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COMANDANTAS AND CARACOLES:
THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF THE
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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to freedom fighters and liberation movements in settler colonial nations around the world. From Palestine, to Mexico to the United States and every country in between, la lucha continúa. The struggle continues.

Acknowledgements

I want to start off this thesis by acknowledging that I am writing from Claremont, CA which is located on Tongva land. I would like to thank the Tongva nation for hosting me the past few years I have spent studying at Scripps College. In my course on settler colonialism I have gotten the opportunity to hear from Tongva elders and Native American scholars and to learn about local native histories and traditions. I am very grateful for that class which also gave me the chance to join IndigeNations, a college mentoring program for native students in the Los Angeles area. Through volunteering as a mentor, visiting the Tongva Living History Garden and attending native programming at the colleges, I have gained a greater understanding of local Indigenous struggles for liberation which has in turn helped me to contextualize the Zapatista movement within a broader decolonial framework.

I would also like to thank my thesis readers- Martín Vega Olmedo, Cindy Forster and Erich Steinman (who teaches the aforementioned course). If it were not for their support and guidance, I would have been completely lost with regard to the thesis writing process. I am also grateful for my two major advisors, Phil Zuckerman for Sociology and Gabriela Bacsán (previously Marina Pérez de Mendiola) for Spanish, Latin American and Caribbean Literatures and Cultures. The Office of the Registrar, the Office of Financial Aid and all the professors and campus organizations I have engaged with at Scripps and across the Claremont Colleges have also been instrumental to my experience here. Lastly, I owe everything to my family members,

friends and communities back home who raised me and have supported me every step of the way. This is especially true for my grandparents.

In terms of the thesis itself, I must acknowledge the Autonomous University of Social Movements and all the people I met at Oventik who provided me with the lifechanging opportunity to learn from the Zapatista movement and take those incredible lessons back home with me. That being said, in all honesty, this thesis serves as a tool for my own academic advancement and is in no way reflective of Zapatista values or principles. The Zapatista vision for a liberatory world is one autonomous from oppressive power structures like capitalism, neoliberalism and white supremacy, all of which tend to dominate higher education and other elitist spheres. However, I have chosen to pursue academia even if private institutions and the systems they uphold are contrary to what I believe in and hope for the future.

Introduction

I first heard about the Zapatista movement through my involvement with the Chiapas Support Committee (CSC), a student organization affiliated with the Claremont Colleges. Through a broad range of meetings and workshops, the CSC informs the student body about Indigenous and African solidarity movements across Latin America and the Caribbean. It was at one of those events that I first learned about the Zapatista movement and its political significance within North America and around the world. More than a year after I attended that CSC event, I had the incredible opportunity to study abroad in a caracol, one of five central regions for Zapatista autonomous governance. I was able to do so through participating in the Autonomous University of Social Movements or AUSM, an organization that runs study abroad programs in Chiapas as well as Havana, Cuba. AUSM and the Albany Park Autonomous Community Center

based out of Chicago, Illinois, both form part of the larger Mexico Solidarity Network which engages in important solidarity work and coalition building on both sides of the border.

The strong relationships AUSM has built with Zapatista communities allowed me to get firsthand experience living in a caracol and learning from a movement I had previously only admired from afar. This proved to be a socially and politically transformative experience from which I was able to both profoundly learn about Zapatismo and draw connections between the struggles of communities in Chiapas, Mexico and other liberation struggles in the United States and worldwide. While I am more inspired than ever by all that the Zapatista movement has accomplished since its inception, I also know the majority of my physical and emotional commitment should be dedicated to movements in the United States. This was something the Zapatistas I learned from mentioned time and time again—that the purpose of me gaining this knowledge was for it to be shared with communities back home who have distinct yet related struggles for autonomy and liberation. I am still navigating how best to incorporate the skills and knowledge I gained in the caracol to organizing efforts I am involved with in the United States.

I would be remiss if after describing the caracol I did not mention the origins behind its name. The inspiration for the use of the word comes from it being the Spanish word for snail, an animal that embodies the well-known Zapatista phrase, “lento, pero avanzo” or “slowly, but always advancing.” That phrase proved relevant time and time again during my one month stay in Oventik, a caracol in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. Located in a rural area just over an hour drive from the culturally and historically significant colonial city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Oventik is the only caracol in relatively close proximity to an urban center. This allowed me to spend weekends in San Cristóbal where I stayed at the communal AUSM home that

houses study abroad students and any Zapatista or affiliated individuals who need a place to stay in the region.

