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# Zapatista Seed Pedagogics: Beyond Rights, Creating a Decolonizing Co-education

Charlotte María Sáenz\*

## Abstract

*This article inquires into a pedagogics that seeds a larger co-educational process outside of the Zapatista movement's autonomous territories. A Zapatista Seed Pedagogics (ZSP) is theorized as an educational, political, and ethical process that confronts oppressive power relations at all levels, growing a collective political and educational subject. While still asserting the need for Indigenous rights within a neocolonial context, a ZSP transcends a human rights education framework to insist on the inherent value of all beings and their birthright to a dignified life. Drawing on a qualitative transgeographic study conducted through interviews with pro-Zapatista interlocutors who are themselves involved in processes of social change in their localities, the author explores how this ZSP provokes a learning to learn and listen differently,*

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*contributing to a larger mutualistic political-ethical education that in turn grows Zapatismo itself.*

**Keywords:** Zapatista epistemology, liberation pedagogics, Zapatismo, pedagogies of social movements, decolonization

## Introduction

Over the last three decades, organized Indigenous Maya<sup>1</sup> peasants known as Zapatistas<sup>2</sup> have been building alternative systems of education, government, justice, production, and health—among others—throughout their autonomous territory (JBG, 2013 a, b, c, & d). Simultaneously, they have engaged in learning exchanges and movement-building with other regional and global communities resisting domination and seeking alternatives to capitalism. As encapsulated by their motif “EVERYTHING FOR EVERYONE,” the Zapatista Movement recognizes people’s inherent value and right to a dignified life. This guiding principle lays the ground for relational ethics that includes and transcends a human rights framework. While the need remains to assert Indigenous rights (Speed, 2008) within a neocolonial context, the global struggle for lives of dignity and resistance against capitalist exploitation transcends a state often unable or unwilling to fulfill the basic needs of its inhabitants. Facing a global capitalist-hydra<sup>3</sup> of extraction and control with many others, the Zapatistas seek to grow a planetary movement in defense of life itself. This was recently exemplified by their Journey for Life embarked upon in 2021, in which Zapatista delegates sailed in a reverse-colonization journey to Europe, the first stop in an announced multi-year voyage to the five continents with the intention of meeting with other peoples also insubordinate to colonial-capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Including Maya Tsotsil, Tseltal, Tojolabal, & Ch’ol language groups.

<sup>2</sup> The contemporary social movement that emerged from the armed insurgency of New Year’s Day 1994 in Chiapas, Mexico, takes their name from the followers of Emiliano Zapata, leader of the southern armies in the 1910 Mexican revolution—in that sense being technically neozapatistas.

<sup>3</sup> The “capitalist-hydra” is how the Zapatistas refer to the many-headed conglomerate of industrial complexes —such as militarization, mass-media, pharmaceutical and agribusiness— of a dominant capitalist world-system.

Together with the many encounters previously held in their autonomous territory over decades, such border-crossing movements are part of what composes the pluriverse of perspectives that make up the decolonizing education of Zapatista Seed Pedagogics (ZSP).

As an education that confronts the hegemonic and homogenizing logic of capitalist-colonial-cisheteropatriarchal domination, I propose that a ZSP transcends both singular social struggles and state borders by building a collective political subject that spans multiple geographies.<sup>4</sup> It does so by building a common political territory of anti-systemic and counter-hegemonic<sup>5</sup> knowledge that confronts racist and cisheteropatriarchal capitalist-colonial domination in all its apparatuses and manifestations,<sup>6</sup> while remaining rooted in a relational worldview and ethics that transcends institutional schooling and politics in a struggle for a dignified life. A closer examination of this ZSP offers a homegrown example of a movement education arising from Chiapas, Mexico, with insights for other communities worldwide and useful for decolonizing human rights frameworks. Various critiques of Human Rights Education (HRE) have noted the need to interrogate epistemological assumptions in HRE, as these have political consequences for those for whom state-conferred rights do not reach or apply. (e.g., Bajaj, 2015; Bajaj & Brantmieier, 2011; Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021; Keet, 2015; Kester, 2019; Shirazi, 2011; Williams, 2013, 2016, 2017; Williams & Bermeo, 2020; Yang, 2015; Zakharia, 2017; Zembylas, 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Zembylas & Keet, 2019; Zembylas, 2020).

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<sup>4</sup> The Zapatistas strategically refer to “other geographies” to imagine and designate other viable anti-capitalist spatial configurations (Reyes, 2015). They rename places in their autonomous territory, for example, the *Caracol Torbellino de Nuestras Palabras* (which can be translated as the Whirling Snail of our Words) which was previously called the *Aguascalientes*, also known as *Caracol de Morelia*, located in the *Tzots Choj* (Bat-Jaguar) zone, which is in the official municipality of Altamirano (CIEPAC, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Construction of what the Zapatistas call “another politics” from “below and to the left,” outside the framework of the nation-state. This call was made in their Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Rainforest (EZLN, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The previously mentioned term “capitalist hydra” highlights the multiple and emerging forms this many-headed monster can take.

Familiar with the limitations of a state whose historically neocolonial domination and exclusion have only been exacerbated by the intensification of a growing narcocapitalism (Veltmeyer & Petras, 2019; 2011) and individualizing government social programs that advance financialization interests (Coughlin, 2022), the Zapatistas go beyond the state human rights model to build their own autonomy on their recuperated lands. In addition to the revolutionary education the Zapatistas create within their autonomous communities,<sup>7</sup> I argue that they have also set in motion a larger decolonizing mutual education process with the external world(s) beyond. The term Zapatista Seed Pedagogics<sup>8</sup> (Sáenz, 2022; Sáenz et al., 2021) refers to this larger participatory, politicizing, and ultimately mutually educational process that develops in relational construction with those outside Zapatista autonomous territories. Many scholars have come to study the revolutionary education that takes place in Zapatista communities through their creation of autonomous systems, including schools and their promoters of education (Barbosa, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Baronnet, 2011, 2012, 2015; Baronnet & Stahler-Sholk, 2017; Baronnet, Mora Bayo, & Stahler-Sholk, 2011; Mora, 2017; Rockwell, 1995, 1998, 2006, 2009).<sup>9</sup> The Zapatista movement also produces a larger education that extends beyond its borders—via their *encuentros*,<sup>10</sup> discourse, and cultural production—and that collectively confronts hegemonic power while constructing collective knowledge and political action with other subjugated actors.

