called that, and was beginning to wonder if I even knew what the word meant since it had been miscontextualized already that day. The sisters led us, both stumbling disoriented behind, in the direction of basketball courts where the children had begun to line up according to gender and age.

Simon and Garfunkel had faded out and *The Sound of Music* began to play from the loudspeaker. It added an aesthetic of European purity to a place peopled by brown bodies in shabby clothes, augmenting the cruelly ironic facade that hopelessly failed at obscuring the racist paternalism there. It was screaming at me from places and faces. I was too distracted by it to focus on a single person, or on where I was going. I became fixated on a smiling nun patting a boy on the head, nuns correcting children’s postures. It all carried striking tones of conquest, residual traces of colonial attempts to convert a native race of people in order to control them. The missionaries kept pulling me by the hand, insisting that I come

with them, but every instant they let go I was again too dumb to move. The soft music felt shrill in my ears.

Suddenly the music stopped. I felt lucid again, standing there beside Neena, who seemed dazed. As the fat man spoke through a microphone to the lines of children, it became partly clear to me why we had been brought to that place: because we were *gringos*. Or it might be more accurate to say that we would not have been brought there in such a fashion if we were not *gringos*. The fat man likely expected us to romanticize the indigenous there, to identify with the missionaries, to proudly soak up every moment in which we were called “volunteers” despite the fact that we did no such work that day. We were not so much people who deserved explanation, but instead opportunities of which he was happy to take advantage. When Neena walked into his office, he likely saw the potential to capitalize on us, not monetarily, but by selling us the church. He meant to draw us closer to the church through flattery.

This concept of “*gringo*” is made by *gringos* just as much as by Mexicans. Although it is unclear what the fat man was trying to accomplish with driving us around that morning, it is clear that he saw himself as a patron to his imaginary, yet informed idea of *gringo*. And now it always drives me crazy to see other Americans complaining of the way they are treated in different countries. Much of the time such behavior is just a dialectical response to our own. The dehumanization can go both ways. Where we exploit other countries and fetishize their cultures, our tourists are manipulated. The reality sometimes is that what bothers us is not the people there, but the reflection we see in them, that of ourselves.

### una lagrima

It is striking to realize that nearly every person praying in Acteal’s tiny dilapidated church on the morning of December 22, 1997 – almost a

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quarter of the people living and taking refuge in that community – was murdered in a five-hour period. Paramilitaries in cahoots with the then powerful PRI party in Chiapas chased people out of the community's church and killed 45 of them as they fled toward the community center and into the brush. They had stepped over the line in their struggle for indigenous autonomy, to live outside of the domain of the government and wealthy landowners.

Almost ten years later their torsos are frozen in stone. They all reach up toward the sky, forming a giant black obelisk. There are no eyes in their decomposing and agonized faces, just blind vacant pits. The statue depicting the victims draws the attention of passers-by and visitors to Acteal, a neighborhood in the municipality of Chenalho, alongside a mountain road that skirts the community's highest elevated limits. Despite the statue's terrifying appearance, ladies perched around it selling apples and *tamales* are somehow able to ignore it, speaking softly in Tzotzil among each other. From this high point a break in the banana and pine trees gives way to a view of the valley below. The grids of tiny farm plots and patches of clouds fill the valley floor like cereal and milk fill a bowl.

I arrived there in August with a handful of noisy European tourists in the bed of a truck. We had careened through the mountains for two hours, whistling into the wind and letting the extra material on our sleeves flap like sails on a boat. As the truck came to a standstill, I jumped down, teary-eyed, and descended a cement staircase through banana trees to the amphitheater where priests and the Mesa Directiva, Las Abejas' judicial and steering committee, were leading a service commemorating the deaths of the 45 victims killed on that same day in December of 1997. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of every month, hundreds of members of Las Abejas fill the small amphitheatre that serves as the group's organizational center. There they pay their respects to the dead in a customary Catholic ritual.

