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On Political Imperfection: The Duty of Feminist Characters in Zapatista Fiction

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Abstract

The relationship between Zapatismo and women's liberation has sparked heated debates between academics and activists alike. Although the Zapatistas' official communiqués have promoted gender parity, criticism has been aimed at Zapatista fiction for accentuating gender stereotypes and for contradictions regarding women's rights. This article discusses the children's books *Habrá una vez* (2016) and *Hablar colores* (2018), encountered during archival and ethnographic research in Zapatista territory, and examines how "Zapafiction" embraces contradiction as constructive revolutionary politics. The children's books analyzed here depict ecofeminist characters, including Defensa Zapatista (an approximately eight-year-old schoolgirl), Gato-Perro (a cat-dog symbolizing nonbinary identities), a disabled horse, and Loa Otroa (embodying queer identities). Instead of solving contradictions, I argue that these characters reject the romanticization of progressive political movements while viewing Zapatismo as the venue for advancing dignity as a way of life (*jch'uleltik*). Through the concept of imperfect politics, Zapafiction leverages the principle of *caminando y preguntando*, "walking, we ask questions," to reimagine the governing structures of the organization through fiction, moving beyond theoretical doctrines on how politics should be.

Keywords: Mexican literature; Zapatismo; feminism; Marxism; Indigenous studies

Resumen

La relación entre el zapatismo y la liberación femenina ha generado intensos debates en los campos académicos y de activismo. Mientras los comunicados oficiales han promovido la paridad de género; académicos han dirigido críticas a la ficción zapatista por acentuar los estereotipos de género y las contradicciones en torno a los derechos de las mujeres. Este ensayo analiza *Habrá una vez* (2016) y *Hablar colores* (2018), explorando cómo la "zapaficción" adopta la contradicción como una forma de construcción de una política revolucionaria. Los libros infantiles aquí analizados presentan personajes ecofeministas, entre ellos Defensa Zapatista (una colegiala de aproximadamente ocho años), un gato-perro (que simboliza identidades no binarias), un caballo discapacitado y Loa Otroa (que encarna identidades cuir). En lugar de resolver las contradicciones, mi argumento es que estos personajes rechazan la romantización de los movimientos políticos progresistas, mientras ven al zapatismo como el espacio que les permite luchar por la dignidad como forma de vida (*jch'uleltik*). A través del concepto de política imperfecta, la zapaficción utiliza el principio de "caminando y preguntando" para reimaginar las estructuras gubernamentales de la organización a través de la ficción, superando las doctrinas teóricas impuestas sobre cómo debería ser la política.

Palabras claves: literatura mexicana; zapatismo; feminismo; marxismo; estudios indígenas

It is safe to say that the relationship between Zapatismo and women's liberation appears to be riddled with contradictions. Despite the Zapatista Army of National Liberation's (EZLN) establishing of an internal bill of rights to secure gender justice even prior to the 1994 uprising, feminist commentators have identified limitations (Bedregal 1995; Belausteguigoitia 2000; Cappelli 2018). Across debates, four points are particularly salient. First and foremost, the ambiguous presence of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos may impart discomfiting allusions to Latin American caudillo tropes. Second, scholars draw a distinction between what feminism is and what Zapatismo is not. For instance, Ximena Bedregal (1995) highlighted similarities between the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) and other patriarchal structures, leading her to declare that Zapatismo is a hierarchical and belligerent organization, consequently antithetical to the pacifist ideals of feminism. Opponents of these views raised the question of whether Indigenous women even wanted the law to be feminist (Vuorisalo-Tiitinen 2011; Marcos 2021). Fourth, this theoretical debate prompted disagreements surrounding terminology. Can we really call Indigenous women feminists? To what extent does the word *feminism* reenact epistemic impositions upon Indigenous languages, thought, and politics?

These scholarly concerns match my understanding of Indigenous women's position regarding gender-conscious politics. Through personal communications with Zapatista women, I have noticed a nuanced, yet puzzling-to-me understanding that, while the organization seeks to guarantee gender justice, Zapatista women often resist the term *feminism*. It may be that Sylvia Marcos's (2008) investigation of the Mesoamerican "original duality" allows us to decipher such reluctance (9). Within Mesoamerican epistemologies, a fixed separation between masculine and feminine is insubstantial; rather, duality is indispensable in sustaining a reciprocal "complementarity," in which one gender or sex can be construed only in the affirmation, not the negation, of the other (13).

But the coconstitutive character of the masculine is not the main point of contention in the eyes of non-Zapatista observers. The main source of criticism among scholars seems to be the persistent subjugation of Indigenous women as evidence of EZLN's failure in advancing gender equality. The solution for gender hierarchies, at times, seems to depend on the estrangement of women from their patriarchal societies, disregarding the also precarious condition of Indigenous men. Thinkers from Chiapas such as Ruperta Bautista (2020) and Mercedes Olivera (1996), and from across the Global South (e.g., Carneiro 2003), have emphasized how white and liberal feminisms have traditionally ignored the experience of racialized women, frequently defining "woman" as a signifier restricted to cisgendered white womanhood (hooks 1981). Similar to what academics might define as feminism, I agree with Mariana Mora's (2017) understanding of the Indigenous ideal of gender-conscious politics as a contentious notion of liberation that highlights the condition of women in their societies at the same time that Indigenous women aim to reconcile their own struggles with those of their communities (including men). Indigenous peoples have a sophisticated cultural understanding of gender through a healthy communal process that is both contemporary and millenarian, contradicting Western notions of individuated liberation. Simply put, Indigenous views on women's emancipation embrace a pluralizing potential. The challenge is that amid frictions, liberation movements like the EZLN also need to center on women's emancipation; otherwise, there can be no liberation at all.

Specifically describing the state of feminist thought in Mexico, Gisela Espinosa Damián (2009) traces the most impactful currents, including historical, working-class, civil, and Indigenous feminisms. Historical feminism is often linked to middle-class mestizo and urban women, namely because it emphasizes notions of empowerment that must be characterized as individualistic when compared to Indigenous views that aim at raising awareness and instigating collective action (Mora 2017). The robust presence of nongovernmental organizations in Chiapas also propelled additional strands of civil

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and working-class feminisms. These currents criticized the role of left-wing men in perpetrating unequal gender dynamics, precisely an issue that concerns the EZLN. Mariana Mora (2017, 157, 158) revisits this discussion to propose that, in Zapatista communities, women managed to affirm their agency by "resignifying household activities," reflecting "a clear influence of Marxist feminism on organized working-class women." Indigenous feminism consequently departs from the liberal dichotomy that distinguishes public and private spheres, as the kitchen and the cornfields are corresponding realms of social reproduction. More than focusing on self-liberation, Mora argues that Indigenous women aim to politicize everyday life, providing spaces for cooperation in a multigender relationality. However, Mora (2017) also notes gender issues at the time she researched practices of *lekil kuxlejal* (similar to *buen vivir*) in Zapatista communities.[1]

These tensions, however, are not exclusive to Zapatista women within rebel municipalities. Guiomar Rovira (2024) has documented that, from the onset of the uprising, the rise of women into the military branch brought anxiety to some guerrilla men. Such discomfort was particularly felt among Tsotsil men, as gender inequalities are more pronounced within that ethnic group as compared to local ethnicities such as Ch'ol and Tseltal (Rovira 2024). Major Ana María explained to Rovira that men joining the military ranks found it challenging to take orders from women, whereas more experienced soldiers tended to respect women's military ranks. In light of these disputes, Subcomandante Marcos noted that women joined Zapatismo not because it is inherently a gender-inclusive movement, but because they earned their space within it, subtly implying frictions surrounding women's participation (Millán Moncayo 2006). Although we learn from Sylvia Marcos (2008, 13) that Mesoamerican gender epistemologies operate through the logics of the "original duality," which promotes gender-sex equilibrium, this is hardly the reality for most contemporary Mesoamerican women. Even though the roots of Mesoamerican beliefs transcend the negation of the opposite gender or sex, capitalism has certainly shifted gender relations (Federici 2018). It is therefore anticipated that the EZLN had to navigate revolutionary aspirations alongside entrenched patriarchy, leading some scholars and activists to identify contradictions regarding the role of women.

However, the relationship between Zapatismo and women's liberation is even fuzzier when examined in Zapatista fiction, or "Zapafiction." One of the most scandalous cases connecting Subcomandante Marcos and feminists arises from a literary character: Don Durito, the scholarly beetle. In a letter to European activists, Marcos (Le Bot 1997) wrote, "Durito goes to Europe [and] he wants me to travel with him inside a can of sardines, but I say no because any humidity that is not feminine makes me dizzy."[2] Unsurprisingly, the statement inflamed accusations of sexism. Marcos vehemently retorted that he did not plan to censor his tone within the framings of politically correct discourses (Le Bot 1997).