As a caracol, Oventik is one of five rebel municipalities in the Zapatista region, all five of which function autonomously and independently from the Mexican government but in conjunction with one another. The caracoles are a more recent version of what were previously known as “Aguascalientes,” albeit structured with a particular focus on working within the constitution and civil society at large. In line with this commitment to civil society, caracoles “give communities engaged in resistance a new way of exercising power, in which their commanders bow to the communities’ authority in formulating and implementing plans for struggle and organization” (González, 2005, p. 82). This is partially done through the “Juntas de Buen Gobierno” or “Boards of Good Government,” which serve the demands of constituents in their geographic region through a transparent and representative democratic process.

The Board of Good Government for the region of the Chiapas highlands holds their meetings in Oventik, an area made up of a series of buildings along a hilltop and housing and educational infrastructures down below. On the same hill as the board are other services important to surrounding communities including places of employment (e.g. women’s cooperatives), a cafeteria, a health clinic and a pharmacy. Further down into the caracol is where the only autonomous, Zapatista boarding high school in all of Chiapas is located. This school and surrounding areas where students, guests and educational promoters live are all covered in beautiful murals. (In autonomous schools the word promoter is used instead of teacher because the Zapatista worldview sees learning as a collaborative process rather than a hierarchal one.)

These murals depict everything from love for the land to international solidarity and a host of other pertinent topics. In fact, as part of the AUSM I, along with my fellow students,

painted a mural representing the fight for environmental justice from Standing Rock, North Dakota to the highlands of Chiapas (where dams present a huge environmental problem for Indigenous populations). Additionally, the money I spent on AUSM tuition for the classes I took from promoters in Oventik all circled back into funding for the secondary school. This was also the case for students from around the world who partnered with AUSM just for a week or two in order to enroll in the language school without participating in the study abroad program itself. That is how I met students of all ages and walks of life from places such as Turkey, New Zealand and Canada.

Having outside visitors taking language classes in Spanish or the Mayan language Tzotzil, frequenting the school store and purchasing from collectives along the hill provides a way for the caracol to sustain itself with dignity. Because many important expenses are covered by the tuition costs for foreigners, Zapatista high school students are able to attend school free of charge as do the children of promoters who have their own daycare/elementary school in the caracol. These students spend half their time studying and half their time back home on their family farms which are often located an hour from the caracol by foot. This distance is why both students and promoters spend about 13 days straight in each place. Additionally, because none of the promoters receive a salary, they (and their students, who are all old enough to work) rely on farming for sustenance. This is also why workers in collectives take turns living in the caracol and living at home. Educational promoters, members of collectives, and others in the caracol sacrifice and committed themselves to this work for the betterment of the community and the movement as a whole. In contrast to capitalist societies' focus on individualism, Zapatismo promotes community-based models of governance, labor, interpersonal interactions and more. I

am writing my thesis on how those collectivist values have produced social change within the movement and its communities in both the public and private sphere.

Upon deciding to focus my thesis on pivotal changes that have occurred within Zapatista regions since the start of the movement, I decided to do so from a gender-oriented lens. As a student at Scripps College, a school for women and other gender minorities, I am drawn to the social and political role of women and how it has interpersonally and systemically changed over the years as a result of Zapatismo. I will approach this topic from a sociological perspective, drawing upon the work of women of color activists and scholars. Lastly, I will include a section on my own experiences observing how gender dynamics play out in Zapatista territory. However, before I examine this any further, it is important I begin with a brief history of Zapatismo and the context from which it originated.

Context

January 1st, 1994 marked the launch of the Zapatista uprising when after more than ten years of clandestine planning, the Zapatista Army of Liberation (EZLN) took a united stance against encroaching neoliberalism, most notably the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which was signed into law that same day (Stahler-Sholk, 2010, p. 269). In the June 2005 “Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona” Zapatismo defines neoliberalism, an economic era that primarily began during the 1980’s and continues to this day, as a form of globalized capitalism that threatens Indigenous lives and customs as well as other exploited populations (EZLN, 2010, par. 31). In the words of the Sixth Declaration, “neoliberal globalization, capitalism, destroys what exists in these countries, it destroys their culture, their language, their economic system, their political system, and it also destroys the ways in which those who live in that country relate to each other.... so that only one Nation or country remains, the country of

money, of capital” (EZLN, 2010, par. 34-35). More than two decades after the January 1st uprising and more than one decade after the Sixth Declaration, the Zapatista movement remains a regional and global leader in the fight against the dangers of neoliberalism and for Indigenous autonomy and liberation in Mexico and around the world. Throughout that fight, Zapatistas have been striving for transformation across all cultural, political, social and economic sectors (which are very much intertwined). This has resulted in a variety of tangible changes, especially for female Zapatistas whose role in the movement has increased over the years. Much of these positive changes can be attributed to the influential participation of Zapatista women in law-making, political expression, campaign involvement and relational politics.