Like other various critical, Indigenous, and decolonizing pedagogies (i.e., Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Grande, 2004), a ZSP promotes participatory collective processes that question oppressive systems. The Zapatistas have

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<sup>7</sup> Zapatista autonomous territories in Chiapas extend across several municipalities and consist of their own created systems of governance, justice, health, education, agroecology, and other economic cooperative projects, in which all members of the communities participate. They are administered through eleven “caracoles,” each with their own Council of Good Government, schools, and health clinics. Caracol means snail, conch shell, or spiral.

<sup>8</sup> In translating from the Spanish “pedagógica” into the English “pedagogics,” Backer and Diego (2019) create an ambiguity as to its singular/plural use, one fittingly appropriate as it confers a flexibility to refer to a specific pedagogics, while also allowing for there to be others.

<sup>9</sup> “Promotores de educación” is how the Zapatistas refer to their teachers.

<sup>10</sup> In-person encounters, usually large-scale gatherings on Zapatista territory.

hosted a variety of political, arts, cinema, science, organizing, and sporting encounters in which participants share experiences and strategies, critical analyses, worldviews, and creative expression. Collectively, this helps develop the ethical, historical, and political framings which read society from de-centered positions. However, as Tuck and Yang (2019) emphasize in explaining the fundamentals of Indigenous pedagogies, it is not a pedagogy that seeks to empower a critical citizenry for greater participation and integration within the nation-state, but rather one that seeks to build self-determination via the construction of Zapatista autonomy *from* a colonizing state. Such autonomous praxis opens collective imagination to other forms of living and learning that operate outside of the nation-state framework, creating opportunities for more diverse and direct mechanisms of change.

A note on terminology: my use of Dussel's term "pedagogics" contrasts with the word "pedagogy," defined as the science or technique for transmitting knowledge. Pedagogics refers to a larger philosophical framework that confronts face-to-face relationships of power (Dussel et al., 2019) and geopolitical asymmetries; it considers ethics, politics, and economics in power analyses. Dussel's Pedagogics of Liberation mobilizes an ongoing process of *learning to listen*, essential to an intersubjective<sup>11</sup> relationship in learning and teaching. In the moment of encounter, the subject holding the more dominant position<sup>12</sup> has the option to open themselves up to other ways of being and knowing. Or, inversely, of insisting on their own sense of what is or what should be, foreclosing any new understanding. Dussel's liberatory pedagogics open possibilities for deeper listening that can lead to new and shared understandings, instead of remaining in the same place of knowing.

Thus, a ZSP is a way of understanding how Zapatismo builds a collective political-ethical subject (Sáenz et al., 2021) both inside and outside its autonomous territories, as well as across borders. This pedagogics is nourished by the potent figure of the seed, for its ongoing role in continuing life itself, essential to planetary vitality. With philosophical roots in the ancestral

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<sup>11</sup> Where both subjects regard each other as worthy of mutual respect and dignity, able to dialogue as equals in mutual listening with, and learning from, each other.

<sup>12</sup> In Dussel's example the dominant subject was the adult teacher vis-à-vis the child learner.

knowledge of its diverse Mayan peoples and lands, this pedagogics continues to develop and transform through its interlocution with other regional, continental, and global liberatory movements. It has been influenced by the Marxism brought by the National Liberation Forces,<sup>13</sup> Teología India<sup>14</sup>—a regional Liberation Theology (Tamayo, 2017), the Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970), and Indigenous human rights (Speed, 2007; Sumida-Huaman, 2017). This ZSP has developed over time, disseminating inspiration and impact well outside Zapatista territories.

This article presents findings from a 2020-2021 international study that analyzes 36 interviews with Zapatista sympathizers engaged in their own community struggles for justice in Mexico and around the world. My questions invited interviewees to reflect on what they had learned from Zapatista encounters, and on how these learnings impacted their present lives on a day-to-day basis. Their testimonies narrate how their interactions with radically different ways of knowing, being, and doing within a Zapatista political framework opened possibility: they came to different understandings and to see how inherited conceptions and systems of life are not immutable. Their narrations of personal unlearning illustrate how a ZSP introduces other ways of knowing, being, and doing that disrupt a hegemonic ontoepistemology, while co-constructing an evolving process of political education.

### **Onto-epistemic Roots**

Zapatismo is a political expression that emerges dialogically through time from local knowledges in dialogue with external influences. Like many other contemporary indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica and beyond, the diverse Tzotzil, Tseltal, Tojolabal, and Ch'ol communities<sup>15</sup> of the Zapatista movement remain rooted in the land and in collective life (Lenkersdorf,

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<sup>13</sup> The National Liberation Forces (FLN) is the Mexican political and armed group from Monterrey that gave rise to the EZLN, the political-military structure of the Zapatistas.

<sup>14</sup> The regional experience of spiritual syncretism (Perez-Espinosa, 2021) that emerged out of the Catholic diocese of bishop Samuel Ruiz.

<sup>15</sup> Although all Mayan peoples, there exist differences—at times frictions among them—and diversity in their ways of knowing, as social memories and philosophies change even amongst the same people.