Building off these frictions, I turn to *Habrá una vez* (2016) (There Will Come a Time) and *Hablar colores* (2018) (Speaking Colors), written by Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano to demonstrate how these children's books complicate the discussion.[3] "Zapafiction" is the merger of fictional and military texts written by members of the EZLN who speak on behalf of the organization; with that, the children's books analyzed here depict the adventures of

[1] *Lekil kuxlejal* (Maya Tsotsil) and *sumak kawsay* (Kichwa) are conceptions of *buen vivir* from Abya Yala, which can be understood as Indigenous alternatives to experiencing a good life. These concepts transcend and contradict capitalist modes of production, extractivism, and ecological sacrifices.

[2] "Durito va a Europa, quiere que me vaya con él en una lata de sardinas, yo le digo que no porque toda humedad que no sea femenina me provoca mareos" (Yvon Le Bot, 1997, 352).

[3] In 2015, a Zapatista schoolteacher was gunned down by paramilitary assailants. After his murder, Subcomandante Marcos declared his own "death" and took on Galeano's name (EZLN 2014). In 2023, he reassumed his own name with a new rank as Capitán Insurgente Marcos.

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a schoolgirl, a disabled horse, a non-cisgendered person,[4] and a hybrid cat-dog to illustrate how Zapatismo broadens the scope of their revolutionary struggle. In drawing from the tenets of Maya societies as described by the Tsotsil thinker and literary writer Juana María Ruiz Ortiz (2022), the character Defensa Zapatista simultaneously affirms the emancipatory potential of Zapatismo and voices criticisms. That is, she attempts to tense and reconcile Zapatista politics and women's liberation as she further multiplies the subjects of emancipation. One thing must be said regarding gender roles in the Zapatista literary archive. Although it is true that Zapafiction publications are authored by Marcos/Galeano, the relevance of these texts and characters lies in their ability to displace Marcos/Galeano as the sole narrator or conarrator. This displacement allows for literary expressions that simultaneously pluralize literary protagonism and critique the single-writer repertoire.

In this article, I propose contradiction as presenting dialectical political possibilities wherein conflicting statements do not necessarily cancel one another but serve as a means for such immanent tensions to promote conversations, challenges, impulses, and reimaginations. Tensions widen rather than wither political utopia. Through literary analysis, I observe how these children's books introduce political contradiction under the notion of *pas k'op*. In Tsotsil, *pas k'op* glosses as "revolution," "rebellion" or "la lucha," but its roots complicate the translation. Because the expression unites the verb *pasel* (to do) with *k'op* (war or language), always in the present tense, revolution comes to mean an everyday practice, not a destination (Fitzwater 2019). Defensa Zapatista adopts this conceptualization to highlight her dual battle, inside and outside the organization. In employing *pas k'op* as a method, she rejects the mirage of perfect politics, because revolutionary contradiction is more promising than stagnant agreement (Baschet 2018). Imperfect politics, then, stands for mobility and ongoing political construction of the rebel autonomy, in contrast to the romanticization of perfect political organizations, which articulates either the lack of political power or exclusionary compositions (Dean 2019; Biglieri and Cadahia 2020). More than perfection, Zapatismo seeks the principle of *caminando y preguntado*, "walking, we ask questions," meaning that even mistakes are collectively absorbed as pedagogical opportunities. In bridging different fields (queer feminist studies, guerrilla history, Marxist theory), literary aesthetics becomes a privileged site in which the EZLN complicates, self-criticizes, and fictionally rearticulates its self-governing structures.

The limited circulation of these texts in the scope of my contribution is also worth noting. *Habrá una vez* (2016) and *Hablar colores* (2018) were not produced as postscripts of the official and/or military communications, and they remain understudied because circulation remains largely limited to EZLN-aligned villages. Unlike other Zapatista texts that received the attention of publishers and were translated into multiple languages, these children's books were printed in local shops.[5] The archival and ethnographic work undertaken in the completion of this essay allows me to introduce underexplored characters and infer that their narratives provide an intimate sense of gender dynamics inside rebel villages, rather than an apologetic bulletin to outsiders, such as scholars and non-Zapatista activists. In this way, any analysis on Zapafiction post-2016 will be incomplete if these narratives are not part of the argument. This is to say that one cannot fully understand the nuances of the clandestine years preceding the uprising (1983–1994)

[4] In the text, it is unclear if Loa Otroa is a nonbinary or a transperson. In Zapatista villages, *otroa* is also a term that can refer to a nonheterosexual person. Even if the person is potentially a cisperson, the term implies that they embody the spirit or the heart of the other gender. This became evident when Subcomandante Marcos advocated for the participation of transwomen in the International Meeting of Zapatista Women, at which he called for acceptance because *otroas* also face gender oppression (EZLN 2019).

[5] Some of the fictional texts are present in the English translation of the speeches delivered in the Critical Thought in the Face of Capitalist Hydra (EZLN 2017). In some of his addresses, Subcomandante Marcos/Galeano introduces Defensa Zapatista to the audience.

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and the EZLN's political strategies against neoliberalism (1994–2014) without characters such as Viejo Antonio and Don Durito. In contrast, Defensa Zapatista personifies the pursuit of autonomous governance (especially post-2003).[6] If a Zapatista motto is that the organization aims at building a world in which many worlds fit (EZLN 1996), then Defensa and her comrades advocate for diverse subjects in that new world under construction.

To develop my argument, I propose two questions: First, how does conjecturing political leadership through the character of a schoolgirl intervene in the relationship between Indigenous self-defense and the EZLN's actions toward women's liberation? Second, how does Defensa Zapatista challenge notions of perfect politics while she advocates for utopia? In the following section, I propose an abbreviated account of the encounters and disencounters between Zapatismo and feminisms.[7] Subsequently, I look at the construction of gender through the EZLN's fictional characters. Last, employing literary close reading as a literary methodology, I briefly discuss how Zapatista fiction defies the myth of perfect politics.

Zapatista feminism?

One year after the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Elena Poniatowska (1995) published an enthusiastic assessment of the effects of Zapatismo on Mexican politics. In the final lines of "Voices of the Jungle: Subcomandante Marcos and Culture," Poniatowska recalls an unfortunate experience that Rosario Castellanos had many years before the 1994 insurrection. Traveling around Chiapas, Castellanos saw an Indigenous man returning from the forest carrying a bundle of firewood as he rode on a burro. His wife followed him, on foot, with a bulky load of stove lengths on her back. Indignant, Castellanos asks the man, "Why do you travel comfortably seated, while your wife follows behind you, on foot?" (Poniatowska 1995, 381) He bluntly replies that she was walking only because she did not have a burro. Through personal communications with elders in Tsotsil territories, I came to understand an additional layer through which one can interpret this episode. In the Maya Tsotsil epistemology, carrying firewood on one's back is a task performed both by the individual and by their *ch'ulel* (spirit, soul, spiritual guardian). Consequently, it can be argued that such inequality burdens a woman in her physical, emotional, and spiritual spheres.

Poniatowska (1995, 381) concludes by stating that "thanks to the Zapatistas," Indigenous women in Chiapas "finally have a burro." Logically, Poniatowska does not reduce her analysis to property possession as a form of equality. Rather, she describes how Zapatismo allows for new gender paradigms in Mexico, transcending the territorial limits of EZLN. In 1997, Poniatowska reiterated her prognosis through an essay in which she parallels the appearance of Zapatismo with new policies against domestic and sexual violence across Mexico. Simply put, Poniatowska sees Zapatismo as a form of feminist reconstruction.

Naomi Klein (2001) is another notable intellectual who has shown optimism about Zapatismo, specifically concerning its democratic principles. For her, Subcomandante Marcos projected inspirational leadership examples into world statecraft. Instead of seeing him as another caudillo in Latin American insurgencies, she distanced Zapatismo from traditional guerrilla enclaves because of its participatory democracy. To this point, she asks, "What other guerrilla force asks its bases of support about what to do before doing it?" (Klein 2001, 118).

Pushing back against these and other such prominent enthusiasts, several feminist commentators ushered Zapatismo into a heated debate. Some scholars suggest that

[6] In 2005, the EZLN published the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle as a rupture with previous negotiations with the Mexican government. Among several other ongoing conflicts, EZLN and the National Indigenous Congress declared their profound disagreement with the General Law of the Indigenous People's Linguistic Rights passed by the Congreso de la Unión in 2003.