Law-Making

One of the most important pieces of legislation brought forward by the Zapatista uprising was the Women’s Revolutionary Law. This law, along with others, was first publicized on that important day of January 1st, 1994. It is crucial to note that women from Chol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Tojolabal communities in the region were all an intrinsic part of this law-making process which produced a text that has inspired Indigenous, feminist movements across the globe. A total of ten articles were included in the law, each outlining an important issue regarding gender equity (Hernández Castillo, 2016, p. 129).

The articles call for changes ranging from an end to domestic violence and sexual assault to reproductive rights. Other influential points include access to the political process and leadership positions, the freedom to marry whomever one chooses and the right to a source of income, healthcare and education. The social changes brought about by these laws tangibly impacted the lives of women across the region, especially those who came of age prior to 1994. Doña Rosalia, a leader of a Zapatista women’s cooperative, was interviewed about this exact

subject and spoke of her experiences growing up as a young woman before the implementation of the Women's Revolutionary Law or any other form of gender-based protection. In the words of Rosalia, "...[my father] didn't given me permission to learn Spanish, to go to school. My father did speak Spanish, but he never spoke to me in Spanish, only in Tzeltal. When I was very young, I never went out to play, I didn't have the liberty to go play. Instead, I helped my mother with the work around the house. We went to help in the fields and other things" (Williams, 2012, pp. 26-27). Women who, like Rosalia, grew up without the opportunity to go to school, play outside or engage in other childhood activities were able to reflect on their past experiences and fight for a better life for future female generations

For women around the world, reflection and storytelling often manifest in positive social transformation, as was the case for Rosalia. This was also the case for the Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based organizing group of Black, lesbian women. Through their statement written in 1978, members of the collective were able to highlight a number of important points relevant to their organizing work and their identities, both of which were inextricably linked. Their praxis was largely based upon the belief that, "the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity". In the statement, coalition members then went to explain how this identity is not merely a class identity, a racial identity, a gender identity or a sexual orientation identity. Those axes of oppression do not exist in isolation but rather intersect in a multitude of ways, thus forming what are currently known as "intersectional identities" (a term coined by the legal scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw) (The, 1978, p. 4).

While the concepts of intersectionality and radical identity politics were popularized by U.S. based, working-class, women of color organizers, they can also be applied to international female contexts such as the Zapatista movement's Women's Revolutionary Law. In fact, Audre

Lorde, a member of the Combahee River Collective and one of the most influential women of color organizers in the United States, was also an internationalist in her denouncement of imperialist intervention, particularly in her mother's birthplace of Grenada. For example, in her collection of essays and speeches entitled *Sister Outsider*, Lorde discusses the 1983 U.S. military invasion of Grenada and the nation's painful encounters with colonization (Lorde, 1984, pp. 188-189). In doing so she also highlights the history of resistance on the island, whereupon she writes, "I am proud to be of stock from the country that mounted the first Black English-speaking People's Revolution in this hemisphere" (Lorde, 1984, p. 189).

Lorde and many other U.S. based women of color activists at the time felt strong ties of solidarity to colonized nations throughout the world, a sense of solidarity that continues to this day amongst younger generations of activists. Although the Combahee River Collective Statement was written in the United States, in several instances the meaning behind it transcends national boundaries and thus can be applied to revolutionary movements around the world from Grenada to Chiapas. When considering the Women's Revolutionary Law, for instance, like Combahee members, Zapatista women drew from their own identities and lived realities to create articles of legislation that would in turn radically improve conditions for themselves and generations down the line. These articles were also specific to the context from which they were coming from—a female, poor, rural and Indigenous context that has as much to do with patriarchy as it does with white supremacy, colonialism, neoliberal capitalism and other dominant systems (The, 1978, p. 4).

This intersectional, identity-based approach to drafting the Women's Revolutionary Law produced a written document that was put into practice within Zapatista communities and outside of them. Mexican women from all over the country supported this fight for the advancement of

women in the public and private sphere and applied it to their own geographical, political and cultural contexts. Inspired to take initiative, these women “not only voiced their support for the demands of their compañeros (comrades) and the interests of their communities but have also pressed for the respect of their specific rights as women” (Hernández Castillo, 2010, p. 542). Evidently, the Women’s Revolutionary Law and the law-making process behind it was not just revolutionary within the Zapatista context but also on a broader national and even global scale.

Political Expression

In the years after the Women’s Revolutionary Law was published up until today, many Zapatista women and allies in the struggle have taken part in a number of conferences focused on gender equity issues. For example, another hugely significant event in the Zapatista movement was the passage of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture. Many Indigenous women were involved in the two years of negotiations leading up to February of 1996 when these accords were signed into law by both Zapatista and national parties. Although the Mexican government ended up warping implementation of the accords to service its own agenda, they are still largely significant in Zapatista history insofar as they helped to mobilize the National Indigenous Congress and other solidarity efforts (Stahler Sholk, 2000, pp. 4-5).

