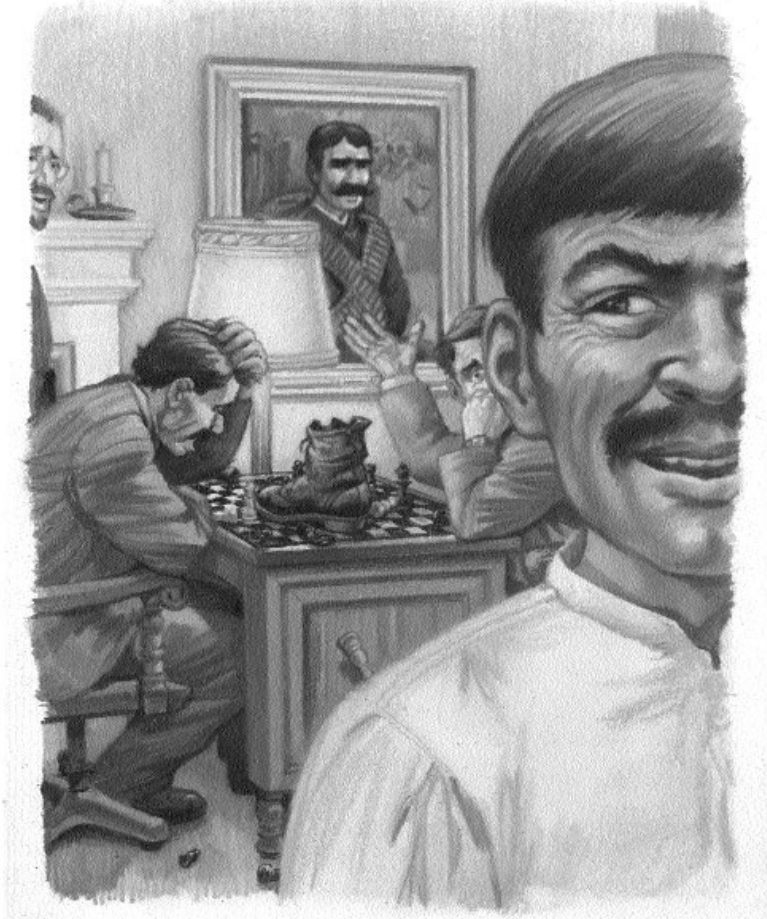


The Other Player



At the March 12, 2001 intercultural meeting, “Paths of Dignity: Indigenous Rights, Memory and Cultural Heritage,” Marcos begins his presentation by complaining that Durito has repeatedly interrupted his preparation. Marcos also tells a story about the intervention of an indigenous man in a chess match. Leaving Marcos to talk about culture in the abstract, Durito exits to enjoy the rock concert held later that evening in the Zócalo.

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March 12, 2001

A good midday to all:

We would like to express our appreciation to the community of the National School of Anthropology and History for offering us the opportunity to give our word alongside these people, who add their humanity to their power to give life to words, people who accompany a struggle that can only be recorded within the great battle for humanity.¹

It is not simple to begin this talk.

Not just because the lights accompanying us are dazzling and leave very few dark spaces, the favorite place for the shadows that we are.

But also because an impertinent beetle has prevented me from preparing something poised and skillful, interrupting me with every kind of absurd and unintelligible thing.

Perhaps you have heard talk of him before, he calls himself “Don Durito de la Lacandona,” and he has assigned himself the mission of, he says, righting injustice and offering succor to the needy and helpless. For some reason that I am not able to understand, Durito has decided that I fit into the category of the needy and helpless and, he says, my entire life is an injustice.

So you already know that what has kept me up all these days has not been the volume of Fox’s contradictory statements, nor the death threats so generously lavished on us by the National Action Party. No, it’s been Durito who has insisted that the bus is not a bus, but a vessel, and that the march in reality does not march, but sails, since it is the sea that gives it sustenance.

According to the little I was able to understand, Durito will attend the rock concert that will take place today in the Zócalo of Mexico City, in which, we are told, Joaquín Sabina, Maldita Vecindad, Santa Sabina and Panteón Rococó, as well as a good number of young men and women, will take part.²

But that is, as everything in this march, a story yet to be told.