[7] I borrow the term *disencounters* from Bruno Bosteels (2012).

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Zapatismo replicates patriarchal hierarchies and the *Votán* Marcos exerts a self-imposed form of authoritative and charismatic leadership that often eclipses local demands (Bedregal 1995; Belausteguigoitia 2000; di Piramo 2010). While not offering a direct criticism, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (2002) interprets the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law with caution. Although she acknowledges its positive impacts, she highlights its limitations amid highly patriarchal structures. Márgara Millán Moncayo (2006) pointed out that while Zapatismo has significantly increased the visibility of Indigenous women in Chiapas, women's emancipatory projects in the state predated the EZLN. The author believes that men's domination "begins with their control over land and extends into the family" (81), a matter that the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law did not address in its original charter. Furthermore, Millán Moncayo (2006, 91) notices that rather than focusing on reproductive rights or gender equality as a horizon, Indigenous women often associate women's rights "with the right not to be battered," signaling repressive paradigms.

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos (2004) also asserted that there was little change in gender relations inside Zapatista communities. In "Reading a Video: Second Part: Two Failures," he offers a self-critical statement emphasizing the need to address gender relations more directly beyond the military branch. Reaching a similar conclusion, Alejandra Araiza Díaz (2004, 139), interviewed Tseltal Zapatista women in Roberto Barrios and noted "a marked sexual division of labor" in which women worked twice or thrice as much as men. In addition to shouldering the burden of social reproduction (housework and maternal duties), women are engaged farmers, artisans, and sellers of their cooking goods to enhance household income. Araiza Díaz concludes her essay by signposting the contradiction between what Zapatismo says and what it does when it comes to gender dynamics.

Regarding capitalism and gender, Hillary Klein (2015) challenges the notion that capitalism introduced patriarchy to Indigenous societies. Rather than dismissing the effects of capitalism, she believes that gender hierarchies were already present in precapitalist societies. In also identifying gender oppression as a precapitalist matter, Mary Louisa Cappelli (2018) raises the tone. She argues that gender hierarchies persist in the Zapatista movement because the EZLN and the National Indigenous Congress of Mexico fail to critique Indigenous patriarchy, instead attributing gender violence solely to capitalism and neoliberalism. Taking aim at Sylvia Marcos, Cappelli questions the credibility of her conclusions, given Sylvia Marcos's close relationship with the *comandancia*. While Subcomandante Marcos calls her a "serious researcher" (Capelli 2018, 5), *compañeras* vocalize their experience of patriarchal subordination. Cappelli (2018, 5) challenges Sylvia Marcos's assertion that "under the aegis of Zapatista autonomy," "women's sexual and reproductive rights" have been transformed due to the "collective identity, interdependence, and inter-relatedness" that are part and parcel of Zapatismo. Capelli holds that, on the one hand, Subcomandante Marcos reduces gender hierarchy to the effects of capitalism; on the other, the "female Marcos appears to be rearticulating the male Marcos's interpretation" (Cappelli 2018, 5).

For Mary Louisa Capelli, this presents a "postmodern rhetoric" that functions as a "trap to ensnare Indigenous women at the precarious precipice" that negativizes the meaning of the Zapatista maxim "We are equal because we are different" (quoted in Cappelli 2018, 05). The critic also notes gender dynamics at the Juntas de Buen Gobierno. Those serving on the councils are temporarily excused from farming and domestic obligations during their weeks of communal duty. However, Cappelli notes that women have a second shift at home, straining themselves to participate in civil governance. Additionally, she criticizes the activities of the National Indigenous Congress. For her, the EZLN discourse accuses capitalism of the social maladies affecting women, but she finds Zapatista events rife with child labor, women's subordination, and sales of Coca-Cola and Zapatista merchandising. In short, Cappelli argues that Zapatismo reifies the oppression it seeks to condemn.

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It is hard to deny that women's emancipation within Zapatismo is a complex subject. It is equally hard to overlook the impact that the revolutionary Indigenous movement has had on gender equality in Mexico. For example, Juana María Ruiz Ortiz's (2022) *Trecientas hormigas/Sba' slikebal jun a'yej* (Three Hundred Ants/The Prologue of a Story), the first autobiographical novel known to be written by a Maya Tsotsil woman, documents how the emergence of the EZLN shifted the ground on gender politics in Chiapas. On the other hand, the Zapatista Army's ruling, which penalizes rape with death, has not ceased domestic abuse or gender hierarchies within EZLN civil bases. Perhaps Cappelli's (2018) criticism deserves some attention.

First, the point Cappelli (2018) makes regarding the sales of merchandise reflects the frustration that must come to anyone assessing actual political conditions using a communist fairy tale. Cappelli suggests that rebels in Chiapas have failed to break all relations with capital—as if the EZLN could develop its autonomous projects without any access to money. Her anticapitalist critique risks veering into antiorganization politics, embracing a fantastic idealization that demands the overthrow of capitalism by romanticized revolutionary subjects pristinely unaffected by market-driven dynamics. Contrary to this conception, combating capitalism necessitates a structured approach that relies on economic resources; after all, the Indigenous organizers require supplies currently available only as commodities under capitalism.

Second, Cappelli's critique of Coca-Cola is valid, but we should be surprised by her unwillingness to investigate how Coca-Cola became integrated into Maya culture, even making its way inside Indigenous healing rituals. This is particularly surprising given her resistance to the idea that capitalism had deeply altered gender relations in Indigenous societies. The reality is that this integration coincided with the deterioration of drinkable water quality, a drastic decline that coincides with the opening of a Coca-Cola bottling factory in the region (Nash 2007).[8] Again, she accuses Indigenous practices instead of targeting capitalism. Last, regarding her comments on Indigenous children working at events, I wonder to what extent Cappelli recognizes how their labor is the direct product of the harsh reality that envelops and necessitates the existence of the National Indigenous Congress. Certainly, those privileged enough to circulate inside the republic's Congreso de la Unión will not see children working inside it, but while the privileged there project the image of a well-functioning society, the surroundings of the Congreso de la Unión are replete with children engaged in precarious labor. Not only does Cappelli criticize the heroic achievement of an Indigenous organization that endeavors to articulate solutions amid precarious conditions, her criticism fails to acknowledge the state absenteeism that results in an insufficient number of childcare facilities for Indigenous mothers, the need for which Zapatista women explicitly voiced in my conversations with them.

Another problem with Cappelli's essay is the unspoken alternative at the basis of her comparisons. What is she contrasting Zapatismo with? Is she implying that mestizo women in Mexico experience a feminist utopia? She does not specify the demographic example that Zapatista women are expected to take as a model. I am certain that she is not implying that Mexico is the reference point, given its alarming rates of femicide that challenge even the fictional creativity of Roberto Bolaño (2009) in his novel *2666*. The Zapatistas precisely criticized Mexican culture to the point that they broke with it, establishing an autonomous order that Indigenous communities view as far superior in terms of social justice. In terms of policy implementation, EZLN has never enjoyed the necessary political stability to implement its projects, owing to the never-ending escalation of violence in Chiapas. Even when conditions are favorable for improvement,

[8] Potable water is growingly scarce in Chiapas, and the presence of bottled water and Coca-Cola products abound in the state, consequently causing a surge of diabetes and its related illness among Indigenous population (Lopez and Jacobs 2018).

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policy implementation requires time, and the challenges of establishing governance are exacerbated by paramilitary violence and cartel conflict, as well as by the road-mobility hazards and snarled interregional communication of rural Chiapas.

Intriguingly, Cappelli's arguments seem to place responsibility for the conditions affecting even non-Zapatista Indigenous women squarely on the backs of the Zapatistas. Cappelli ignores that, according to the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law (1993), members of the EZLN are free to marry whomever they choose, including non-Zapatista men. This clause requires that the civil and military leaders of the organization navigate a range of social complexities, as Zapatista communities exhibit political dissonance. There are several forms of social fusion with nonmembers that present both opportunities—such as recruitment and partnerships—and challenges, including leadership disputes. Accordingly, Cappelli's criticism overlooks the fact that there is little clear division between the civil bases of Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas, making the implementation of policies within the resulting incoherent polity nearly impossible to achieve without political compromise and eclecticism.