Luckily I was able to set myself apart from the horde of tourists who took photos and video of the service. Although we knew that it commemorated a massacre, we did not understand it. Running into Clemente, with whom I worked back in San Cristóbal, I felt relieved to separate from them. The two of us sat together on a stoop and he explained to me in Spanish what was being said in the mainly Tzotzil ceremony. He pointed out the Mesa Directiva. They sat on the amphitheater floor, all wearing enormous hats with multicolored strips of tape cascading on all sides. Then he pointed me in the direction of the community's church, where the paramilitaries had arrived and had begun to shoot the praying community members and refugees. The refugees had been taking shelter in the community under enormous tarps, having been uprooted from their own communities by the same violence that would ultimately catch up with them. Throughout late 1997 and 1998, paramilitary groups with names such as Peace and Justice, Red Mask and Anti-Zapatista Revolutionary Movement terrorized the Zapatistas, Las Abejas and their supporters. The paramilitaries were indigenous people, oftentimes from the same communities they terrorized. The ruling PRI party in Chiapas funded the groups in order that they might burn houses, kill civilians and chase the survivors into the forest.

Although the indigenous have historically had some autonomy under colonial and post-colonial regimes, powerful groups in Mexico cannot tolerate the indigenous people that slip beyond their realm of control. In the legacy of conquest, the indigenous are good to the elite for the resources, symbolic and material, that can be cheaply extracted from them. Indigenous people who cease to serve that role are inherently at odds with elite power, which relies on their complacency and docility. The Zapatistas, Las Abejas and others involved in autonomous movements are usually not repressed because they are aggressors to the state or wealthy landowners. For example, those killed in Acteal were all pacifists, yet they still represented a threat to the government of

Chiapas. Autonomous groups are threatening in that they are more committed to making revolutionary change happen themselves than they are to asking the government for change. They are repressed because they do not ask for permission—for the fact that their growth and development is not filtered through or endorsed by the state.

But when a movement can be drawn into the state apparatus or paid off, betraying its ideals and followers, there is little need for police force or physical violence. All of Mexico has a history of cooptation and betrayal that dates back to the last years of the Mexican Revolution, when opponents lured Emiliano Zapata into a trap, saying they wanted to make an agreement with him but instead murdering him in their own territory. They took a photo of themselves with his dead body and sent it back to his supporters as testimony to the death of radical land reform. The same elite co-opted Zapata's vital image, not that of the pale, dead face sent back to his supporters, and built the PRI party on revolutionary ideals as a way to "institutionalize" the revolutionary changes set into motion (PRI stands for Institutional Revolutionary Party). The PRI pulled virtually all unions and institutions under its wing, ostensibly to give the revolution permanence and solidity. Where progressive reforms were written into the new constitution, such as the *ejido* system that granted farming communities collective ownership of lands, a hierarchy of corruption and impunity emerged. Efforts of progressive movements were drawn into it to serve the interests of the party rather than the revolution. Now in Chiapas, co-optation reigns. For example, several leaders of leftist peasant organizations in the 80's eventually joined the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari who led free-market restructuring of the economy.<sup>15</sup> Also NGOs with government ties try to convince Zapatista leaders to take less militant positions to get government aid.<sup>16</sup>

Historically wealthy landowners in Chiapas have hired thugs and gunmen to act as the arms of capital, securing or stealing land

for large ranches and plantations on which indigenous people are employed. Likewise, the government has violently repressed the more militant elements of indigenous communities. However, where actual acts of violence destroy significant parts of the population, be it a chunk of the community or central figure, the violence in Chiapas has not been as significant as a full-out genocide, as in Guatemala. The point of violence in Chiapas is not so much that a state takes control of a community by literally killing it, but rather by intimidating people. Violence might kill leaders, but more importantly to the life of organized struggle, it kills the will of supporters.

By getting preoccupied with death and terrorism, were Las Abejas becoming docile—essentially doing what the paramilitaries wanted? Was death haunting these people so much that it became an obsession obscuring their struggles? Were they being controlled? I couldn't say for sure, because although Clemente translated, I still didn't understand the service. I was more or less bored. However I was still more committed to the service than the tourists who had given up and were smoking cigarettes together in the back of the amphitheater. Having heard of a monument for those killed beneath the amphitheater I ventured along its side, looking for an opening. Descending steps I slipped underneath the amphitheater's floor. My eyes adjusting to the light, I was further disappointed to find very little there besides barren concrete floors and bare brick walls. A cross painted with small praying figures leaned against a far wall and a candle offered a tiny warm glow in the vast cold chamber.

