

# **Notes from a Visit to Chiapas: Toward Practices of Nomadic Identity and Hybridity<sup>i</sup>**

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*Context: In 1994, on the eve of the North American Free Trade Agreement's (NAFTA) going into effect and in the wake of the Mexican government's repeal of Article 27 of the Constitution that gave land rights to those living on and working the land, many indigenous communities in Chiapas, the southern most part of Mexico, joined a brief armed resistance to draw attention to their plight. Five hundred years of colonization, of death and displacement from their ancestral lands was and is now being repeated through international trade agreements that are undermining their local economies, and displacing them from their homes and communities in order to further exploit the vast natural resources of their region. "Ya Basta!," "Enough!," they cried in unison.<sup>ii</sup>*

*The Mexican government was surprised that both civil and international society was quick to support the indigenous communities, who had long lived under the specter of intense and pervasive discriminatory practices. The San Andreas Accords were negotiated, giving indigenous communities a realm of autonomy and rights that were long overdue. Unfortunately, the Mexican government has failed to honor these accords, gutting all legislation dealing with indigenous issues.*

*After ten years of working for the Mexican government to enact the San Andreas Accords, many of the indigenous communities in Chiapas decided to live according to the accords anyway, forming themselves into five autonomous zones called caracoles, snail*

*shells. They took in their own hands the building of schools, health clinics, local and regional systems of representative government, and structures to develop equality for women. These autonomous zones do not overlap with Mexican government zones, and so stand apart.*

*The Zapatista communities were clear that they were not seceding from Mexico, but creating a form of democratic government that was not corrupt, that was consensually based, and that represented and responded to the needs of the indigenous communities. Unsuccessful in reforming the corruption of the Mexican government, the indigenous peoples of Chiapas creatively leapt ahead to enact in their daily and communal lives what they had requested permission from the government to do. The autonomous zones call themselves rebel zones, where rebellion is affirmed. They invite us to create our own autonomous zones where we live.*

*In the summer of 2004 I visited this region with a delegation from Global Exchange, an organization that has been studying the effects of transnational corporate globalization on indigenous communities.*

### **"To Open A Crack in History"**

The Zapatistas' spokesperson, dubbed Subcommandante Marcos (2002), says poetically: "That's what we are," I said to myself, "fallen stars that barely scratch the sky of history with a scrawl....30 years ago, a few people scratched history, and knowing this, they began calling to many others so that, by dint of scribbling, scratching, and scrawling, they would end up rending the veil of history, so that the light would finally be seen. That, and nothing else, is the struggle we are making. And so if you ask us what we want, we will unashamedly answer: "To open a crack in history"" (p. 212).

"To open a crack in history," we must interrupt the steady trample of greed that ignores the integrity of communities who wish to dream into being communal, sustainable, just, and peaceful ways of being. For the psychologically minded, the question of subjectivity must be addressed. How are we to practice our subjectivity to rend the cloth of oppression? These are some of my thoughts from a visit to several of the autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas.

**Oventik, Office of the Good Government, *Oficina de Buen Gobierno* : Meeting at the Border**

We knock on the door to ask for two things: can they arrange a meeting between our delegation and the health educators at the clinic, and can we have their permission to visit a nearby refugee camp, where thousands of displaced indigenous live after being run from their napalm poisoned, burning, and looted homes and communities by paramilitary violence over the last ten years.

The door opens a crack and a man in black mask, a *passamontana*, peers out at us. Here the threshold is both literal and liminal, where the "processes of symbolic interaction are thrown into relief" (Homi Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). We must announce in Spanish who we are and what we want. Then the door opens and we enter a simple room where two other men in black ski masks sit. Their discussion of our request is carried on outside of our comprehension, in Tzotzil, the indigenous language of this region. After ten minutes of discussion amongst themselves, a notebook is taken out where the permissions are slowly written and the stamp of the Buen Gobierno of Oventik is imprinted.