In response to such accusations against the organization, Zapatistas affirm that women commanders spearheaded historically crucial public acts. At the end of 1997, peace negotiations were suspended and the future of the EZLN became unknown when the Mexican Army threatened to arrest its members and supporters (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 2001). Armed aggressions spiked. In this moment of escalated tensions, Comandanta Ramona broke through the barricades surrounding Zapatista villages as she departed to Mexico City, where she delivered a memorable speech at the Zócalo, as depicted in the documentary *A Place Called Chiapas* (Wild 1998). Comandanta Esther is another Zapatista leader and the first Indigenous person ever to speak at the Mexican Congress. Nearly three years after the signing of the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law (1993), a proposal submitted by Zapatista women to amend the law was accepted even as the effects of the low-intensity war escalated.[9] After the law's passage, several other events centered discussions on gender justice (Marcos 2011; Leyva Solano 2020), including the widely attended meeting Mujeres Que Luchan (Women Who Fight).

In the anthropological work of Mariana Mora (2017) in Tojolabal territories, she argues that, before Zapatismo, women felt they had two masters. Besides the farm owners, women recognized their fathers, brothers, and husbands as overbearing figures. Women could be traded. Comandanta Miriam (EZLN 2017) contends that women had to deal with the *patrones* (landowners) and *patroncitos* (husbands or male family members), indicating a colonial circuit of violence in the way that husbands emulated in their homes the mistreatment they endured in the workplace. But instead of a double oppression, Comandanta Miriam speaks of a triple one. Indigenous women are often despised by state institutions (*mal gobierno*), such as when denouncing physical abuse or seeking medical care. President Felipe Calderón's (2006–2012) War on Drugs policy caused the number of femicides to skyrocket (Staudt and Méndez 2015); even so, Comandanta Rosalinda (2017) argues that the policies of Zapatismo promoted equality. Mariana Mora (2017) has offered evidence of the resistance some Zapatista men have shown concerning women's

[9] In 2007, the First Encounter of Women Who Fight (Mujeres Que Luchan) was a huge gathering of Zapatista women with national and international allies. The meeting has become a platform to assess the victories and shortcomings of the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law to further understand the women's condition in Chiapas, inside and outside Zapatista villages. This internal and external relationship is important because inside a family unit, different members may have divergent views on Zapatismo. At the event, Zapatista women suggested thirty-three amendments to the original ten acts of the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law. A second meeting took place in 2018 and gathered around four thousand women, including non-Zapatista women (EZLN 2019).

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leadership, but she also articulates how Zapatismo allows for those contradictions to be debated within assemblies, public hearings, and trials at the Juntas de Buen Gobierno.[10] Additionally, regardless of their fluency in Spanish—women have managed to occupy every organizational level inside Zapatismo (Padierna Jiménez 2013).

On Zapatista fiction

Literary scholarship on the Zapatista has also highlighted gender tensions. Kristine Vanden Berghe (2001) identified contradictions in comparing fiction with communiques, observing that Subcomandante Marcos repeatedly centers gender justice as an urgent political theme in nonfiction texts. In contrast to such convictions, his representation of women in fiction confines them to their relationship with male characters. In Zapafiction such as *El Viejo Antonio* (2020), for example, Doña Juanita appears as Antonio's wife and Mariana as a potential girlfriend to Marcos. These literary depictions, written by Marcos, either reinforce gender roles by limiting women to positions of unpaid domestic and affective labor (e.g., setting up the fire, making coffee, preparing corn or sugar) or situating them as secondary characters who accidentally surface in the narrative as accessory supporters of pivotal *guerrilleros* or community leaders.

Beyond examining how the texts written by Subcomandante Marcos reinforce gender stereotypes, Vanden Berghe (2001) also notices that only one woman combatant appears in *El Viejo Antonio*—Major Ana María—and even she endures misogynist reactions from her *compañeros*. When she asks what women should do about the fact that their hair reveals them as female even if they wear balaclavas, male combatants display a vexing attitude concerning women's attire and hair. At no point do they ask for Ana María's opinion or for that of any other Zapatista women. In spite of her military rank, *guerrilleros* shut down Major Ana María's attempt to voice matters pertinent to insurgent women. Following Vanden Berghe's argument, fiction is the magnifying glass through which contradictions in gender politics become evident. Additionally, Marcos remains as the sole outwardly known writer of Zapafiction, adding another layer of gender favoritism, as women's representation is filtered exclusively through the imagination of a male author.[11] That does not mean that Zapafiction in the future will be restricted solely to his compositions; for the time being, Zapafiction remains a literary category that documents the fictional universe envisioned by the most prominent spokesperson of the organization. Although Marcos is the sole author so far known outside EZLN communities, there are certainly other aspiring writers within the communities. Indeed, Marcos does not exist as person (he is a political persona through the body of Rafael Guillén) but as an ideologist author and political disguise to advance the ideals of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Zapafiction is a distinct literary category because beyond the possible encounters between mestizo and Maya cosmovisions, it articulates diverse political purposes of the organization, including, but not limited to, propaganda, pedagogy, and military statements.

[10] It is worth mentioning that during the publication process of this article, EZLN restructured its organization and dissolved the Juntas de Buen Gobierno, transitioning to Gobierno Autónomo Local (Local Autonomous Government), also due to increasing paramilitary and cartel activity in Chiapas (EZLN 2023).

[11] Subcomandante Marcos/Galeano is the only known writer of Zapatista fiction. However, the renowned poet Ruperta Bautista (2020) constantly focuses on Zapatismo potential for the Maya resistance in the state of Chiapas. I do not believe that Bautista's poetry and fiction can be categorized as Zapafiction or Zapatista poetry as she does not speak on behalf of the organization. Still, her work and her partnership with the Zapatista cause expands literary production on EZLN beyond Marcos/Galeano's writings.

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Not until the appearance of Magdalena, a transwoman character, in *Muertos incómodos* (The Uncomfortable Dead) did Zapatista literature deploy a different approach concerning representation of queer individuals and women.[12] In his segments of the coauthored novel with Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Marcos (2005) depicts Magdalena as a non-Indigenous ally who wants to marry her Zapatista lover after her gender affirmation surgery.[13] Despite discrepancies regarding the medical procedure, as though her womanhood were solely defined by the medical intervention, Magdalena is highly esteemed by Zapatista villagers throughout the narrative and bravely leads an operation in which Zapatistas manage to arrest Morales, a paramilitary aggressor.[14]

In the wake of *Muertos incómodos*, Zapatista literature experiences two major shifts. Through the publication of children's books, narratives begin to include characters such as Defensa Zapatista (a schoolgirl), Loa Otroa (a queer person), a disabled horse, and Gato-Perro (a nonbinary cat-dog), drawn in watercolor-like shades. The fact that these characters are originally represented through drawing dialogues with Sebastián Martí I Puig's (2022) remarks on how Zapatismo has aesthetically addressed its revolutionary agenda. These new characters indicate that Zapatista activist iconography is under constructive and expansive dispute. Defensa Zapatista inhabits the organization's cultural imagery as a reminder that the Zapatista future must consider the feminist demands of the militant child.

Second, unlike the first phase of Zapatista fiction that was primarily public facing, what I am calling as the second phase of Zapafiction follows a more inward-looking approach (Figure 1). Post-2014, Marcos "became" Galeano and became less visible outside Zapatista villages, focusing on more internal communications. This shift is also reflected in the endogenous circulation of the newer characters. The precariousness of Defensa Zapatista, Loa Otroa, and the representation of nonhuman animals sets forth a distinct narrative order from previous male characters. For example, the character of Viejo Antonio interpreted Maya epistemologies for non-Indigenous militia fighters, solidifying the encounter between Maya and Marxist concepts of liberation from 1983 onward (before and after the 1994 uprising). This elderly community leader appears as a character at the onset of the 1994 uprising and goes on to become a tactful political translator. Viejo Antonio explains the emergence of a form of Mayan Marxism through traditional cosmogony, illustrating the unorthodox transformation of the armed resistance that came to ground formulations of power and sovereignty in Maya-Indigenous decelerated temporality (*k'unk'un*). Conversely, Don Durito—the scholarly beetle—adds the perspective of nature to EZLN's dialectical materialism. As the pundit in political economy, he compels militia

[12] Defenses of queer rights are also present in nonfictional texts, including the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (2005) and the famous "Todos somos Marcos" (We Are All Marcos), in which Subcomandante Marcos states that he is gay in San Francisco, Black in South Africa, a Palestinian in Israel, and any woman walking alone at night anywhere in Mexico. In short, Marcos here serves as a signifier to Zapatismo, and the organization sides with any oppressed person in the world (https://www.proceso.com.mx/opinion/2014/5/28/la-resurreccion-de-marcos-133100.html). It could also be debated to what extent *De todos para todos* (From all to all; 1994) and *Siempre México con nosotros* (Mexico with Us Forever; 2001) could be considered Zapatista fiction. *De todos para todos*, for example, was directed by Ralph Lee a month after the uprising to intensify the discussion on the roots of the Zapatista struggle. The play was organized by Lo'il Maxil (Monkey Business), the theater branch of Sna Jtz'ibajom (The House of the Writer). In this conversation, I am indebted and grateful to the works of Cynthia Steele (1994), Donald Frischmann (1994), and Tamara Underiner (2004).