2006). This is exemplified in the tending of a common *milpa*<sup>16</sup> which extends beyond agriculture to educating the community. As described by Tseltal scholar López Intzín:

[We] walk and [...] learn to live in a communal way. Learning to gather-collect [as] a knowledge and teaching-learning of life in the field. Whatever seed it is, it must be gathered, and it requires *kanantayel* (care) because much of the subsistence and continuity of family and community life depends on it. (López Intzín, 2013, p. 79, my translation)

Literally and metaphorically, he describes the value of each grain as vital to community subsistence. Each seed is a human intervention coming from a long co-evolutionary history and earthly memory. López Intzín emphasizes the vitality of each seed, referring to how each person is vital for the community in their contribution to “the common good,” an ethic evident in Zapatista praxis. Grounded in communal ancestral wisdom, the ethics in such pedagogics counters the capitalist and colonial hegemonic logic that promotes individualism. This relational thinking-feeling<sup>17</sup> manifests in the seven Zapatista principles.<sup>18</sup>

For example, the concept of *mandar obedeciendo*,<sup>19</sup> is not just about individual humans and their relationships; humans are understood as part of nature, part of a world and a cosmos that cannot be fully comprehended. “Leading by obeying” describes a relationship to nature, manifest in the many rituals of planting, caring, and harvesting that are done in accordance with

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<sup>16</sup> The Spanish word *milpa* is derived from the Nahuatl word *milli-pan*, which describes the Mesoamerican way of planting corn, squash, beans, and other endemic plants. It is an ancient technology geared towards basic subsistence that carries cultural identity and knowledge.

<sup>17</sup> “*Senti-pensar*” is a way to re-integrate a mind-body split that privileges “thinking” as abstract reason over the felt knowledges of the body and its emotions.

<sup>18</sup> The seven Zapatista Principles are: 1) serve and not serve oneself; 2) represent and not supplant; 3) build and not destroy; 4) obey and not command; 5) propose and not impose; 6) convince and not vanquish; and 7) descend and not ascend.

<sup>19</sup> “Leading by obeying” is one of the most important Zapatista principles that reflects their assembly-based decision-making process for the common good, as well as the authorities’ mandate to carry out the common good of the people.



the seasons, climate, and elements. This principle of “obey and not command” is perhaps the most difficult for a Modern episteme to absorb. It speaks of acquiescence to the common good in a sustainable life of a community intertwined with the natural world to which it belongs. It manifests both in the political field and in the environmental wisdom (Leff, 2006) that serves the EVERYTHING FOR EVERYBODY ethic.

In a ZSP, the right to a dignified life extends beyond humanity to all living creatures. It finds expression in the spiral image of snails,<sup>20</sup> a fundamental element of Mesoamerican cosmovision that the Zapatistas frequently recreate in embroidery, murals, books, and paintings. In various Mesoamerican codices and ceremonies, the snail is a symbol of speech. In Zapatista autonomous territory, administrative zones are organized into *caracoles*,<sup>21</sup> each bearing a distinct name; these welcome people from outside who feel called by the ethical-political approach of Zapatismo. Conch shells summon communities to assemble for collective decision-making. The leisurely pace of a snail is also a counterpoint to the intense speed and voracity of capitalism that has devastated the environment and caused massive species extinction. Its infinite spiral in both directions refers to the Zapatista metaphor of the inverted periscope<sup>22</sup> pointing “under the earth” to ancestral knowledge that was subjugated but not exterminated. Ancestral knowledge, as manifested in Zapatismo, entails self-reflection in the *caminando preguntamos*<sup>23</sup> praxis that guides the movement in its steps. This was also the methodology of my study that inquired into the reflective learning process of a ZSP.

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<sup>20</sup> Mendoza and García (2015, p. 657) explain how, for the Zapatistas, a snail represents “entering the heart (knowledge), in turn leaving the heart to walk in the world (life), so there is a movement back and forth...” (my translation).

<sup>21</sup> Historian Andrés Aubry writes about the historical and political symbolism of the Zapatista *Caracoles* in November 2003 in *La Jornada's* Ojarasca supplement 79.

<sup>22</sup> Metaphor of former Sub-commander Marcos, who wrote, “An inverted periscope (or memory, a buried key)” at [http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/comunicados/1998/1998\\_02\\_a.htm](http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/comunicados/1998/1998_02_a.htm).

<sup>23</sup> The self-reflexive methodological praxis of the Zapatista movement that expresses itself with variants such as *we question as we walk*, *questioning while walking*, among others.

## Research Methodology

My theory and research stem from my life interest in educational trajectories that seek common liberation by critically confronting power. My theorization of ZSP (Sáenz et al., 2021), develops out of my own experiences accompanying Zapatismo since 1994<sup>24</sup> first protesting the war, militarization of Chiapas, and the massacre of Acteal; then as a community media educator in Chicago<sup>25</sup> and Lebanon, and later as university faculty leading study-trips to the region. Over three decades of growing recognition and solidarity with the Zapatista movement, I have also come to regard myself as a part of its extension across borders of struggles, as I carried what I was learning to other places and communities who had never heard of this movement; I began to see how our different struggles connected to each other. As a queer mestiza Mexican woman of various lineages, I share in the experience of multiple migrations and continuation of historical struggles as subjugated peoples: of humiliated and exploited workers; of forbidden sexualities and gendered violence; of forced disappearances; of denied spiritualities and persecuted knowledge; and of resistance to the assimilation of mestizaje.<sup>26</sup> I have felt in my body and psyche the incongruence, pain, and rage that accompany violence at all levels—whether directed at me or others. Thus, the desire and intention in all my work, both intrapersonal, interpersonal, as well as socio-political, is to contribute to the liberatory fields of education by collectively reflecting on the ZSP of which I am a part.

By engaging in structured conversations with others who have similarly engaged with the Zapatista Movement, my intention with this research is to come to better understand the movement pedagogics we are involved with in Zapatismo. I have drawn inspiration from South American participant

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<sup>24</sup> In 1994, I was a government worker restructuring curricula for a new National Center of the Arts in Mexico City, while also volunteering with Alianza Cívica to monitor the national election.

<sup>25</sup> At Street-Level Youth Media, which participated in the Chiapas Media Project that later became Promedios de Comunicación Comunitaria.

<sup>26</sup> *Mestizaje*, meaning “mixing,” is a Latin American term referring to a nationalist project of racial mixture dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century which includes a (whitening) process of assimilation into dominant Eurocentric culture, largely through mechanisms of education and media.

observation (Fals-Borda, 1991), as well as from North American feminist women of color (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983), whose methodologies inform my process in research and writing from embodied and lived experience. Although always an incomplete process, I seek to decolonize my own epistemological process, opening myself to other ways of knowing that draw from the embedded socioecological networks (Rocheleau, 2016) of the various territories I inhabit and traverse.