In culture, Zapatismo has been able to find generous ears and echoes that voice their own dignity. In music, particularly in rock, in the visual and dramatic arts, in letters and in scientific analysis, we have found good people, humane people, who follow their own paths of dignity. And so we would like to take advantage of this event to greet all those men and women who struggle for humanity through culture.³

1 Marcos joined noted intellectuals José Saramago, Alain Touraine, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Bernard Cassen, Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska, Carlos Montemayor and Pablo González Casanova at the panel discussion “Los Caminos de la dignidad: Derechos Indígenas, memoria y patrimonio cultural” convened at the Olympic Village Sports Center of the National School of Anthropology and History or Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH).

2 The concert, “Zapata en el corazón,” had an estimated 90,000 Zapatista supporters, brigadistas and fans. Joaquín Sabina cancelled at the last minute. Although Marcos was rumored to attend, he did not join in the celebration.

3 For an important statement of the Zapatistas’ appreciation for cultural workers, see “Today Ends the National Plebiscite for Peace and Democracy,” in EZLN, *Documentos y comunicados 2*

In order to speak as Zapatistas about the paths of dignity, we will tell a story that is called:

THE OTHER PLAYER

Set in their studious corner, the players
move the gradual pieces. Until dawn
the chessboard keeps them in its strict confinement
with its two colors set at daggers drawn.

(...)

Eventually, when the players have withdrawn,
when time itself has finally consumed them,
the ritual certainly will not be done.

(...)

The player too is captive of caprice
(the words are Omar's) on another ground
where black nights alternate with whiter days.

God moves the player, he in turn the piece.
But what God beyond God begins the round
of dust and time and sleep and agonies?"

—Jorge Luis Borges⁴

This is the story:

A group of players finds itself engrossed in an important master chess game. An indigenous man approaches, observes, and asks what it is they are playing. No one answers him. The indigenous approaches the board and contemplates the position of the pieces, the serious, frowning faces of the players, the expectant attitude of those around them. He repeats his question. One of the players takes the trouble of responding: "It's something you wouldn't be able to understand; it's a game for important and wise people." The indigenous remains silent and continues to observe the board and the competitors' moves. After a time, he ventures another question: "And why do you play if you already know who's going to win?" The same player who responded before tells him: "You'll never understand, it's beyond your intellectual grasp. This is for experts." The indigenous doesn't say anything. He continues looking and he leaves. Soon after, he returns, carrying something with him. Without saying a word, he approaches the game table and places an old, mud-covered boot in the middle of the board. The players are confounded, and they look at him angrily. The indigenous smiles maliciously as he asks: "Check?"

(México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1995), 449-50. See also "From the Underground Culture to the Culture of Resistance," *La Jornada*, October 27, 1999.

4 "Chess," in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, Alexander Coleman, ed. (New York: Viking, 1999), 102-3.

End of Story.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English poet from the cusp of the 18th and 19th centuries, wrote: “If a man were to cross through Paradise in a dream, and they gave him a flower as proof that he had been there, and if, upon awakening, he were to find that flower in his hand . . . what then?”⁵

In this March of Indigenous Dignity, we Zapatistas have seen a part of the map of national tragedy that is not at primetime on the radio and television news programs. Anyone present here can argue that this has no merit whatsoever, and that a march wasn’t necessary in order to realize that the Mexico of below forms the majority in number and in poverty.

But I did not come to talk to you about poverty rates, constant repression, or deceptions.

On this march, we Zapatistas have also seen parts of rebel Mexicos, who see themselves and see others. That and nothing else is dignity. The Mexicos of below, particularly the indigenous, speak to us of a history of struggle and resistance that comes from afar and that beats in the today of each place. Yes, but it is also a history which looks forward.

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast to the Zócalo of Mexico City, we Zapatistas have crossed a territory of rebellion that has given us a flower of brown dignity as proof that we were there. We have reached the center of Power and we find that we have that flower in our hands and the question is, as Coleridge wrote, “what then?”

Contrary to what the columnists of the political class might suppose, the question does not refer to what follows, but to what that brown flower means. And, above all, what it means for the future.

I know that in these times of modernity, where intellectual quotients are replaced by bank accounts, poetry by advertising spots, and science by verbal diarrhea, speaking of dreams can only sound anachronistic.

Nonetheless, the struggle of the Indian communities for their dignity is fundamentally a dream, indeed, it is a very otherly dream.