Over my shoulder I noticed eyes fixed on me and quickly turned my head to see that the wall from which I entered was covered in photos of unsmiling faces. Squinting and moving closely I noticed that most of the dark-faced figures wore brilliant dresses. In fact at a closer glance I could see that almost all of the victims pictured were women and children. In other memorials to tragic events I had forced myself

to identify with the victim. Since my range of experiences with loss has been so limited, I would become self-aware of how ridiculously privileged I was to be *forcing* myself to feel bad, and I would end up feeling more guilty than anything else. But staring at me closely from their faded photos on the wall the thin faces of the victims had a certain familiarity. They leapt out at me and held me in their gaze. The floor above me began to rumble and, suddenly conscious of where I was, I realized the air had become heavy. I walked outside into the light.

A hump of earth just outside the memorial gave me a view of the amphitheater floor where most of the men and women present stepped slowly to a band of men who were plucking discord out of some fiddles and a harp. People shook *maracas* and tiredly moved their shoulders into the slow, persistent rhythm. Watching everyone there in this act, I finally made the connection that the faces in the photos below were those of families and friends. Before everyone had been passive in the ritual. I understood it only as restriction because to me enduring the hours of Tzotzil was little more than that. But seeing each person plodding along I became aware that they were celebrating, healing wounds and nurturing memory. It was no longer spectacle. The memories of the dead were embodied, making themselves alive, present and real.

The dancers formed a procession that passed down steps in front of me and under the amphitheater floor. Gathering myself I entered again, following them. The music stopped, and they all kneeled. Realizing that I was the last one standing, I fell to the ground as well. I entered into prayer with them, but in the dark my thoughts were distracted by the hum of prayer around me. Still bowing I opened my eyes a little bit to see if anyone was watching me. No one was. I opened my eyes completely, still feigning prayer. Around me a sea of hunched shoulders bent over the cold concrete in which bodies of the 45 victims of the December 22 massacre were entombed

below. Eventually the prayer ceased and man raised his fist in the air out of the shoulders, screaming,

"¡Viva! *the mothers of the resistance!*"

"¡Viva!" *they responded.*

"¡Viva! *Las Abejas!*"

"¡Viva!" *they responded.*

"¡Viva! *the insurgents for autonomy!*"

"¡Viva!"

## Family Albums

*Understandings or strategies for describing human differences have helped recreate and reproduce social hierarchies. At the least, those hierarchies have created small humiliations and rejections, and have lessened opportunities. At the worst, they have abetted wars of extermination, lynchings and rape. Representations may be deployed for or against such horrors or indifferently in relation to them, but they are never irrelevant, never unconnected to the world of actual social relations. Images of the non-Western world draw on and articulate ideas and thus, like all conceptual work, become cultural and historical, mutable and political in intent and/or effect.<sup>17</sup>*

I left the hostel one night with my friend Marga, a Guatemalan college student doing the civil service work required of all university students in Mexico. Across the street passed an indigenous woman wearing a sheepskin skirt and a sash cradling a child against her back. Mid-sentence Marga stopped, producing a black camera from her bag. By the time I had also stopped to turn to her she had it against her eye and was skillfully turning the lens. As the woman passed directly underneath a street lamp, the shutter snapped, and she was frozen in that moment, silhouetted against colonial red adobe brick. Marga disappeared the camera into her bag, grinning at me, but I didn't return a smile. Clearly taking the picture without permission hadn't made her as uncomfortable as it had made me. I wasn't tactful at all in telling her how angry I was.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded, deliberately blowing her cover. "You didn't ask first!" My outburst annoyed her, and she seemed suddenly uncomfortable around me, an overbearing blonde boy drawing attention to his fragmented Spanish. She hurried along past me, performing the part of young woman accosted by disorderly male stranger. Uncoolly I persisted. She asked me what I meant. I hadn't expected to have to explain myself because the injustice seemed self-evident, and I hadn't prepared a way to articulate my thoughts. She responded to my silence, saying simply that the best photographers didn't ask before taking photos.