For this research study, I developed a flexible qualitative methodology that was self-reflective, participatory, and, above all, relational. Learning from alternative research paradigms theorized and practiced by the original peoples of Abya Yala (Cusicanqui, 2010), New Zealand (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), and North America (Wilson, 2008), I developed ways of asking, listening, documenting, thinking, analyzing, and writing that could guide narrations of life and learning in social movements. I sought to spark self-reflection and dialogue during and beyond the interview or research project.

The resulting 36 interviews were conducted with 38 interlocutors from diverse territories with origins in 14 countries and included respondents between 20-80 years of age. These were mostly urban, although many with ties to agroecology and/or rural sectors. 25 were women, 12 men, and one non-binary person, from diverse professions,<sup>27</sup> faiths,<sup>28</sup> race/ethnicities<sup>29</sup> and different ascriptions within the political Left--all sympathetic to the Zapatista movement and adherents to the Sexta.<sup>30</sup> The majority opted to choose a

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<sup>27</sup> These include lawyers, academics (sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, ecologists, economists, scientists, mathematicians), activists, agroecologists, beekeepers, artists, farmers, filmmakers, communicologists, land defenders, athletes, educators, students, teachers, mothers, fathers, journalists, painters, poets, human rights, NGO workers and healthcare practitioners.

<sup>28</sup> Although several told stories from their Catholic or Protestant backgrounds, often with Liberation Theology undertones, none identified themselves by their religion. There were also two people of Muslim cultural origin.

<sup>29</sup> Among those who mentioned more general categories of race or ethnicity in addition to their specific people(s) or places of origin and formation were Afrondigenous, Indigenous, Mestizx, White, Chicanx.

<sup>30</sup> These adherents to the Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona, be they individuals or collectives, organizations, or movements, agree with the new way of doing politics proposed in the communiqué of the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (EZLN, 2005).

pseudonym for confidentiality in this process. I started with a list of contacts and then drew upon the recommendations of the interviewees themselves. These interviews were conducted during 2020-2021, under early pandemic conditions, via video calls between our respective locations,<sup>31</sup> audio and/or video recorded, transcribed, and sometimes translated. Quotes were categorized following axes presented in the interview questions: personal and collective territories or geographies; first knowledge and/or contact with the Zapatista movement; learning from the encounter with the Zapatistas; and impact on their daily lives. The transcripts were sent to the interlocutors for their approval and revision.

What all my interlocutors have in common is that they credit Zapatismo with having significantly impacted their political formation, trajectory, and/or daily life. Some only traveled to Zapatista territory for one or several *Encuentros*; others spent decades working with Zapatista communities. As evidenced by the social struggles in which they participate, my interlocutors came to this study already immersed in a learning process around politics and action. More than half actively work in national or international solidarity networks. My interviews invited reflection on what was learned from their encounter with the pedagogical logic and practice of Zapatismo. They were also asked to reflect on how their learnings manifest in their everyday life and practices upon returning to their communities.

My interlocutors began with a biographical narration across the various geographies and histories that compose the trajectory which led them to connect with Zapatismo. These journeys often described experiences of dissonance that led to the critical questioning of what Freire (1970) identifies as the beginning of the conscientization process. Prompted by the interview questions, my interlocutors narrated processes of (un)learning that, often, they had not had a chance to reflect on before. My interview questions and the space created by this overall inquiry provided an opportunity for deeper personal reflection on how they had learned what they now know.

The examples shared by the interlocutors of this study reveal how a political-ethical commonality can be built by engaging in an intentional and

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<sup>31</sup> The locations of the interviewees are not disclosed to preserve respondents' anonymity.

continuous process of (un)learning that transforms relationships. Their learning processes are complex and non-linear; many are similar, but not the same. Yet patterns emerge in their movements of deconstruction and reconstruction through time and space. One pattern that emerges from these interviews is how they begin to learn differently: unlearning previous assumptions and relearning through listening and collectivity—both exercises in developing a decolonizing process that deconstructs individualism and opens greater awareness. Together, their interviews reveal how a ZSP affects ways of conceiving and constructing knowledge in everyday practices.

### **Impact of the Encounter**

While the Zapatista insurgency of January 1, 1994, took most of the world by surprise, it was also welcomed by locals who had suffered at the hands of the oppressive elite. Aurora, at the time a young woman from a small town in Chiapas, narrates how Zapatista major Ana Maria issued a statement at midnight saying: "Huixtán is now liberated from its oppressor, from fear." These events impacted her both personally and collectively, becoming the "determining pedagogy of political formation that would come to define the route of my life," (Aurora, interview 05/05/2020). For Aurora and her mother, it meant a liberation from an oligarchy of unpunished military men, among whom were their sexual oppressors.

In the years that followed, there were those who came from elsewhere to Zapatista territory through organized support groups, perhaps to assist with the construction of autonomous infrastructure, or as part of educational brigades and solidarity caravans. There were also those who responded to the Zapatistas' open invitations to any one of the many large public gatherings and diverse pedagogical encounters that began with the First Intercontinental *Encuentro* for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism in 1996. A partial list includes: The Color of the Earth March (2001), The Other Campaign (2006), The Encounter of Zapatista Women with the Women of the World (2007), The Festival of Dignified Rage (2010), International Seminar Planet Earth: Anti-systemic Movements (2012), The Little School of Freedom According to the Zapatistas (2013, 2014), Homage to Maestro Galeano (2014), El

Pensamiento Crítico Frente a la Hidra Capitalista (2014-2015), the two Conciencias por la Humanidad, and the various CompArtes (2016, 2017, 2018), the meeting of the transnational working tables in the formation of the Red de Rebelión y Resistencia (2018-19), the two International Encounters of Women Who Struggle (2018 & 2019), La Travesía Por La Vida (2021), and the multiple meetings over the years of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) and its subsequent formation of the Indigenous Council of Government (CIG). The multiple seminars and conferences held at the Indigenous Center for Indigenous Capacity-building (CIDECI) between 2004-2019 and the regular weekly seminars of its University of the Earth, Chiapas, should also be considered as part of this larger dialogic interaction of Zapatismo with the world.