[13] Although the novel was coauthored with Paco Ignacio Taibo II (2005), the reader learns from the authors' note that Marcos wrote the chapters in odd numbers; meanwhile, Taibo II wrote the epilogue and even chapters.

[14] *Arrest* is unrelated to carceral logic. In Zapatismo, legal punishment does not center on imprisonment as a solution. This alternative is rarely taken, and it is entirely temporary. Following the logic of restorative justice, those facing criminal consequences can serve their victims as a form of dual restoration, for the victim and victimizer. Dialogue is the preferred resource. If the defendant or culprit refuses to accept the terms and conditions of the autonomous justice, expulsion from Zapatismo is applied (Baschet 2018).

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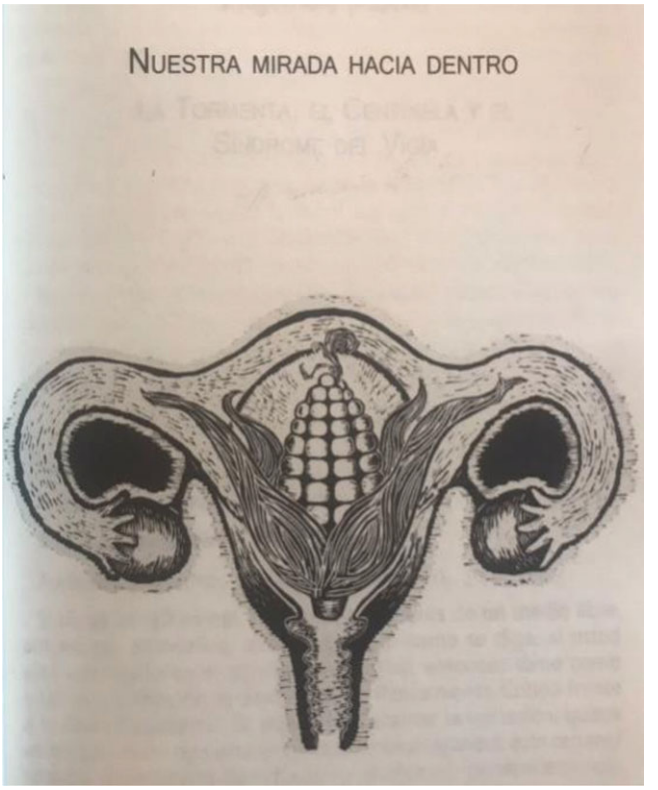

Figure 1. *Nuestra mirada hacia dentro*, by Zeltzin Nahual [Background: Our look inward (EZLN 2017)]

fighters to understand how left-leaning *guerrilleros*' boots may crush tiny creatures like himself. The beetle proposes more environmental debates inside revolutionary circles. Also serving as Marcos's alter ego and a reference to Don Quijote, Durito voices the importance of understanding historical materialist conditions that characterize neoliberalism in order to halt its destructive progress. Of relevant note is that Don Durito also appears in 1994, symbolizing that the two male-presenting characters represented and mediated the political tone of Zapatismo (Vanden Berghe 2005).

In the 2015 seminar "Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra," Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano (2017) delivered a paper titled "La visión de los vencidos" (Vision of the Vanquished), a direct reference to Miguel León-Portilla's eponymous archival work. In the paper, Galeano describes the emergence of Defensa Zapatista. First, he conveys a self-critical assessment by stating that he "represent[s] better than anyone else the Zapatista machismo and sexism," a statement that is also problematic, as if ultramasculine performance granted him a privileged position to explain gender hierarchy to men and women (133).[15] He also takes the opportunity to depict Defensa as an unpredictable character because he cannot foresee her sexual orientation or the fights of her generation. The only prediction that Galeano/Marcos makes is that for Zapatismo to continue to exist as a political project, Defensa's position must be majoritarian. In essence, Defensa represents the feminist victory over the vanquished men in the organization, allowing Zapatismo to be better because of her claims.

[15] "Y yo, que sintetizo mejor que nadie el machismo y el sexismo Zapatista" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2017, 133).

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Beyond interpreting or situating the organization as notable male characters, I suggest that Defensa epitomizes the *ch'ulel* (spirit), or the *Geist*, of Zapatista autonomous governance. In contrast with characters who bridged internal and external issues, Galeano's Defensa represents the immanent aspirations and shortcomings of the organization. Unlike Viejo Antonio, who spells out EZLN's rationale to non-Zapatista observers, Defensa's duty is to lead the EZLN to provide explanations to her, taking disagreement as the vector of political action (Rancière 1998).

In conversation with Vanden Berghe's contributions, I refuse to simplify recent Zapatista characters as a less problematic and renovated iteration of women's representation, moving from sexist to pro-feminist representations. Instead, I observe a continuum that symbolically underscores the contradictions at the heart of the social movement. My contention is that Zapafiction has documented the difficulties of advancing political ideals in the face of counterinsurgency. While contradictions in gender representation showcase the legacies of highly patriarchal structures, they also shed light on the material difficulties of Zapatismo in advancing a political agenda as instability grows in Chiapas (Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, Frayba, 2024). Still, any critique of gender within Zapatismo must remember how Indigenous women drafted the women's legislation, how they participated in the construction of the different Lacandón Declarations, how assemblies ceased to be masculine spaces, and how women's leadership is evident within Zapatista villages.[16] Besides, it is important to consider the difference between people who joined Zapatismo and those who grew up in it, as they came into adulthood under new conceptual paradigms.

Another reason I resist framing Defensa Zapatista simply as a pro-feminist evolution of Zapatista fiction stems from the continued prominence of Viejo Antonio and Don Durito in Zapatista public writings. Beginning in 1994, Viejo Antonio and Don Durito are repeatedly conjured in EZLN's communiqués in references and direct speech. Don Durito, for instance, maintains his controversial male gaze (Vanden Berghe 2001) from the early stages of the uprising as he continues to influence the aesthetic landscape throughout EZLN's different political configurations: *aguascalientes*, *caracoles*, rebel municipalities, Juntas de Buen Gobierno. The more recent appearance of Defensa Zapatista does not substitute these previous male characters but complicates their centrality. In the first phase of Zapafiction, the outward-facing literary propaganda that reflects masculine posture also seems to highlight the armed resistance's readiness to resist military aggression. Through a more inward-looking literary production, the second phase of Zapafiction reveals the organizations' revolutionary sensitivity regarding internal dilemmas as the actual unmasking of Zapatismo.

Habrá una vez (2016)

In the children's book *Habrá una vez* (2016), Defensa Zapatista epitomizes the quest for emancipatory dreams rooted in political contradiction. That is to say, Defensa is a rebellious figure not only because she despises capitalism but also because she is a free-spirited child who is willing to achieve her definitions of justice even if her choices may disregard the doctrines of the organization. The schoolgirl claims to be a radical revolutionary while she attempts to fool her teachers (*promotoras de educación*) when she does not finish her homework; she tries to find ways to retaliate against Pedrito, her

[16] It is worth noting that the EZLN is one among several Indigenous organizations in Chiapas. To the best of my knowledge, no other political organization has embraced women's leadership in the same way. The Zapatistas remain unique concerning territorial rights given to women, internal mechanisms to address domestic violence, women's freedom to choose their marriage partners (thus challenging the traditional practice of negating marriages for girls), and women's right to free and unrestricted access to education.

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Zapatista nemesis; and she thinks that only Pedrito should be punished—because he is a boy. In contending that punishment be gendered, she affirms a problematic logic. Notwithstanding its many contradictions, Defensa believes that by pointing out the flaws of the organization she can propose shifts that could benefit vulnerable members. This belief is performed in numerous instances in which the character voices disagreement with the leadership structure, its decision-making processes, and even plots against Pedrito. Despite her somewhat crooked ways to attain gender justice, Defensa sees the organization as the space where she can enact her political and intellectual battles.