In America, black ski masks are sometimes used by criminals who wish to conceal their identity. While I know this is not the case, upon being greeted by a man whose face I cannot see my body registers some dis-ease. No doubt this dis-comfort that provokes reflection is part of the rationale for putting on a wool ski mask in the heat of summer. In a brilliant stroke of representation, the Zapatistas have given a multivalent visible image to toxic messages that assault their psychic health. Since colonization they have felt invisible, faceless. What has been valued is their labor, and the riches of the land underneath their communities. Exploited, displaced, murdered, they were and are treated as inferior and non-human. The *passamontana* announces, "Here we are, your faceless 'Others.' Now you must knock at our door, ask **our** permission, wait on us, see how we deliberate dialogically rather than unilaterally decide matters. It is important that you, who are used to feeling at home, in charge, as though you have the right to what you do and to what you take, it is important that you write to us and ask, knock on our door and ask, and experience that you are in relationship to others who have seized the fate of their communities. We are at the entrance to our Caracole. You may visit us here with our permission. But you will come no further unless you are invited."

The *caracole* of Oventik, named *Caracol en la Resistencia Y Rebeldia por la Humanidad* (Caracol in Resistance and Rebellion for Humanity), is a sharply delimited place, bordered by fence, hillside, and stream. We are told never to leave this area unless invited to do so. When at the edge, if we meet an indigenous person, we must ask "Permiso?" to go any further. Surrounded by lush mountainsides, I yearned to go for a walk beyond the demarcated borders, but it was against all rules and it would have been taken as an impertinent intrusion. When the plight of the indigenous was first launched

into the awareness of civil and international society by the Zapatistas, hordes of visitors from abroad descended upon these communities. While their support was welcomed, their intrusion had to be negotiated. This negotiation slowly gave rise to the physical structures within the *caracoles* that are used to house visitors. The *caracoles* are surrounded by communities, but precisely separated from them, so that visitors do not intrude on the daily life of the communities. To come up to the boundary of the *caracole* as a Anglo, is to meet in yourself the history of invasion and intrusion of which my "white" Euro-American people have been a part.

The *passamontanas* also have a practical function of providing some security through anonymity. How can you tell who Marcos, their *subcommandante*, is, if he is in a horde of masked men? The security of the aggrieved is assisted by the masks, in a place where active opposition to the unjust and brutal practices of the government risks one's very life. When a community is trying to stop the movement of tanks into their land, those who nonviolently surround the tanks, men and women, can make use of their facelessness for security, turning five hundred years of brutal colonization on its head.

There is an ethics to meeting at the border that emerges from this awakened history. The structure of how the *caracole* greets its visitors is part of the image of the "snail shell" (*caracole*) to which they have appealed. While there is a flexible door-like structure at the mouth of the shell where exchange can happen, the interior of the snail's shell protects the intimate goings on of the community. They have learned from the intrusions of missionaries, anthropologists, and others that the interior life of the community must be protected so its ongoing cultural life can be supported. Meetings at the border should not proceed naively as if the present can be detached from the cries of

history. "History wakes" at the border if any exchange is to become a meeting, and if our way of conducting our identity emerges out of unconscious repetition of colonial injustice, practicing instead the respect the Zapatistas so intensely desire.

The delimited sites of the caracoles are akin to what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls "interstitial spaces," "third spaces," "in-between spaces" which he defines as "provid[ing] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (p. 1). In the *caracol* of Oventik, "whites" and people of color, economically privileged and economically exploited, Euro-American and indigenous do not appear as binary opposites but as interlocking and overlapping pieces of a common puzzle where the psychic contour of one is reflected in the shape of the other, where firm lines become blurry, yielding to a yeasty hybridity. Teenage girls walk hand-in-hand wearing brightly colored traditional Mayan woven and embroidered clothing, while we hear The Beatles singing out from one of the school's dormitories. The boys play spirited basketball in t-shirts emblazoned with American logos, while next to them a Jewish New Yorker teaches Brazilian *capoiera* to a group of American teenagers. Inside a group of French dentists discuss their struggle to introduce fair trade coffee into France. This hybridity exists in the midst of continuing struggles for women's equality, dire healthcare concerns, plummeting agricultural revenues, and strangulation of the communities from their region by the military and paramilitary forces.