Women’s involvement in the extensive collaboration process between Zapatista representatives and their communities was critical to preparing for negotiations on the national level. For this reason, a Working Group on the Situation, Rights, and Culture of Indigenous Women was established with the explicit purpose of providing a platform for women to talk amongst themselves regarding issues pertinent to their lives. Amongst those in attendance were Indigenous women from a variety of cultural backgrounds as well as urban mestiza women who shared many similar economic and social struggles. Rather than referring to it as a women’s

congress, per se, participants described the group as “a profound analysis of the violence, marginality, and discrimination against indigenous women in the country” (Mora, 2003, p. 16).

This profound analysis included discussions surrounding land and its significance in maintaining the dignity and cosmovision of Indigenous communities. This cosmovision can be partially characterized by phrases like “La Madre Tierra” or “Mother Earth” and other beliefs that gender land, life cycles, plant growth, sustenance and fecundity as inherently feminine and sacred. Additionally, conversations regarding a host of cultural demands accompanied those related to Mother Earth and her peoples. Many participants cited women being prohibited from participating in the political process, girls being barred from school and the practice of child marriage as cultural traditions rooted in gender-based oppression. Women in attendance contextualized those traditions within a broader patriarchal framework and were thus able to work towards solutions on a systemic level rather than painting individual men as the enemy. They were also able to criticize sexist cultural practices while still maintaining an overarching respect for their cultures as a whole (Mora, 2003, p. 17).

Audre Lorde’s paper “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” is very relevant to what the working group aimed to accomplish as a space for women to reflect upon their life experiences and challenge cultural norms. According to Lorde, “For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world”. In accordance with this perspective, the working group was not only influential for the San Andrés Accords as a whole, but also for the individual women themselves. Through facilitating connections and coalition building amongst Indigenous and mestiza women,

the working group served as a source of individual and collective empowerment amidst the exploitation of a patriarchal working order (Lorde, 1979, par. 4).

The working group also embodied respect for difference, something Lorde characterizes as paramount to any social movement. In her paper she openly criticizes white, wealthy women who are threatened by discussions of differences, even when racial and class hierarchies are an unmistakable part of their positionalities as women who employ caretakers, babysitters and housecleaners. These same women who benefit from the labor of working class, women of color often fail to educate themselves about the systemic injustices and lived experiences that maintain those hierarchies. For that reason, Lorde cites how “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.... is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support”. On the other hand, those with marginalized gender *and* economic and racial identities know that those tools will only serve to further oppress them and maintain the ruling order (Lorde, 1979, par. 9).

By placing this statement in the context of Zapatismo, it becomes clear that unlike many feminist gatherings in the United States and around the world that tend to center the concerns of white, wealthy segments of the female population, this group embodied the Zapatista principle of, “*abajo y a la izquierda*” or “below and to the left”. In other words, similar to the working-class women of color Lorde speaks of in her paper, the women who participated in the working group were coming from a leftist perspective rooted in their lived experiences as people from communities that have been and continue to be marginalized by systems of domination. The Zapatista women who attended knew not to rely on state interference and other colonial tools and ways of thinking that have oppressed Indigenous peoples throughout history. Rather, they sought solutions to gender injustice through a collective framework that acknowledged difference and

the realities of systemic exploitation all while uplifting the need for tangible, grassroots, culturally relevant changes. As a result of that framework, the working group was instrumental in drafting gender-related resolutions that were later included in the San Andrés Accords.

Moreover, those in attendance also paved the way for future Zapatista conferences and events centering Indigenous women and their struggles for collective liberation (Mora, 2003, p. 17).

Campaign Involvement

Female involvement in the passage of the Women's Revolutionary Law and the San Andrés Accords has inspired further political participation. Notably, la Otra Campaña, or the Other Campaign, was an important site for women's leadership in the mid 2000's. First announced in the 2005 Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona or the Sixth Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle, the Other Campaign sought to making connections between popular, radical movements happening across the country in the months leading up to the 2006 presidential election. At that time, so called "leftist" mainstream political parties were consistently betraying their principles and the populations they supposedly aimed to serve. Although claiming to be of and for the people, such parties were rampant with corruption and often sold out to corporate/international interests complicit in the exploitation of Indigenous populations and other marginalized groups.

The Other Campaign was established as a grassroots, anti-capitalist and antiracist campaign that could unite marginalized populations otherwise disregarded by the traditional electoral process. This facilitated coalition-building among movements throughout the country who in turn found a space to organize outside of the oppressive framework of neoliberal national politics (Mora, 2007, p. 151).