Habrá una vez works simultaneously as a novel and a collection of short stories—with that, in the chapter "Loa Otroa," Defensa doubles down on her rebellious nature as she disquiets the Zapatista principle of leading by obeying (*mandar obedeciendo*), one of the hallmarks of EZLN's democracy. In a conversation with Loa Otroa, she rants about male privilege in the organization: "Politics, as they say, is the fight but in thought. Well, that's the reason why in our politics, we are not fighting to replace a Bossy Man (*Mandón*) who annoys us with another who does the same, but [we want] something bolder; there should be no one who is in charge, because if there is one who is in charge, then there are those who obey" (28).[17]

Defensa critiques the logic of leading by obeying because she imagines a world with no authority, even if this authority rule comes with reciprocated accountability to the people. Defensa wants power to penalize her frenemy. Instead of rejecting power, the character wants to exert authority over Pedrito as a form of obtaining feminist reparation. While leading by obeying is not a hierarchical structure—for example, in Tojolabal, *governance* means "collective service" (Lenkersdorf 2002)—the fact that Defensa identifies different *Mandone*s as masculine tyrannical figures questions the extent to which governance and leadership have materialized through masculinizing behaviors and figures inside the EZLN. A similar mode of self-criticism is voiced in "Novena parte" (The Ninth Part; 2023), the document explaining the Zapatistas' revised autonomous structure. In fact, the fictional character seems to anticipate the extinction of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno.

In the sequence, she interrupts her conversation with Loa Otroa, saying, "I have to go or else my mom will get upset and when a woman gets upset, even if she is your mother, you should run fast because they will eat you alive" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 28).[18] Even as she aspires for politics beyond authority, the character contradictorily recognizes the ruling of her mother.[19] Her remark unveils layers of authoritarianism as a behavior potentially exerted by women upon other women. The statement also plays with gender favoritism in gesturing to the type of leadership she prefers—in the current state of things—while she subtly criticizes it. Defensa makes evident not only the contraposition between men and women; she also suggests her own political interpretation of future politics, illustrating how women's inputs are relevant to the making of the Chiapas revolution. In a word, Defensa suggests that in Zapatista politics, ideally no *Mandón* would exist, either male or female, but as the horizon is still under construction, she

[17] "La política como quien dice es la lucha pero en pensamiento. Bueno de ahí que nuestra política es que no es que [*sic*] estamos luchando para que cambie un Mandón que nos chinga por otro que también, sino que todo cabal, no hay quien manda, porque si hay quien manda pues entonces hay quien obedece" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 28).

[18] "Tengo que ir porque luego mi mamá se embravece y cuando una mujer se embravece manque [*sic*] tu mamá, pues ahí sí a volar cuervos que te sacarán los ojos" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 28).

[19] Throughout different texts, *mamaces* (mothers) is an ambiguous expression. At times, it seems like her mothers are, in fact, a lesbian couple, while in other moments, it gives the impression of communal family structures as if childcare were a social duty.

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contradictorily supports gendered leadership even if authoritarianism of sorts is employed.

Defensa Zapatista is the first female protagonist in Zapatista literature but not the first feminist protagonist in Zapatista cultural productions, broadly construed. In the film *Corazón del tiempo* (*Heart of Time*), Sonia fights to enforce the legal accomplishments of the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law.[20] Written by Hermann Bellinghausen and directed by Alberto Cortés (2008), the film was recorded and distributed in Zapatista communities, with actors from EZLN municipalities interpreting themselves. In the story, Sonia falls in love with the guerrilla fighter Julio even though her parents have promised her to Miguel. The narrative depicts her right to romantically exert self-determination. In opting for the liberating alternatives within Zapatismo, she has to face family dynamics, even as her family has adopted the revolutionary lifestyle. In addition, Sonia will have to choose between civil and military life because of her relationship with the insurgent fighter. The protagonist's struggle is a symbol for other Zapatista women who still have to remind EZLN communities that gender equality is proclaimed within Zapatismo, breaking with existing traditions. Beyond the similar aspirations shared by Sonia and Defensa regarding abandoning the rebel autonomous municipality to join the armed branch of Zapatismo, these women characters denounce internal gender discrepancies while they have no illusions about finding liberation against sexism and capitalism outside the organization.

Still, in the book *Habrá una vez* (2016), the episode "El muro y la grieta" (The wall and the crack) begins: "As Zapatistas, our memory also adheres to what is to come. [Our memory] highlights dates and places" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 7).[21] As a child, Defensa Zapatista is not simply a girl more or less eight years old; she is a child born in 1492 who is capable of fighting for imagined futures that should safeguard gender justice. The narrative follows a discussion about the wall built by capitalism, raising the significance of trying to tear down the metaphoric wall. However, since the wall seems undefeatable, Defensa throws little rocks to create cracks before the daydreamed demolition.

Eduardo Galeano appears in the story. The Uruguayan writer comes to the narrative when Defensa organizes a soccer team to train against the neoliberal wall. She tries to recruit the writer by saying he looks like a "striker" (14), and Eduardo Galeano engages in conversation through which he mostly hears her monologue, which effectively silences the prominent scholar. Defensa quickly proves that she understands the stakes of the struggle for Zapatista women, retaking the double-master logic (mestizo bosses and Indigenous males). Eduardo Galeano could not join her team because he was waiting to be seen at the Junta de Buen Gobierno. When a Zapatista militiaman asked the writer what his profession was ("¿y usted a qué se dedica?"—literally, "what do you dedicate yourself to?"), he replies, "I am the ball picker" (16), implying that Eduardo Galeano had been recruited by Defensa's game and that, in soccer politics, he decided to support her team.

[20] There are other examples of documentaries such as *Mujeres por la dignidad* (Women for Dignity; 2000), *Ramona: Mujer, indígena, rebelde* (Ramona: Woman, Indigenous, Rebel; 2006), *Ellas, las otras, las de veras . . . Las mujeres Zapatistas* (Women, the other, the real . . . Zapatista women; 2019) that depict women's protagonism. *La montaña* (The Mountain) by Diego Enrique Osorno (2023) is a contemporary film that documents the Zapatista delegation's maritime trip from Chiapas to Europe as part of the Squad 4-2-1 (four women, two men, and one LGBTQ+ person). I believe that these films follow the categories of Mexican "ecomedia" as described by Carolyn Fornoff (2023) concerning low carbon productions and circulation as a consequence of the Hollywood industry control of the Mexican market post–North American Free Trade Agreement (Sánchez Prado 2014).

[21] The narrative also dialogues with the political project also named after "el muro y la grieta" (the wall and the crack), where the EZLN emphasized the effectiveness of small and radical rebellions, generating fissures in the capitalist structure. This discussion is thoroughly addressed in John Holloway's *Crack Capitalism* (2010). "Como Zapatistas que somos, nuestra memoria también se asoma a lo que viene. Señala fechas y lugares" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 7).

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Figure 2. "Defensa and the doll looking through the crack in the wall" anonymous illustrator

In the subsequent episode, "Apuntes solo para mujeres" (Notes only for women), Defensa Zapatista follows her daily devotion to creating a crack in the wall. One day she notices a crack in a very high part of the wall. She cannot see what is on the other side. She then builds a pile of stones to take a peek, but the crack is too high for her reach. Unexpectedly, she stretches out her hand so that her male doll (*muñequito*) can see through the crack and tell her what is on the other side (Figure 2). As a result of her interaction with her doll, Defensa visualizes her victory. In the narrative sequence, she lets Pedrito know that she has access to information that might overthrow the capitalist system.

As a response to Defensa's teasing, Pedrito says: "Who cares, when I grow up, I will be a watchman by the wall and I will be able to see the other side through the hole. As for you, it will take a while" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 21),[22] bragging on his advantage because of Defensa's age. In questioning the essence of his advantage, Defensa "smilingly tastes her victory as she argues: I already know what is on the other side" (21).[23] Pedrito challenges the truth of her statement because she is little; this information is "only for the grown-ups. And they will never allow a little girl to join [the insurgent band], not even as a trick" (21).[24] In the sequence, he laughs at her story. Calmly, Defensa states: "I know [what is on the other side]" (21).[25] She indicates that the doll is her informant. Pedrito takes the doll from her, placing it by his ear. Unable to hear, he says, "It says nothing" (21).[26] Defensa retorts: "It says, but you do not understand it" (21).[27] Pedrito says

[22] "No importa, yo cuando sea grande, me va a tocar ir al muro y voy a poder ver por el agujero. Tú, te falta" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 21).

[23] "Sonríe saboreando la victoria y argumenta: yo ya sé qué hay del otro lado" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 21).

[24] "Sólo los que están grandes. A poco van a dejar que una niña se asome, ni de chiste" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 21).

[25] "Lo sé" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 21).

[26] "No dice nada" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 21).

[27] "Dice, pero tú no entiendes" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 21).