"My professor in college would be walking along side you like this, then jump in front of you, and BOOM!" She blocked my path, thrusting the lens in my face. In it I could see my frowning reflection. The shutter snapped open and then closed again. She pulled the camera away from her eye and the frown in my reflection had displaced onto her face. Clearly I hadn't taken her point. I could tell already that arguing with her was going to make me feel self-righteous and probably alienate her. I knew also that our friendship was delicate and precarious under the strain of differences in opinion. But I couldn't help myself from speaking my mind, as the issue that brought me to Chiapas in the first place had just manifested itself before my eyes. It had taken a very simple form, that of the unequal control of representations between tourists and local indigenous people. I explained that white and *mestizo* people are almost always the ones who choose the ways in which indigenous people are represented. By taking a picture, even the tourist is assuming a degree of power over the subject of the photograph. Photos make it into family albums, alongside other images of ancient ruins and landscapes.

She was patient as I spoke and agreed with me that recontextualizing images could have a harmful effect. She used the example of publishing a photograph of someone in a newspaper. A person could be cast in a

negative light as the photographer has the power to highlight certain elements of a person to express something about them. Also photos have a reciprocal relationship with articles, headlines and captions in the way the former help us to understand the latter, and vice versa. Together the photos and text create a total message. This presentation can have a harmful effect when explanations of photos appeal to people's prejudices or reinsert them into negative contexts. But, she said, her situation was different. Certainly with the news media, the represented peoples' public reputations were at stake. However, she only wanted to keep the photos for her own personal use. So what harm could be done?

I knew we were talking about something more than the public image of a few people, but I couldn't respond at the time. I still felt uncomfortable with the whole situation and concluded that I must be paranoid. But even though what we do with the images that we take is important, an even more serious issue lay beneath the entire discussion of how they are manipulated. We are constantly representing things. For example, with language we substitute the word for a thing, concept or action. It might scare some people to think that a word is not a concrete or static concept. Every time we use a word, we recontextualize it and redefine it. In a sense we are always misrepresenting what we want to talk about because the thing, concept or action is understood within a totally new context. The gravity of realizing that this imperfection in language has a potential to do good things as well as horrible things can be frightening. But Marga probably would have said that if we thought about this every time we spoke, we would get paralyzed, so afraid that we might misrepresent something with our language. Then we would never be able to say anything. To her it was probably all right that language would misrepresent something else at times, or all the time. That is the nature of language as well as representations in general.

But still, my own personal inability to "speak" about indigenous people did not come so much from the fear that I would say the wrong thing, although this is sometimes a concern. What troubled me more than *how* people speak is who exactly is doing the speaking, or who is *able* to speak and be heard. They call the Zapatista radio station *Radio Insurgente*, "the voice of the voiceless," because it is an outlet for people who cannot usually make their own representations heard. They are voiceless, not in the sense that they are mute, but in the sense that their voice isn't afforded the same legitimacy or can't be projected in the same way.

Vocalized sounds make a voice when they understood as such, when they cut into the multitude of voices and asserts themselves as truth. In Mexico and in most places, some voices are audible and understood while others are not as much. I thought there was something inherently wrong with this imbalance. The ways in which we explain ideas, situations and other people through the use of representation is critical, but no matter what we do, the harm has already been done before we even open our mouths, put a pen to paper, click on a tape recorder, or reach for a camera.

But this is not to say that the harm is irreversible. Because although there are deep systematic problems that precede everything

**"I hadn't expected to have to explain myself because the injustice seemed self-evident, and I hadn't prepared a way to articulate my thoughts. She responded to my silence, saying simply that the best photographers didn't ask before taking photos."**



we do, change can come when marginalized people put more pens to paper, click on more tape recorders and use more cameras. The indigenous media activists in Chiapas know that control of major media will not simply fall into their laps. But they know that for the most part they don't have to fight over it either. Instead they make their own.

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