The indigenous struggle in Mexico is a dream that not only dreams the tomorrow that includes the color of the earth, also and above all, it is a dream that fights to urge the awakening of that tomorrow.

We Indian communities reappeared precisely when what denied us seemed stronger and more solid. And it’s precisely what our dream already predicts—that the monuments that neoliberalism erects for itself are nothing but future ruins.

5 The full quote reads: “If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke—Aye, and what then?” See “Anima Poetae” (1816), in *Bloomsbury Biographical Dictionary of Quotations*, 1997.

Power wants to enclose the current indigenous struggle in nostalgia, chest-beating and the artisan “boom.” It wants to strike out the Indian struggle within the framework of the past, something like “the past reaches out to us with unpaid accounts,” to use the marketing language that is so fashionable. As if settling these accounts were the effective solvent to erase that past, and then the “today, today, today” that Fox used as an election platform and uses as a government program, could reign without any problem. The same “today” that neoliberalism has converted into a new religious creed.

If we warn that the indigenous movement wants to turn fashionable, we are not referring only to the publicity zeal that wants to envelope it.

After all, fashion is nothing more than a return to a past whose final horizon is the present, the today, nowadays, the fleeting moment.

In the struggle for dignity, there is a similar turn to the past, but—and this is fundamental—the final horizon is the future.

To put it in other terms, neoliberalism—nothing other than a fashion, that is, a turn to the past with the horizon of the present (thus the “neo” that gives the liberalism of yesteryear currency)—conceives of the current world as the only one possible, as the culmination of the ages. That’s why Fox and others say that ultimately all progressive struggle ended with his reaching Power. His intellectuals and public relations advisors (that is, if there’s any difference) shoot at the clock of history in order to stop time, and thus ensure that there is no other tomorrow than the one they are presiding over.

Neoliberal intellectuals, in contrast with their predecessors, have renounced the historic initiative and no longer announce the future. Not because they are unable to see it, but because they are afraid of it.

The Mexican indigenous struggle has not come to turn back the clock. It is not about returning to the past and declaiming, in an emotional and inspired voice, that “all previous times were better.” I think they would have tolerated and even applauded that.

No, we Indian people have come to wind the clock and thus to ensure that the inclusive, tolerant and plural tomorrow—that is, incidentally, the only tomorrow possible—will arrive.

To do that, in order for our march to make the clock of humanity march, we Indian peoples have resorted to the art of reading what has not yet been written. Because that is the dream that animates us as indigenous, as Mexicans and, above all, as human beings. With our struggle we read the future that had already been sown yesterday, that is being cultivated today, and that can only be reaped if one fights, that is, if one dreams.

To the skepticism-made-State-doctrine, to neoliberal indifference, to the cynical realism of globalization, we Indian people have countered with memory, the word and the dream.

By launching into this fight with everything we have, the Mexican indigenous, as individuals and as a collective, have operated with a universally human

impulse, that of rebellion. It has made us a thousand times better than before and it has turned us into an historic force, not because of its prominence in books or monuments, but because of its ability to make history, like that, in lowercase.

The key to “The Other Player” is not in the old boot full of mud that interrupts and subverts the media chess game of the gentlemen of power and money, and the game that exists between those who have made politics the art of simulation and deception. The essential thing is in the smile that the indigenous smiles, and that he knows something. He knows that the other player, which is him, is missing and the other who is not him, but who is also other, is also missing. But above all he knows that it is not true that the fight has ended and that we have lost. He knows that it has barely begun. And he knows it, not because he knows, but because he dreams.

In short, we indigenous are not part of yesterday, we are part of tomorrow.

And given boots, culture and tomorrows, we remember what we wrote some time ago, looking back and dreaming ahead: “A boot is a boot that has taken the wrong path, and seeks to be what all boots long to be, that is, a bare foot.”

And this is relevant because in the tomorrow that we are dreaming there will be no boots, nor jeans, nor soldiers, but bare feet, which is how feet should be when the morning is just beginning.

Thank you.

From the National School of Anthropology and History
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos
Mexico

P.S. I know it might be disconcerting to some that, to speak of culture from the indigenous point of view, I resort to other voices—Borges and Coleridge in this case—but that is how I remind myself, and remind you, that culture is a bridge for everyone, above calendars and borders, and as such should be defended. So we say and say to ourselves: no to cultural hegemony, no to cultural homogeneity, and no to any form of hegemony and homogeneity.

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