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Figure 3. "Defensa, Gato-Perro, and the male doll against Pedrito" anonymous illustrator

that he can know things because he goes to the Zapatista autonomous school, and Defensa derides him because some forms of knowledge are restricted to little girls. Pedrito is upset not only because Defensa may have more information about neoliberalism than him; he is also disquieted by being unable to learn what she knows. Defensa's advantage stems from the coalition she established with those deemed unimportant combatants (the doll, the ghost of Eduardo Galeano, the disabled horse). The story ends without Defensa sharing what she heard, showing that girls have the right to preserve their tactics.

This narrative certainly draws inspiration from the Maya concept *snail ch'en* that could be translated as "cave," "crack," or "shelter."[28] In the Tsotsil epistemology, this physical or emotional cave provides protection through which one can find clarity to respond in the face of extenuating circumstances. Those oppressed frequently attempt to find solace in this shelter or find the crack in a wall, trying to muster strength to deal with life's difficulties. Considering that for Zapatistas, capitalism is the system of oppression, a sentence such as *li vinik-antsetike ta Chiapas laxa yilik bu oy snail ch'en li capitalismoe* means more than its literal translation (the people in Chiapas will see where the capitalist den (or crack) is located). Seeing hence means construing a strategy against the system of oppression. Connecting this notion with the narrative, the fact that Defensa and the male doll are the ones seeing through the crack (Defensa seeing or hearing through the doll) suggests that anticapitalist hope can exist only if mediated through queer-feminist worldviews, themselves mediated by the male doll and the schoolgirl. For Defensa, seeing through allows her to dismantle the secret of the capitalist system, even as she visualizes imperfections inside her organization.

[28] As a student of Tsotsil, I was introduced to this concept through personal communication with native Maya Tsotsil speakers who are members of EZLN from the region of San Andrés Sakamch'en de los Pobres. I am thankful for my Zapatista Tsotsil-language teachers for introducing me to this discussion (they prefer to remain anonymous). There are other explanations regarding the significance of caves to Tsotsil communities in Gary Gossen's (2002) *Four Creations.*

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The queer worldview this story presents and champions is further revealed through the story's narrator. In contrast to *El Viejo Antonio* or *En algún lugar de la Selva Lacandona: Aventuras y desventuras de Don Durito* (2020) (Somewhere in the Lacandon Jungle: The adventures and misfortunes of Don Durito), in this text Subcomandante Marcos/Galeano neither holds nor shares the narrating voice with another male-presenting character. Gato-Perro, the nonbinary animal, is the narrator. In this episode with Pedrito, Gato-Perro does not externalize to the reader what Defensa Zapatista potentially knows regarding the neoliberal wall. As Figure 3 illustrates, Gato-Perro is fully biased in supporting the schoolgirl.

Despite Defensa's assertion that "knowing, knowing, it is only for women" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 22),[29] the text does not propose a direct competition among men, women, queer, and nonhuman Zapatistas. On the contrary, the story situates women as co-central figures in the cultural imagination of the Chiapas revolution. These characters avoid any political margins and sketch out their contributions at the center of their collective political utopia. Even if Defensa feels triumphant in relation to her rival, she knows that Pedrito is an essential comrade. Conversely, Pedrito's statement or temporal advantage due to his age does not prohibit Defensa from becoming a soldier in the future. Zapatismo wants children to flourish as children for as long as possible before performing military service in an attempt to secure dignified forms of life (*jch'uleltik*) in the face of warfare. Pedrito's advantage can be justified not by gender differences but by age, because the military branch of the EZLN prevents children from acting as soldiers. Deepening the queer-feminist environment of the story, Defensa and her male frenemy will achieve the equality of fellow soldiers once Defensa reaches military age. Through Defensa's account, it is evident how Zapatista fiction is a vehicle in which the organization actively self-criticizes and reimagines its governing structures.

Hablar colores (2018)

In *Hablar colores* (2018), Defensa Zapatista tries to trick her teacher (*promotora de educación*) and doctor (*promotora de salud*). In the chapter called "Depende" (It depends), the Zapatista child attempts to get away with not finishing her homework. As a response to her teacher, she explains that her tasks as a child revolutionary have kept her away from her academic assignments. In her mischievousness, she sifts apart two forms of labor: She dedicates time to her revolutionary labor to the detriment of her scholastic responsibilities. In these scenes, Defensa does not understand how through Zapatismo, women's education is itself a form of radical politics, considering the stark literacy inequality in Chiapas.

In this same passage, Defensa Zapatista remembers a conversation with the doctor when she also wanted to trick the professional. At the Zapatista autonomous clinic, she says, "I then told the doctor that we have to support each other as women and that we should cause no harm to other women. The doctor made a face as if she understood what I said, but I clearly saw in her eye that she did not get anything at all" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2018, 8).[30] In her confabulations, Defensa analyzes how receiving a vaccination can be positive and negative (Figure 4). She argues: "For example, they

[29] "Saber, saber, es sólo para mujeres" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2016, 22).

[30] "Y entonces dije a la doctora que tenemos que apoyarnos como mujeres que somos y que no debemos hacernos mal entre mujeres. Y la doctora nomás puso cara de que sí entendía, pero yo claro lo vi en su ojo que no entendió nada (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2018, 8).

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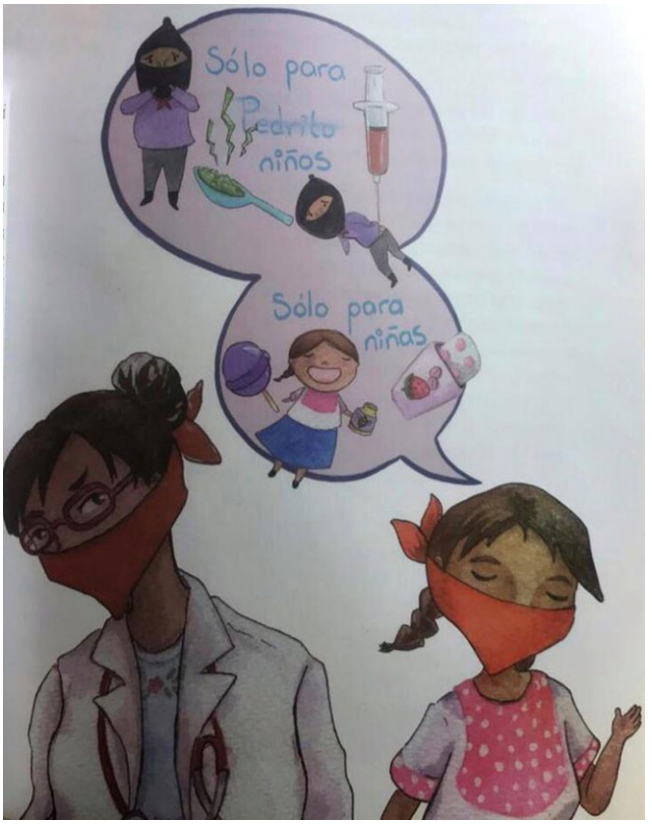

Figure 4. "Defensa plotting against Pedrito." Illustrated by Andrea [Background: Only for boys (injection and unsavory medicine), only for girls (candies and tasty pills)]

[injections] are bad if you apply them in a girl . . . do you think she will be able to shoot the ball if my leg hurts [*sic*] because of the shot? Certainly not, right?" (8–9).[31]

By contrast, injections are positive for Pedrito "because he is very mean and he is always making fun of me by saying that women can't play soccer and the we are "flimsy" (*endeble*) (9).[32] Defensa feels offended even though she does not know the meaning of the word *endeble*. Her solution is that only Pedrito should receive injections as a form of punishment. The doctor ignores Defensa's "argumentation" by showing her that women have a right to free health care in Zapatismo. Even if the individual's argument is defeated, the doctor demonstrates how the organization tries to advance the collective good. Defensa cries after the injection. As an attempt to put on a brave face, Defensa says that she cried out of "anger" (*coraje*) (10) because women were not fully united, and the doctor gave her the injection. Back at school and at the end of the chapter, Defensa seems victorious after a day of adventures, and she whispers to Gato-Perro, "It looks like we got away with this" (15), meaning she managed to escape her homework obligations.[33] However, while observing her mother talking to the teacher, Defensa overhears, "Well, it

[31] "Por ejemplo, son un mal si le pones una inyección a una niña, porque, a ver, ¿usted cree que voy a poder patear el balón si me duele la pierna porque me inyectaron?, no, ¿verdad?" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2018, 8–9).

[32] "Que es muy maldito siempre me está burlando que las mujeres no sabemos fútbol y que somos 'endebles'" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2018, 8).

[33] "Parece que nos salvamos" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2018, 15).