**The Mirror at Morelia: "What Struggles Are You Part of?"**

We also visited the *caracol* of Morelia, the site of torture, assassination, and oppression by the paramilitary forces in 1994. We arrived in early afternoon, hoping for a conversation with the *Oficina de Buen Gobierno* at 3pm. We had written in advance and been granted permission for a visit. They were busy installing water tanks, and we were asked to wait. While we waited I read a description of the community traumatization that had taken place right near where we were heating our beans. From Ross' The War Against Oblivion (2000):

Early on January 7<sup>th</sup> [1994], dozens of armored vehicles rolled into this tranquil Tzeltal coffee-growing community and 400 soldiers charged from hovel to hovel, dragging the men out and herding them onto the basketball court at the center of the settlement, the military's customary m.o. in Indian communities suspected of subversion.

Morelia was seen as a pocket of resistance due to their efforts to charter their land as an *ejido*, a village organized as a communal agricultural production unit.

Other than the attention focused upon the impoverished outpost on the morning of January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1994, the abandonment of Morelia by its government has been spectacular. The *ejido* had a basketball court but no baskets, a government clinic building but no doctor, a powerful thirst but no potable water, a full schoolhouse with one teacher three days a month, a priest who attended to the *ejido* every four months.

All morning long, the men were forced to lie face down on the ground, their noses driven down into the concrete. "Today is the day we turn Morelia into an orphanage," the soldiers barked. Their interrogators wanted to know about a

doctor, a non-Indian, who sometimes visited the *ejido*. Three men were singled out, forced into the deserted hermitage of Jesus Christ of Good Hope, a square weatherbeaten building fronting the basketball courts. For four hours, their *companeros* listened to the screams of Sebastián Santiz López, 60, Severino Santiz, 47, and Ermelindo Santiz Gómez, 39. Severino's head was repeatedly dunked into the filled baptismal font. Electric cables were attached to the men's testicles and they were burnt. "The soldiers brought them out bathed in blood," said one witness. "All we could do is listen to their lamentations..."

(Ross, 2000, p. 28-30)

Thirty more men were rounded up, as the community's stores of food were sacked. Two weeks later, after brutal and dehumanizing treatment, all were returned to Morelia except the initial three men, whose bones were later found.

When I went for a walk to look at the murals, there on the spot near the torture, was a mural commemorating the martyrs of Morelia. Toni Morrison speaks of art as "the fully realized presence of a haunting" of history. Indeed, this mural, which everyone passes many times a day keeps the haunting actively informing the present. History awake.

We were asked to craft questions for the members of the Good Government to read and discuss in advance of their meeting with us. Sometime the next morning, we would be able to hear their answers. We were thrown back upon ourselves to work as a group to understand what our deeper questions actually were. In an uncomfortable four hour session we worked to articulate our wonderings into respectful and knowledgeable questions. When our meeting took place the next morning with eight members of the



governing council, it was clear that they had discussed them in every bit as much detail as we had. Each question was assigned to a spokesperson who delivered a considered answer. At the end, one of us asked if they had any questions for us. Only one emerged. Instead of reflecting curious, and perhaps frivolous, interest in our day-to-day life, it was a challenging question: "In what struggles are you involved in your home communities?" It was as though they were saying: We have taken a lot of time to explain to you the struggle we are engaged in here; the struggle that will be occupying us and our children for the rest of our lifetimes. We ask you to reflect on how our struggles here are connected to the policies of your government and the practices of you and your people. How are **you** engaging these issues? We did not get a request to help in the fields, to teach English or computer skills, to assist with the cooking. Instead we were given a floor to sleep on, latrines and makeshift shower, ample beans and rice, language classes, classes on Zapatismo. Then a mirror was lifted so we could see ourselves through the lens of a single question: What struggle do you partake in, or will you partake in, having now understood more about how your situation effects ours? The inference was that as Americans the site of our struggle must be in the belly of the beast, for it is in the beast's greedy extension that hungrily consumes them, their land, their culture, and people. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, NAFTA, the false conservation agencies on whose boards representatives from the pharmaceutical companies sit as they make the appropriation of the Montanes Azules rainforest look like ecological safeguarding. The School of the Americas who has trained the trainers of the paramilitary forces. They pointed our attention back home as though to say, "These are the beasts you must wrestle

with.” There were moments when I felt that being asked to help harvest corn or teach English would be a great relief.