Many coming to these encounters experienced a kind of cultural shock in confronting profound differences in language, culture, and socio-economic realities. Confronted with very different ways of doing everyday things, they tried to listen and understand a very different world. Such encounters with otherness, the cultural clashes between diverse modernities, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, plus the particularities of Zapatista time and culture, prompted self-reflection and questioning. The new context complicated subjugated identities, as with a woman of South American Indigenous roots who migrated to California 20 years before, who stated:

listening to their testimonies and hearing what is happening with Indigenous women in Latin America hit me hard, to realize that even as a grassroots activist, I am very privileged to live in the United States; it opened my eyes to how I am part of a whole system that is causing damage. (Hormiga Brava, interview 07/24/2020)

Her process involved a self-recognition of privilege and non-privilege, observing how inhabiting a racialized gendered body could operate differently in different global geopolitical contexts.

Among the notable impacts of the study's interlocutors' first encounter with the Zapatistas was an opening to other ways of knowing and doing politics. For those familiar with life in Mesoamerican Indigenous

communities, the novelty was in the new kind of political discourse emerging in the assemblies. They encountered an openness to sharing stories, knowledge, and resistance strategies. Their interviews reveal how their participation in Zapatista encounters helped to make evident, as well as build, a larger common struggle against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, that encompasses regional, national, and international movements in defense of land, territory, and life.

At the beginning, our approach was from a more educational space, but later we got involved in the defense of our territory, meeting with other Indigenous peoples of other places. By effectively sharing a threat to our existence, we also share the many possible ways of resistance. (Maya, interview 04/05/2020)

Another theme that emerged in the interviews was the reframing of agroecological peasant work within a broader field of struggle. This grew the terrain of solidarity with other movements that work and defend the land in urban, rural, and global spaces. In this sense, ZSP can be thought of as a pedagogical device like the peasant-to-peasant learning methodology promoted by agroecology (Val et al., 2019), where knowledge is shared horizontally in building food sovereignty. "The new ideas and development of ways of doing things that we need are coming from the peoples of the countryside in this historical moment" (Pedro, interview 06/04/2020). As with ZSP, the collective knowledge production of peasants in other social movements demonstrates the transformative power of intersubjective learning and teaching relationships coming from the grassroots.

For those who work in the countryside, the exchanges of knowledge with the Zapatistas around agroecological issues resulted in very concrete shared learning around the defense of native seeds and resistance against transgenics. "Although we know that we cannot do it the same way, they are a reference that helps us maintain hope that changes are indeed possible, that other ways can be achieved" (Maya, interview 04/05/2020). Even when it comes to non-Zapatista communities who live in proximity, "you can see how they impact non-Zapatista villages, with very slow transformations that still motivate significant changes, even though they are not directly linked to

the movement" (Pajarito, interview 11/05/2020). The integrated ethics of Zapatismo that connect everyday life to the protection of land and territory finds resonance in subjects not yet explicitly connected to the movement, but who become a part of ZSP through a contact that inspires a related process of (un)learning and action.

### **Emerging Seeds of a Zapatista Pedagogics**

Analyzing the interviews, I identified several interrelated seeds of learning (see my diagram below) in ZSP. These include: learning to learn differently (unlearning and relearning); learning to listen; learning other ways of seeing and naming (opening to other worldviews); learning other conceptions of time; learning collectivity; learning to organize; and learning to self-manage (build autonomy). These learnings are all part of a ZSP and can be visualized as spirals off a larger spiral caracol symbolizing this pedagogics (see Figure 1 below).

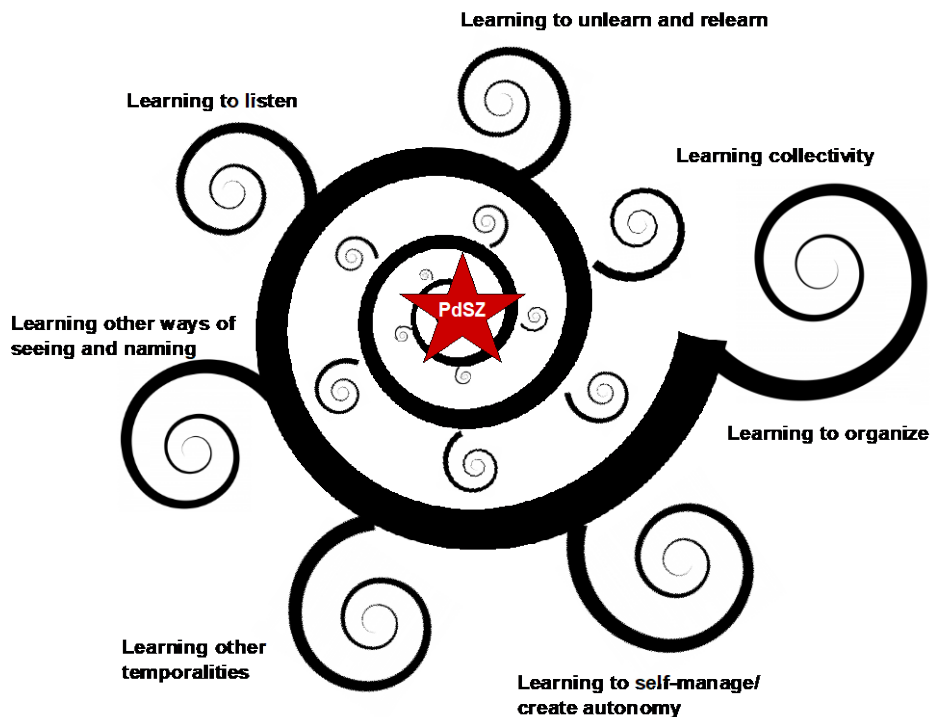


Figure 1. Seeds of Zapatista Pedagogics



### ***Unlearning Assumptions: Opening to Other Possibilities.***

For several of the respondents, conceiving a shared struggle meant expanding their preconceptions about how to make social change.