After it was first mentioned in the Sixth Declaration, the Other Campaign officially began on January 1st, 2006, 12 years after the initial Zapatista uprising. Central to its goal of listening to the plight of marginalized peoples throughout Mexico was the idea of creating “un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos,” or “a world where many worlds fit.” For that reason, the Other Campaign was focused not just on combatting the ills of capitalism and neoliberalism but also on doing so from an inclusive, heterogenous perspective. Among the marginalized groups that participated in the campaign were those from sex worker, LGBT+, disabled and elderly communities; a diverse representation of the Zapatista phrase “iguales, todos somos diferentes” or, “we are equal, but all different” (Pellarolo, 2006, par. 23).

Women formed an essential part of the equal yet diverse populations that partook in the campaign, even during its launch period. For instance, on that January 1st day Hortensia and Kely introduced the campaign to an audience of more than 10,000 people who had just collectively occupied the public square of Chiapas’s most influential colonial city—San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Both Hortensia and Kely are known as comandantas, a word that stems from the masculine noun comandante or commander in English. When referencing female commanders, of which there are many in the Zapatista movement, this noun is deliberately changed to encompass a feminine grammar structure. Both used their platform to speak out against gender injustices and encourage their fellow women to keep fighting. Comandanta Kely referred to the Other Campaign in particular, calling for women throughout the nation to participate and show men who think otherwise that “como mujeres que somos, no sólo somos de la cama o de la casa, nada más” or “as women, we don’t only belong to the bed, or the house only” (Pellarolo, 2006, par. 7). Comandanta Hortensia echoed this call to action, stating “This unjust situation that we

women live, we cannot permit this to continue always, but some day, it has to change”
(Pellarolo, 2006, par. 9).

Although the Other Campaign started in San Cristóbal de Las Casas with a focus on displaced, Indigenous populations from La Hormiga who were forced to leave their ancestral lands for religious reasons, it soon travelled to other locations in the nation. The Other Campaign tour went all over the country—from coastal to inland areas, small villages to urban centers, union buildings to universities. It attracted a diverse range of individuals and community-based organizations and because of this unifying (and therefore threatening) message, it also became a target for police violence. Policemen and those who deployed them saw these acts of resistance as a threat to the neoliberal order and therefore used imprisonment and physically violent tactics to attack the campaign and its base. This culminated in a particularly violent incident in San Salvador Atenco, a town outside of Mexico City known for its organizing efforts opposing the construction of an international airport in the region. On May 3rd, 2006, a protest organized by Atenco flower vendors and allied protestors affiliated with the Other Campaign was met with extreme force which resulted in the murder of two protesters and the violent arrests of many more wherein dozens of women were raped by state and federal police. Despite its temporary suspension after the state-sanctioned atrocities that occurred in Atenco, the campaign and its spokesperson (Subcomandante Marcos, now Galeano) were able to reach thousands of fellow marginalized people across the nation (Gómez Carpinteiro, 2013, p. 142).

The dialogues that occurred along the campaign trail were profound in message and impact. For example, when the tour stopped in the state of Morelos, home to Emiliano Zapata and his tremendous, grassroots legacy, human rights activists highlighted the alarming rate of femicides in the region. At the time of the Other Campaign visit, “11 women had already been

murdered”, including Compañera Veronica who was murdered in her house in Ahuatepec and Compañera Otilia who died in Tepoztlán in what outside forces claimed was a suicide. That being said, organizing surrounding this harrowing reality extended beyond the discussion of statistics. In the words of the human rights organizers, “We came here to speak about resistance, not to passively accept this terrible reality that women of Morelos live”. These proactive forms of resistance were already underway at the time of the tour, particularly in an autonomous community in Morelos that had already established its own community-based police force (Gómez Carpinteiro, 2013, p. 146).

Discussions of violence against women in Morelos and throughout the 31 Mexican states relate to a cross-national test of the feminist theory of violence against women. This test analyzed data from United Nations statistics and the International Crime Victims Survey and came to a very pertinent conclusion. The test found that, in accordance with the feminist theory of violence against women, “The higher the educational and occupational status of women in a country, the lower the rates of sexual violence” (Yodanis, 2004, pp. 668-669). Although the cross-national test only compared data from so-called “Western” nations in North America and Europe, I believe its results can be applied to the Zapatista context. This notion that more gender equity in any given society can be equated with less instances of gender-based violence is very relevant to what female Zapatistas have fought for throughout the years.

From human rights activists in Morelos to Comandanta Hortensia and Comandanta Kely in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, female participants in the Other Campaign discussed not only the injustices women faced but also the systemic changes needed to combat said injustices. In a similar vein to the aforementioned feminist theory, they saw connections between individual instances of oppression and overarching, systemic power structures (e.g. capitalism,

neoliberalism) that subjugate women and other marginalized populations. For Zapatista and aligned movements, the liberation of women in the public and private sphere is an intrinsic part of the fight for the liberation of all oppressed peoples. Only when women and all other populations that face oppression are freed from the pain of interpersonal and systemic injustices can we truly have a liberated world where many worlds fit.