Struggling through the mountains Marcos carries a single pink, high heel pump. In the wake of this struggle being catapulted into international notoriety, tons of donated goods arrived in the mountains, some of it the discarded luxury that bore no signs of empathic engagement with their situation: a single pink slipper separated from its mate comes to a region where many are without any shoes to navigate thick mud and to protect against the mountain chill. The pink slipper comes as a cast off offering that underlines the serious slippage between two incommensurable worlds.

When history wakes, meetings at borders disappoint romantic yearnings for union. The disenfranchised workers, migrants, and exiles know the border situation between the so-called First and Third Worlds. As Homi Bhabha puts it, "it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking" (quoted in Sandoval, 200 p. 1). They have learned English, how to arrange the accoutrements of the upper class as they clean, how to take care of the flower gardens of those who have no need for a vegetable garden. They are asked to risk their lives quietly crossing the border, do work for others, and return with small wages. They have acquired the double consciousness of which DuBois writes, and often attained the cosmopolitan status once thought the possession of the materially privileged (Bhabha, 2004).

But what is the ethics of the border situation when we, the relatively privileged, willingly depart from the center? The educators at the *caracoles* were pointing us back toward the center, not to reside in its comforts, its repression of history, its sense of the

future as a site for personal and corporate acquisition. They pointed us back toward it so that we could engage, interpret, and struggle with it with these indigenous people in our heart. Indeed, the educators greeted us the first day at the language school, saying that we had entered an anti-neoliberal zone, a rebel space, where the heart would be opened, where we must learn to embrace our own rebelliousness in order to "make a world in which love is possible" (Freire, 19 , p. ). The pedagogy for rebellion is one which welcomes questions, and which poses questions that help us in our paths to more complex, systemic understandings.

The postcolonial situation sends anthropologists back home. There is no need to speak for the marginalized and the silenced. They are speaking for themselves. A beautiful example of this is evidenced in the Chiapas Media Project. Media experts came to Chiapas not to make documentaries **about** the indigenous movement, but to make filmmaking equipment and know how available to as many communities as possible. In this process of sharing the know-how, the colonial gaze is inverted. Now when the Mexican army soldiers video from their tanks the indigenous crowds surrounding them, Zapatista cameras film the military intrusion, craft it into documentaries that are made available to the international community through the internet.

Gramsci wrote that when he and his Latin American colleagues went to Spain during the Revolution, they found they had left home to better understand themselves. To leave the center, to meet at the border, is necessary to becoming archaeologists regarding the site of our own social formation (JanMohamed, 1993, p. 113). Such border crossing allows us to return to the center, seeing it anew as itself a potential border site where revolt and creativity become possible.

## **Hospitality and the Un-Homely**

What has been called the first postmodern revolution imagines autonomous zones being created throughout the world, forming an archipelago of communities striving for justice, democracy, equality, and peace, as well as a network for solidarity and potential collaboration. While not negating national identity, these zones reimagine identity by expressing multiple layers of compatible identification.” a larger, deterritorializing one that reflects transnational exchanges, a regional one that that allows for the strengthening of participatory democracy (Kearney, 1998, p. 12), and an ethnic level where indigenous languages and cultures are safeguarded.<sup>iii</sup>

At first glance my town, Santa Barbara, seems poor in such autonomous zones, quietly performing its own variety of ethnic and economic apartheid, with those of Mexican descent in some neighborhoods, schools, and clinics, and Anglos in others. The indigenous Chiapans are our teachers regarding having the courage and imagination to create in the present "a world in which all worlds fit," where some worlds are not cast out as discardable, or merely exploitable. Coming back home it is clear that my "home" —just as the homes in Chiapas—is not yet a place where all worlds fit. It encompasses tacit exclusionary practices that must be seen through. Meetings at the border allow us to encounter our psychic and literal homes as "unhomely" in Homi Bhabha's sense, where the ordinary domesticity of our lives breaks open to reveal the history they contain. Here the fixed and stable subject, bolstered by ownership and the accoutrements of individualism, gives way to a more nomadic self, described by Braidotti, Deleuze and Guattari (1986). In this figuration of the self, identity is a process,