Having grown-up in the 70s and 80s, I had a romanticized idea of revolution that was radical for my home environment, yet my thinking remained simplistic. Zapatismo goes beyond the communism or anarchism I knew; it's more diverse and complex than either/or thinking and opened my eyes to many ways of making change. (Pajarito, interview 11/05/2020)

The organized and collective daily construction of Zapatista autonomy helped outsiders see that dominant social structures are not immutable and that both education and politics can be deprofessionalized, challenging the notion of the expert. Witnessing everyday people learning how to create for themselves better ways of living was a radical, transformative shift for many of my interlocutors that helped them further question deeply ingrained assumptions, including patriarchal habits, questioning gender roles, and witnessing gentler masculinities. The Zapatistas broke with the sexist vanguardism of previous revolutionary movements with their 1993 *Ley Revolucionaria de Mujeres* declaring women's equality and power to make decisions about their own lives. Notwithstanding, various interlocutors narrated how it felt contradictory to still encounter hierarchies in Zapatismo, particularly at the intersection of its military-political structure and its civilian process. This engendered other ways of thinking about the political, expanding the category to the domestic sphere, and politicizing the tasks of care and reproduction of life also performed in the home.

Unlearning patriarchal ways, both interpersonally as well as sociopolitically, was echoed amongst the respondents who observe in the Zapatistas an appreciation for the value of mistakes, understanding that making them does not have to be a cause for shame, but rather that mistakes are a teacher, holding opportunities for reflection, evaluation, (un)learning, and sharing. Collectivity plays a role here too, as where responsibility is shared and participation communalized, shaming decreases. Many of the interviews highlight anecdotes about moments in which the respondents were confronted

with a “dignified humility” (Árbol, interview 08/24/2020), an openness to not-knowing, a willingness to (un)learn, to listen, and then to newly learn, and do, together.

### ***Learning to Listen: Opening to Another Worldview and Temporality***

In a previous theoretical article (Sáenz et al., 2021), we described how linguistic philosophies can be vehicles of cosmoauditory travel (Lenkersdorf, 2008), in opening other conceptions of time and space conveyed through the Indigenous language<sup>32</sup> of a place. Learning to listen in everyday life includes building collective knowledge, invoking ancestral wisdom, and creating shared memory.

We need to listen to our ancestors, to elders who are still here, to understand who and what we are, and were, to know how to take up again this long road of listening, while also making, our history. (María Bonita, interview 12/04/2021)

Learning to listen then, opens portals to other temporalities and realities. Many of my interlocutors spoke about how powerful it was to witness people living their lives from an alternate worldview than the dominant colonial modernity.

I had read a lot about cosmovisions, but it was another thing to live it: to light a fire; to cleanse ourselves by burning *copal*; to pray every time we set out to do something important; to sow seeds on May 3<sup>rd</sup>...all actions that correspond to a cosmovision with very deep roots, still very much alive and that I could participate in without it being a folkloric representation, but rather a living process of cultural syncretism that embodies its history. (Genaro, interview 29/04/2020)

Here, Genaro alludes to the interrelationship evident in many rituals of planting, praying, caring, harvesting, and celebrating that are integrated

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<sup>32</sup> In the case of this article (Sáenz, Barbosa, and Cruz, 2021), the Indigenous languages discussed are the Maya Tojolabal studied by Lenkersdorf and the Maya Tseltal described by López Intzín.

with the weather, climate, and the elements in coexistence of mutual respect. Immersed in such a world, Genaro was experientially introduced to the Zapatista concept of *mandar obedeciendo*, of what it means to lead by obeying.<sup>33</sup> This kind of close listening leadership manifests both in community self-governance as well as in the interrelationship with one's environment (Leff, 2006). To lead by obeying is thus in service to the *lekil kuxlejal*<sup>34</sup> in common benefit with the Nature of which we are a part. This ethic of mutual care and support is the basis on which the political communality of Zapatismo manifests and continues to build.

An Indigenous peasant worldview committed to socio-environmental well-being provides a common ethical framework that weaves humans with the rest of nature. This ethics guides the socio-political life of the human community as well. Two of my interlocutors describe it as follows:

*Mandar obedeciendo*, or as we were invited to say, 'accompanying by obeying,' goes beyond accompaniment: it is about living organized. When the Zapatistas say ¡*organícense!* (Organize yourselves), they mean in the coexistence of dignified and respectful relationships with the whole environment. It is important to learn to talk less and to listen more—to relearn—and always, to be in relationship. (Laras and Sierra, interview 15/04/2020)

*Mandar obedeciendo*, then, also has to do with the actions of organizing collectively, with respect and dignity for all.

Several respondents relate how they came to conceive and experience other temporalities, both that of a long-term intergenerational historical resistance, as well as of the timefulness of processes that require more presence and care. "From the Zapatistas I learned to walk at the pace of the slowest, which I see as a pedagogical principle, one of humility, collectivity, and reciprocity" (Bernardo, interview 03/09/2020). Learning intercultural patience

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<sup>33</sup> One of the most important Zapatista principles that reflects their collective forms of decision-making (such as community assemblies) for the common good, as well as the responsibility of authorities in charge of carrying out the common good of the people.

<sup>34</sup> In Mayan Tzotzil and Tselal languages, it means a good living/existence with dignity in common with all beings on the planet.

was a constant and difficult learning, as cultural forms are structures deeply ingrained. Working in popular education, Emiliana sees an opportunity to practice patience with her family members and coworkers:

... before I wanted things to change right away. I started to judge others, without recognizing that I went through a transformative process just to become brave enough to be open, to question and become a critical thinker, to relearn. (Emiliana, interview 12/04/2020)

Patience is tied to listening:

the humility with which one must exercise a politics of listening is very different from a dialogue. It is both active and reflexive, building a connection that requires deconstructing privileges while also recognizing non-privileges. One listens from the heart, not from the head. (Blue, interview 20/04/2020)

Such patient listening means unlearning ideas of power, supremacy, and vanguard—practicing an "anti-elitist politics, a work from the rear" (Bernardo, interview 03/09/2020), where finding the rhythm of the collective starts from the *pace of the slowest*. This resistance to speed simultaneously advances an anti-ableist and anti-capitalist temporality, as it resists the merciless productivity demanded by the incessant growth and extraction of our contemporary sped-up world. Learning to be another way by daily recreating a worldview that unfolds at another pace, helps develop a more generous temporality that accompanies a long view of history with the time and ability to listen and accompany the realities of others.