Relational Politics

In recent years, advancements in gender equity within Indigenous communities and social movements have received national and international attention. About a year ago I remember seeing an AJ+ video titled “Meet Marichuy: the first indigenous woman to run for president in Mexico”. This video and similar clips, articles and photos resurfaced on my Facebook newsfeed in the weeks following Marichuy’s electoral registration. She first registered as a candidate in the 2018 Mexican election cycle on October 7th, 2017 and has made history ever since. From people voicing their support on Facebook accounts throughout the world to supporters on the ground, individuals and communities expressed a new kind of excitement for the first Indigenous woman to ever run for the Mexican presidency.

Marichuy (born Maria de Jesus Patricio Martinez) and her campaign are closely tied to the EZLN which forms part of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) that selected her as a spokesperson for the Indigenous Council of Government (CIG) and the Indigenous communities they serve. This governmental council has engaged with 43 distinct Indigenous groups and 523 communities across 25 Mexican states. Its 31 female and 42 male members are tasked with the responsibility to “obedecer y no mandar” or “to obey and not to command” when it comes to their constituents. The six other political principles central to the CNI, CIG and the Zapatista Juntas de Buen Gobierno or Boards of Good Government also discuss ways in which

governments must serve the people and not the other way around. The principles are as follows: to represent and not to supplant, to serve not to serve yourself, to convince and not to conquer, to work from the people not from above them, to propose and not to impose and to construct and not to destroy (Mignolo, 2017, par. 8, 12).

For many outsiders to the Zapatista movement and affiliated struggles, Marichuy's candidacy came as a surprise. As a healer from the Nahua community in Jalisco (a state in western Mexico), Marichuy is not the typical Mexican candidate. Moreover, the Zapatistas have a history of openly criticizing Mexican electoral cycles. However, her candidacy never strove to adopt or conform to neoliberal modes of governance or a mainstream political party. Therefore, the Zapatistas and other members of the CNI were able to put forward a spokesperson while still critiquing the oppressive nature of Mexico's party system. Marichuy's purpose within the electoral process was not to affirm the validity of the system nor to win the presidency itself. Rather, as a spokesperson for Indigenous peoples, Marichuy introduced a decolonial political framework to a so-called "democratic" process and in doing so exposed its fatal flaws. She "indigenized" politics, thus challenging the colonial, corrupt state and revealing it for what it is (Mignolo, 2017, par. 13-15).

This decolonial campaign involved reaching out to communities in a way reminiscent of the Other Campaign. As a spokesperson for the CNI, Marichuy engaged with populations normally left out of political conversations. By conversating and mainly listening, she "engaged in the enormous task of weaving the communal through the country, with the smallest, the most vulnerable and the most resilient". Every time Marichuy met with new community members meant another opportunity for healing from oppressive power structures and coalition-building with the goal of eventually eliminating said structures through collective action. Although

Marichuy did not appear on the ballot because the signature gathering/registration process was sabotaged by the state, the CNI and partnered organizations continue their struggle. Regardless of the outcome, the campaign was never about organizing by the Mexican state's terms because "In the face of the politics of representation, the CNI is enacting a politics of relationality".

These politics of relationality value collectivism and respect for the earth and all living beings in contrast to the capitalist ideology of individualism and economic advancement at all costs (Mignolo, 2017, par. 18-20).

It was not a mere coincidence that an Indigenous *woman* was chosen to be the spokesperson for the CNI during that time period. This came after years of internal struggle in which Zapatista women fought for their rights, including the right to be included as participants and even leaders in the political process. Moreover, as individuals with multiple marginalized identities, Indigenous women have a perspective from the bottom and to the left, something that is central to Zapatista values. This relates to Native American (meaning native to the United States) feminism as well, particularly when considering the work of M. Annette Jaimes, a Yaqui/Juaneño scholar.

In *The State of Native America* M. Annette Jaimes and Theresa Halsey (another Native American scholar) write that "it is women who have formed the very core of indigenous resistance to genocide and colonization since the first moment of conflict between Indians and invaders" (Jaimes, 1992, p. 311). Jaimes has also written about the concept of "Native Womanism" which "promotes a prospective vision for a more humane and gender-egalitarian future exemplary of 'being Indigenous'". From her perspective, 'being indigenous' includes subverting the heteropatriarchal power structures imposed upon native peoples by colonizing forces. This active resistance starts with Indigenous women and their fight for decolonization

(Jaimes Guerrero, 2016, p. 481). Marichuy, the Indigenous women who proceeded her, and those that will follow all have a “prospective vision” that, in line with Jaimes and Halsey’s views, sees women’s liberation as an intrinsic part of Indigenous liberation and the fight for autonomous governance. On both sides of the colonial border between what are currently known as the United States and Mexico, those who experience the worst of heteropatriarchy are always the best at dismantling it.