not a product, a practice marked by its gestures toward others, and its own sites of formation. The nomad practices what Foucault has called "counter-memory," "a memory that is activated against the stream" of forgetting injustice (Braidotti, 1994, p. 25). The nomad works to develop peripheral consciousness. Glancing to the margins, it is not easy to forget injustice. "The nomad is determined to destroy the state-form and the city form with which it collides" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 113). It resists assimilation into dominant ways of representing the self (Braidotti, 1994). Braidotti says that nomads "enact a rebellion of subjugated knowledges. The nomadic style is about transitions and passages without pre-determined destinations or lost homelands" (Braidotti, 2002, p. 7). While one storyline sees Mexicans who have come north as busily assimilating English language and American ways, another storyline shows Anglos like myself becoming aware that we are living in California on what was once Mexican soil. Spanish seeps into the names of our streets and foods. Mexican rituals and art shape our sensibilities. In the light of this exchange, our lack of hospitality casts a long shadow on a sunny town like this.

In the Depth Psychology M.A./Ph.D. Program at Pacifica, which sponsors this conference, we have sought to nurture nomadic identity through the provision of the paradoxical co-occurrence of a public homeplace which encourages experiences of what Homi Bhabha calls "the unhomely." We have helped to nurture voice, dialogue, and the use of the arts to give expression to marginalized experiences. Students are asked to inquire into their own cultural location, to investigate its history and shadows, its ways of conducting selfhood and encountering otherness. At the same time students are asked in their community and ecological fieldwork and research to immerse themselves in a

community context, to apprentice themselves to the questions that arise there, to “let go of predetermined destinations,” so that learning can occur at the borders where meetings become possible (Braidotti, 2002, p. 5). As Braidotti describes it, one is to both be in transit **and** responsible for one’s historical location. By transit she does not mean the literal act of traveling, but the subversion of set conventions.

In this cultural work there is a practice of nomadic subjectivity and its associated ethics. It is a practice of encounter where we go past what we have anticipated, enabling us to look back and be aware of ourselves in a different manner. As Seshadri-Crooks puts it, it is "a radical desire for the dissolution of one's subjective certainty" (Seshadri-Crooks, In Oliver, 2002, p. 75). We have aimed to avoid the missionary work of a colonial ego, giving the beliefs of our culture wrapped in leftover material goods or local practices falsely universalized. We have also aimed to avoid the voyeurism of the colonial gaze, bringing back artifacts and descriptions of rituals made quaint or exotic by those still clinging to the center. We have encouraged the close examination of one’s own site of spawning subjectivity, believing that such critical consciousness of what has been taken as center, is one way of dissolving the oppressive grasp of taken-for-granted and unexamined “truths," of decolonizing the imagination.

From this work a methodology for nomadic consciousness is being worked out, for a “self-conscious flexibility of identity” (Sandoval, 2000, p. xii), where meetings at borders and boundaries within oneself, between self and other, one community and another, and between ourselves and the natural and built environments can be conducted. Dislodged from single unambiguous identifications, an odyssey can evolve that awakens

history and allows us to witness the multiplicity of voices and experiences around us and within us.

The hope: To lend the weight of our own practices of nomadic subjectivity to widen the cracks in history where multiple worlds can live with each other with greater justice, peace, and beauty.

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<sup>ii</sup> "During the past decade, over a million Mexican campesinos lost their lands. US subsidies for corporate agriculture, free trade agreements (read NAFTA), and monopoly control of international markets are destroying the livelihoods of one-fifth of the Mexican population. Corporate subsidies and free trade allow US corporations to dump corn on the Mexican market at below the cost of production. Nearly 20 million Mexican campesinos depend on small plots of corn and/or coffee for survival. With rapidly declining family incomes, many have no alternative but to migrate to large cities, the northern border or the US in search of work." (Mexican Solidarity Network).

<sup>iii</sup> In speaking of the Irish dilemma, the philosopher, Richard Kearney (1998), writes, "There is no such thing as primordial nationality. Every nation is a hybrid construct, an 'imagined community' that can be reimagined again in alternative versions. The challenge is to embrace this process of hybridization from which we derive and to which we are committed willy-nilly" (p. 13).