### ***Learning Collectivity***

Conducting these interviews within the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic positioned relationships and caregiving on the political terrain. Several of my interlocutors spoke of how a comprehensive health system cannot be achieved without the simultaneous congruence of all other systems, and how community collectivity is essential for this shift. For Inés, who spent over a decade working closely with the movement in developing its education

system, this collaboration changed the course of her life, as well as her very conception of community:

Zapatismo led me to question our modern ways of life in the city. My close relationships with people in Zapatista rural communities, helped me more deeply understand the value of things that were previously invisible to me, but that now I see the great importance of. This experience showed me that humanity must rethink its ways of life, especially with our present/future epidemics. City comforts come at a very high price in a pandemic or other worst-case scenario health emergency. We need to return to a community-building that approaches problems from the perspective of the small, from the everyday realities of domestic life, to rebuild our autonomy. (Inés, interview 29/04/2020)

Here, we hear an emphasis on what can be achieved when everyday decisions are made by a community empowered to solve its own problems. In her experience, it was the collective community action in following the Zapatista principles that motivates an individual to grow themselves into a better human being, both ethically and in terms of their ways of knowing.

Realizing that there are other ways to learn outside of school systems was radical for many of those who attended La Escuelita,<sup>35</sup> whose pedagogy revolved around the daily life of the communities in autonomous Zapatista territory. Various respondents recognized the enormous pedagogical value of this accompaniment in learning experientially how collective autonomy is built. Everyday work doing activities of making and grinding nixtamal for tortillas, slaughtering the chicken for lunch, father holding the baby, harvesting, and shelling coffee berries, gathering to pray, sing, play basketball or sing...all *together*, reveals how “structural transformations are generated and gestated” (Blue, interview 20/04/2020). Participating in collective work and

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<sup>35</sup> The Little School of Liberty, according to the Zapatistas, was an open invitation to the world to come and get to know Zapatismo up close, living with families in the communities for five days. Several sessions were held in 2013 and 2014 where approximately 7,000 people from all over the world came to Zapatista territory. There they were hosted, fed, and educated for free by the autonomous communities through the daily coexistence of eating, working, resting, studying, playing, singing, and dancing together.

integrated learning became a preferred way to learn for many of my interlocutors: "It no longer makes sense to me to only think individually; a liberating mindset of working collectively has permeated my consciousness—understanding that there are different ways of working collectively" (Genaro, interview 04/29/2020). Exercising collectivity in small ways opened options to more participatory and interrelated forms of cooperation that lightened the load for any one person. For many interlocutors, this process subsequently encouraged them to attempt greater collectivity in their everyday lives and work, including moving towards shared knowledge production and building autonomy.

### ***Learning to Organize and Self-Manage***

"We—as small anti-systemic projects, anarchists, alter globalists in all our manifestations—learn from broader forms of decolonial resistance such as Zapatismo, as these give us inspiration" (Pajarito, interview 11/05/2020). "The first thing that catches my attention about the development of Zapatista Autonomy is how complete it is, how it encompasses so many dimensions of everyday life" (Pedro, interview 06/04/2020). The comprehensiveness and breadth of the Zapatista autonomic project are admired by my interlocutors in whom the conviction has grown that an important way forward is to promote creative self-management *from below*. They've come to see how alternate participatory systems of government, justice, education, health, defense, agriculture, etc. at the community level, are not only possible but essential for the survival of humanity. Learning about Zapatista organization has opened their imagination to the possibility of organizing in their own contexts:

When I went to La Escuelita I learned more about the geography of the towns, that they were not homogenous territories, that they are towns where not everyone is a Zapatista. When I saw that, I realized it's possible anywhere, even in our cities. It was for me a new reconfiguration of geography [...] I realized that we could start organizing wherever we are; we can do it now. (Emiliana, interview 04/12/2020)

Others saw it differently:

I learned that in our modern city contexts, we are in fact *not* organized--despite our collectives, unions, community groups, cultural groups, and associations--it's not like the organization of the Zapatistas because we are not organized to defend *all* our collective interests, just those of a particular kind or group. (Bernardo, interview 03/09/2020)

For those among my respondents who are members of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) and its related Indigenous Council of Governance (CIG), it is not new to organize through networks of Indigenous struggles and resistance. What is new for them is the Zapatista framework of building autonomy and how they organize intergenerationally:

something I have really liked in the CNI assemblies is how they add people regionally, to represent their lived realities and achievements of years of struggle more directly. Witnessing this larger collectivity totally changes our understanding. Children and youth who have grown up in these movements and structures are now participating in this organization. (Maya, interview 04/05/2020)

An important organizational axis for the learning of many of my interlocutors has been around women's and gender struggles. As Maya relates:

The first *Encuentro de Mujeres Que Luchan*<sup>36</sup> was an opportunity to bring together young women with whom we were already working in other areas, but who had not touched on issues of feminism or gender. Attending these learning spaces and then returning and being able to reflect on how one confronts these issues every day, is one of the most valuable lessons I learned and witnessed in others. Everything was a learning experience, starting with the very organization of the event itself. (Maya, interview 04/05/2020)

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<sup>36</sup> Zapatista Women convened several large-scale gatherings for "Women who Struggle," beginning in 2007 and then again in 2018, 2019. The category of "woman" was notably expanded in the more recent gatherings to include anyone who self-identified as one. Men were not allowed to participate until the very end; yet an adjacent area was designated where they could provide support with cooking and childcare, later joining to partake of the closing celebrations.