Personal Reflections

In addition to analyzing research on the role of women in the Zapatista movement, I also want to take the time to reflect on my own experiences in the caracol. Throughout the month I spent in Oventik I learned more and more about internal and external struggles for gender equity. For instance, I remember a conversation we had regarding alcohol in Zapatista communities. Through discussing the issue of alcoholism with fellow female community members in the years following the uprising, comandantas came to the realization that liquor was central to the subjugation of women and children. Not only that but also alcohol was first introduced to Indigenous communities in Mexico by colonial forces who sought to weaken and control the people. Since colonial times, alcohol has done just that by contributing to impoverishment, public health issues and rates of domestic violence. Moreover, especially during times of clandestine organizing such as the years leading up to the Zapatista rebellion, liquor served as a security threat since government officials tried to lure answers out of community members using the promise of alcohol.

For the aforementioned reasons, female Zapatistas felt that a prohibition on alcohol (and all other drugs) was in order. Although controversial, the ban was supported by many men and often for security reasons. Women were not only influential in raising the issue and working to

institute the ban but also in consistently enforcing it and reporting abuses to designated, community-based authorities. Such enforcement is a continuous struggle as alcohol remains an enticing, colonial, state tool and a source of income for bars and other establishments. This is one of the first things I noticed upon entering the caracol for the first time. In addition to statements such as “Está usted en territorio Zapatista, aquí manda el pueblo y el gobierno obedece” or “You are in Zapatista territory, here the people command and the government obeys”, the sign just outside of the caracol also read that all forms of alcohol and drugs are prohibited. From that moment on it became clear to me that the prohibition of alcohol consumption in Zapatista territory is an important part of its value system.

Another way in which Zapatismo has changed the role of women in society is through the creation of female worker collectives focused on art, bread, vegetables and more. In Oventik I visited several of those collectives, including one in which we were able to speak more in depth with the women working about their experiences in that line of work. From that conversation I gathered that members would take turns between selling artisanry in the caracol and working on the craft from their family farms. Moreover, members would split the profits of each sale, thereby ensuring the truly collective nature of the store in both the social and material sense of the word.

This is central to the Zapatista slogan “mujeres con la dignidad rebelde” or “women with rebellious dignity” because by working within the Zapatista framework women are not forced to sell their products on the street for obscenely low prices. In the collectives, women decide how their works of art should be priced and sell them on their own terms which gives them and their culturally significant products the respect and dignity they deserve. However, the fact that items do not sell much, especially during certain times of the year, makes it hard for members to make

ends meet. Nevertheless, many prefer that life, no matter hard it might be materially, to the alternative of selling and/or begging in the tourist ridden neighborhoods of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

In addition to these more communal ways in which women have been impacted by systemic changes, during one of the classes I took in Oventik we also discussed gender as it pertains to family life. The Zapatista individuals I talked to about this mentioned that in the years since the uprising more and more young people are able to date before marriage and ultimately choose who they marry and how many children they have. This is partially made possible by the availability of sexual education classes in the local Oventik clinic. The Zapatista autonomous schools in the region also teach about other themes relevant to adolescent decision-making including alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution. Moreover, in contrast to the neoliberal focus on individual blame and responsibility, Zapatista communities take a more collective approach to family. Given that the societal expectation is for marriages to remain intact, parents of a couple often serve as mediators when marriage questions or conflicts arise. It is also becoming increasingly common for parents to share the labor involved in child-rearing rather than having all responsibilities fall upon the mother or other maternal figures.

Language is another important component of Zapatista culture and social interactions. For instance, the Tzotzil language, spoken by Tzotziles (who make up the majority of inhabitants in the region surrounding Oventik), makes no differentiation between male and female in its grammar structure. Furthermore, from talking to Zapatistas in the caracol I found that many do not adhere to gendered language rules when speaking Spanish. In fact, one man specifically told me that if he were speaking about a group of women with one male present he would refer to them as “ellas” (the female version of them) rather than as “ellos”, as is customary. He explained

that the idea that one male in any given setting should change how an entire group of people is referred to is telling of Spanish and its sexist, colonial linguistic rules. Some even refute Spanish grammar altogether, thus showing language elitism for what it really is—a way of deeming colonized groups as less intelligent and less cultured for not speaking their oppressor’s tongue in the way the colonial order demands.

It is important to note that Oventik is not the only caracol constantly undergoing social transformation with regard to gender equity and access. Consider, for instance, the caracol of “Morelia”, home to one of the most influential comandantas: Comandanta Esther. Located in the Tzotz Choj region of the state, Morelia has also hosted a number of women’s encounters and conferences. Additionally, it is the only caracol I know of that has an oven-making collective focused on prioritizing women’s health and reducing instances of asphyxiation from the smoke of cooking fires.

In March of this year, el “Primer Encuentro Internacional, Político, Artístico, Deportivo y Cultural de Mujeres que Luchan” or the “First International, Political, Artistic, Sporty and Cultural Meeting of Women who Struggle” took place in Morelia from the 8th to the 10th of the month. This meeting was a space for the thousands of local, national and international women in attendance to unite in the struggle for gender liberation on a variety of fronts (Jessica, 2018, par. 8-9). Other international women’s meetings have also taken place within the caracoles, such as the “Primer Encuentro de las Mujeres Zapatistas con las Mujeres del Mundo” or the “First Meeting of Zapatista Women with International Women” which took place from the 29th to 31st of December 2007 in the caracol known as “La Garrucha”, based in the Tzeltal jungle (Espacio, 2013, par. 8). On a broader scale, it is also relevant that out of the 13 Zapatista demands central to each caracol and the movement as a whole, one specifically focuses on respect for women.

The other demands (land, bread, roof, health, education, work, culture, liberty, justice, peace, independence and democracy) are also integral to the fight for the liberation of Indigenous women and all other oppressed peoples.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have highlighted the tangible ways in which Zapatismo has uplifted the perspectives and demands of Indigenous women. However, those voices would not have been heard had it not been for the amazing work of comandantas and community members. Through the Women's Revolutionary Law, the Working Group on the Situation, Rights, and Culture of Indigenous Women, the Other Campaign, Marichuy's candidacy and a host of other actions, female Zapatistas have consistently fought for their rights as women and shown how gender equity is intrinsic to the fight for liberation and autonomy from the Mexican state and the oppressive structures it upholds. The role of Zapatista women in law-making, political expression, campaign involvement and relational politics has transformed the movement as a whole to be more inclusive of gender difference and other diverse identities.

I believe feminist movements in the United States and other so called "Western" countries have a lot to learn from Zapatismo. While the Women's March, Pussyhat Project, and other mainstream organizations have taken center stage in the last few years, these movements fall short of what I see as the truest and most radical form of feminism. The feminism I and other leftists support goes beyond superficial representation (which usually but not always centers white, wealthy, thin, able-bodied women) and instead focuses on structural inequities and their intersectional effects on female and other marginalized populations. As is the case for the struggle for gender equity within the Zapatista movement, feminism all over the world should take a proactive stance against capitalism and white supremacy which, along with patriarchy and

other systems of domination, serve to inflict interpersonal and systemic violence upon women. Taking inspiration from the strides of female Zapatistas, women in the United States and elsewhere should also focus their efforts on building coalitions of radical, autonomous, political organizations. Liberation is not about assimilating into neoliberalism through fighting for more actresses on television or female CEO's in corner offices. True liberation calls for the dismantling of the system as a whole in order to build new systems of anti-capitalist, antiracist, and antipatriarchal governance and community accountability.

Appendix

Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Laws

The following laws were enacted by the EZLN on the day of the initial January 1st Zapatista uprising in 1994. They also appeared in the newspaper *El Despertador* (EZLN, n.d., par. 1).

“On January 1 1994 in conjunction with the uprising. In their just fight for the liberation of our people, the EZLN incorporates women in the revolutionary struggle regardless of their race, creed, color or political affiliation, requiring only that they meet the demands of the exploited people and that they commit to the laws and regulations of the revolution. As well as, taking account of the situation of the woman worker in Mexico, the revolution incorporates their just demands of equality and justice in the following Women's Revolutionary Law.

First--Women, regardless of their race, creed, color or political affiliation, have the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle in any way that their desire and capacity determine.

Second--Women have the right to work and receive a just salary.

Third--Women have the right to decide the number of children they have and care for.

Fourth--Women have the right to participate in the matters of the community and have charge if they are free and democratically elected.

Fifth--Women and their children have the right to Primary Attention in their health and nutrition.

Sixth--Women have the right to education.

Seventh--Women have the right to choose their partner and are not obliged to enter into marriage.

Eighth--Women have the right to be free of violence from both relatives and strangers.

Rape and attempted rape will be severely punished.

Ninth--Women will be able to occupy positions of leadership in the organization and hold military ranks in the revolutionary armed forces.

Tenth--Women will have all the rights and obligations which the revolutionary laws and regulations give” (EZLN, n.d., par. 2-12).

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