For men also, learning about women and gender as subjugated categories led them to examine ways in which oppressive masculinities have been historically built, and are still reinforced in daily ways:

There are many examples; it was a huge learning to see how we must constantly struggle against our own reproduction of these patterns as they manifest again and again. Listening to the women made us keenly aware of the vigilance we must keep aware of as a collective, as an organization, to keep from reproducing these harmful patterns. (Pajarito, interview 11/05/2020)

In sharing these learnings with emotion, my interlocutors also communicated their affective impact as these touched on both joyful as well as painful histories and experiences--whether personal or witnessed in others. Their encounter with the Zapatistas in their autonomous territories consisted of experiential learning that explicitly highlighted both the affective as well as ethical dimensions of politics. This was an education realized through the quotidian collective activities that build an autonomous community life integrated with the more-than-human world and larger environment. Many of my interlocutors spoke of how their encounter and continued contact with Zapatismo helped them sustain an ongoing process of resistance and (un)learning upon return to their places and daily life. From their lived experience and sustained contact with Zapatismo, they now carry an (often more joyful) political-ethical framework based on collective knowledge that builds a common territory of struggle.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The seeds of (un)learnings emerging from this preliminary study carry both political as well as affective ethics (Zembylas & Keet, 2019) committed to building “a world where many worlds fit” (translation of the Zapatista saying: “un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos”). Such pluriverse of epistemic diversity together with the *longue durée* of its historical approach (Broek, 2013) have been suggested as strategies for decolonizing HRE and other liberatory education frameworks (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021; Zembylas, 2020; Zembylas & Keet, 2019; Maldonado-Torres, 2008). A ZSP is an



example of how knowledge is built outside a dominant episteme. It models how intersubjective dialogue and collaboration between differences can create a process that (un)learns dominant assumptions through its intersubjective methodology. It proposes a deeper listening within a collectivity of autonomous construction that posits a 'being human as praxis' (Wynter, 2003; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015). This includes practicing how to *lead by obeying* a larger (human and beyond-human) common good, articulated in collective wisdom that respects each person's (again, human and beyond-human) intrinsic value embedded in the existence of the whole.

Emerging from intertwined liberatory historical trajectories in Latin America resisting colonialism posits a ZSP outside a Eurocentric episteme. Yet, it does not exclude dialogue and collaboration with liberatory movements resisting domination within the geographies of an insubordinate Europe.<sup>37</sup> Rooted in its land and history, it is a pedagogics of radical inclusivity in practicing a broader border thinking (Zembylas, 2020) that remains open to a mutual education, particularly from decentered epistemological frameworks that resist, alongside those dominant ones that persist, in our complex modernities. The Zapatistas have invited the world to their autonomous territories for embodied *encuentros* rooted in their land and history, while also traveling beyond their territory to "confront our analysis and conclusions with others who also struggle and think critically" (EZLN, 2021). As they announced before setting sail to five continents:

We are going to thank the other for their existence. To thank them for the teachings that their rebellion and resistance have given us. To deliver the promised flower. To embrace the other and tell them in their ears that they are not alone. To whisper to her that it is worth the resistance, the struggle, the pain for those who are no longer here, the rage at impunity...all worth the dream of a world that is not

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<sup>37</sup> Europe is renamed Slumil K'ajxemk'op (Tierra Insumisa or Rebellious Land) by Marijose, a Tojolabal-Maya transgender Zapatista delegate, member of the maritime Escuadrón 421, upon landing in Vigo, Spain, June 23, 2021, during their reverse-colonization journey 500 years after the fall of Tenochtitlan to Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortéz.

perfect, but better: a world without fear. The Journey for Life: where are we going? (EZLN, 2021)

Towards this horizon, the Zapatista movement creates different strategic mechanisms to achieve solidarity and mutual learning with peoples outside their autonomous communities, to jointly build a broader mutual liberation in defense of terrestrial life itself. It offers its own construction of autonomy as an example, sharing its history of struggle while seeding its methodological and philosophical proposals (Sáenz et al., 2021).

The creative potential of a ZSP sows epistemic openness, political imagination, and willingness to organize collectively towards horizons of mutual liberation. This pedagogics are continuously nourished through encounters and exchanges with other peoples and social movements resisting domination. My interlocutors in this study shared how they practice what they've (un)learned and how they continue to be inspired by this movement. In returning to their communities yet remaining connected to the Zapatista movement in various ways, my interlocutors grow their learnings and work, applying their new knowledge to the advancement of autonomous expressions in their own communities, primarily through learning to learn and listen differently.

As a ZSP disseminates through the diverse geographies of the planet, it builds a common political territory while furthering collective knowledge by building on other seed pedagogies grown out of each region's particular histories and lands. As a movement, a ZSP is unique for its global reach, for how it remains grounded in its ancestral history and homegrown language while articulating a political ethics that resonates widely. Thus, a ZSP seeds political accomplices both in the construction of collective knowledge as well as in the common defense of life itself (EZLN, 2021). While the Zapatista uprising began as a struggle for basic human rights to be conferred by the state to its diverse Indigenous peoples (Speed, 2008), a demand exemplified in *Nunca más un México sin nosotros*,<sup>38</sup> the movement has since evolved to the

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<sup>38</sup> After 1994, the Zapatistas stated, "Never again a Mexico without us" (referring to Indigenous peoples).

construction of what could be articulated as *un nosotros más allá del estado*,<sup>39</sup> presenting itself as a common struggle for Life that transcends nation/state borders.

A ZSP is the kind of radical and transformative praxis needed (Bajaj, et al., 2016) to constantly question supremacy and dominance, containing both critical and pluriversal perspectives (Williams & Bermeo, 2020). It is a process that evolves through a methodology of learning *to listen* that grows empathy with the other, another way of doing education that opens a multiplicity of coexisting possibilities. Conferring personhood beyond the human as part of deeply relational ethics, this ZSP models the dignity and respect due all beings for their role in an integrated life. The radical educational philosophy and methodology of a ZSP place a greater responsibility on each of us to become more fully human as well as to extend that respect beyond the human category. This pedagogics is slowly unfurling a collective way of being and knowing with revolutionary potential. As both a political and pedagogical movement, Zapatismo forefronts ethics of relationship and care that acknowledges the dignity and intrinsic worth of all persons, human and beyond.

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<sup>39</sup> Building a political common territory of a “we/us” beyond or without the State.

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