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depends" (15), as though the women who exerted authority over her were ready to discipline the protagonist.[34]

Regarding health and education, Comandanta Miriam (2017) points out how Indigenous women in Chiapas constantly die from fully treatable diseases because of the inferior attention given to them in contrast to economically privileged women. Language is another element that prevents Indigenous women from receiving adequate medical service, indicating layers of exclusion and medical violence. Miriam also criticizes how the right to education has been traditionally taken from Maya women because their fathers tended to associate going to school with sexual freedom (*buscar marido*; Comandanta Miriam 2017, 120). Defensa's tension with Pedrito prevents her from seeing how some of her complaints are over exactly what Maya women have fought to attain. In summary, the child character was still incapable of noticing what Mora (2017) terms *poder ser*, or "the power and ability to be" (151), since everyday life in the revolutionary struggle is inseparable from politics.

Whereas it could be said that Defensa is mainly trying to deceive women professionals working in areas of care labor, it is also striking that she inhabits a world in which women are accomplished professionals, to the point that she seeks alliances to return inequalities to some men. Through this strategy, Defensa Zapatista demonstrates contradictions in her inclusive aspirations at the same time that the text evinces that women still have unattended demands. On the other hand, women's leadership and the freedom of these conversations demonstrate how tensions are verbalized so that alternatives can be offered as the meaning of justice is constantly reassessed. In Tsotsil, several expressions inform the rationale of the Zapatista autonomous government. Unlike the term Western societies tend to understand as *democracy*, the Tsotsil equivalents would be *ich'bail ta muk* or *ich'bail ta k'ux*, which means to mutually recognize the greatness (*muk*) or the suffering (*k'ux*) of one another (Ruiz 2014). Defensa learns that Zapatismo enforces a system in which the greatness and suffering of diversely disenfranchised peoples are deemed legitimate. Defensa does not necessarily follow the Maya perspective on democratic assemblies (*tsobail xchi'uk jun o'onil*) in which social matters are debated until participants come to unanimous agreement (*tsobail*, assembly; *xchi'uk*, with; *jun*, one; *o'onil*, heart). Instead, she wants to make her voice heard as a representative of other women. In other words, Defensa unofficially lowers the voting age and enlarges the Zapatista constituency, troubling community traditions.

Furthermore, she questions the extent that the greatness or suffering of women, queer, and non-human animals are being taken into account inside—and not outside—of Zapatismo as a statement that the organization is the hope for liberation in contrast with Mexican congressional politics. Defensa asserts a mode of gender-conscious Indigenous epistemology that stirs localized Zapatista debates that simultaneously offers universalizing approaches to liberation, moving beyond her endogenous criticism. Defensa's critical method seeks to radicalize even Western conceptualizations of democracy, gender justice, and sovereignty. Put another way, despite the criticisms that Zapatismo has received for its policies on gender equality, the emergence of Defensa Zapatista offers another theorization that proposes women's liberation from the perspective of a child. The importance of having her childlike criticism is that it allegorizes honest self-criticism, welcoming inputs from historically silenced Indigenous villagers.

Still, some of Defensa Zapatista's pro-feminist proposals are immediately rejected by other Zapatista women. For example, the meeting of the mothers and teacher illustrates

[34] "Bueno, depende" (Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2018, 15). Even though the texts present mothers (in plural), the comic drawing in the text illustrates only one woman talking to her teacher. Again, this can be an inference to communal notions of motherhood and collective care, non-Western family dynamics, or nonheterosexual dyads.

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how Zapatista women do not condone emancipatory projects that reproduce forms of inequity. However, Defensa's concerns remain valid. Pedrito demonstrates patronizing behavior by trying to silo soccer as a masculine sport. Yet Pedrito knows that when Defensa plays, she can play against him instead of in a separate league for girls. Zapafiction makes use of internal contradictions to challenge concepts of governance within the organization. Defensa is an equipped soldier when it comes to contaminating masculine conceptions concerning sports and politics. In shedding light on existing tensions, these characters document social disagreements and imagine alternatives from points of friction.

Beyond the fallacy of perfect politics

In *Hablar colores* (2018) and *Habrá una vez* (2016), Defensa Zapatista envisions an autonomous reality for women. Even in its title, *Habrá una vez* inverts the temporality in narration. The future is taken as if told with and against *érase una vez* (once upon a time). Zapafiction does not idealize the Maya epic past but contests and organizes present and future orders. A child comes to represent military defense as Chiapas experiences overmilitarization and heightened paramilitary tensions (Frayba 2024). In response to militarization, Defensa provides accounts that outgrow the generalized violence around the state. Instead of guns, Defensa wants to organize a soccer team to tear down the capitalist wall and she throws little rocks against a structure protected by high-tech tanks. While the Tren Maya project aims to elevate profits from the Indigenous past, Defensa Zapatista fights for the urgency of the Mayan present and prospective survival. Fiction hence proposes a character prohibited from being a soldier because she is a child and a disabled horse as proof that even the military structure of Zapatismo is advancing not violence but inclusion. As the Mexican government invests in military bases, recent Zapafiction documents how autonomous self-defense has promoted sports, health, and education across rebel municipalities.

While Mary Louisa Cappelli (2018) criticizes the dissonance that leads the EZLN—an anticapitalist movement—to hold events at which they sell pro-guerrilla merchandise, Ximena Bedregal's (1995) comments on EZLN's military structure offers a type of liberal criticism that narrows the ways oppressed peoples are allowed to resist. Together, these conclusions seem, at best, to grant scholars the ability to assess the quality of liberation movements' organizing amid adverse conditions. In Bedregal's case, the problem with zeroing in on EZLN's military structure is that such positions overlook the conditions that make armed self-defense a socially acceptable, and necessary, alternative. Several Zapatista commanders—men and women—have reiterated that the dissolution of the armed faction of EZLN is on the horizon (Rovira 1997; EZLN 2005, 2019). Arrayed against the possibility of Zapatismo becoming a fully civil organization is the growing presence of cartel violence, paramilitarism, and state overmilitarization, leading to agrarian disputes affecting campesino and Indigenous communities entrapped amid highly weaponized aggressors (EZLN 2023).

In focusing on how Zapatismo has failed to attain feminist ideals, such arguments lose sight of how warlike conditions have prevented Zapatismo from fully advancing its commitment to women's liberation as well as how living dignity has been continuously endangered. It follows from such a detached, academic thread that armed territorial encroachment, forced displacement, and soil contamination are irrelevant contextual factors when Zapatista villagers attempt to promote gender justice. According to this flawed reasoning, the imperfections of women's liberation can be blamed on a deliberate and insidious internal lack of political will rather than on armed hostility coming from outside of Zapatismo. The fulfillment of EZLN's mission is possible only when liberation can be extended to everyone, inside and outside the organization, that is, once capitalism

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becomes inoperative. Before that goal is achieved, feminism is an ongoing construction instead of an event (*pas k'op*). Zapafiction, which has primarily centered on male protagonism, has nonetheless documented the nuanced reality of living in a conflict zone that makes the revolution's conditions imperfect.

Conclusion

Beyond a narrow assessment of how Zapatistas have employed feminist principles in their communities, it is more important to assess to what extent Latin American progressive movements embrace Zapatismo, primarily as an act of solidarity with the Indigenous resistance. Zapatismo and Zapafiction can be unsettling because they do not sweep political tensions under the rug. Contrary to the imaginations of perfect politics, utopia emerges out of concrete possibilities in dialectical, and hence conflictual, relationships. The fact that Zapafiction documents internal issues illustrates self-criticism and reinforces their own philosophy of *caminando y preguntando*. This means that their political project is an ongoing construction built from popular demands rather than an imposed manual of how politics should be. Bringing tensions to light concurrently demonstrates the centrality of this debate in their political imaginary and their commitment to fight ongoing forms of sexism. These queer and ecofeminist characters provide interventions in an operative and imperfect utopia, building coalition with somewhat flawed *compañeros*. In sum, Defensa Zapatista elevates the pitch of women's questions so that more suitable solutions could stem from comradely disagreements.

In politics, only two groups accept the myth of perfect politics. Primarily, there is the group who romanticizes Edenic social movements, as they remain detached from political organizations and revolutionary parties. As such, the hallucination of impeccable structures resides in imaginary realms where no cultural or material constraints impede the motion of righteous theory toward its goal of full equality. Victory seems to be undesirable. The mirage of political perfection stands solid due to political paralysis. These commentators are more analysts than practitioners, even in times of urgency. This social group is also keen to berate progressive organizations while simultaneously suggesting no effective alternative policy interventions, maintaining safe distance for personal, professional, and social convenience. The second group who envisions indefectible forms of politics are those with well-established political agendas to the point that they are prone to demarcate fences. In this sense, this group exerts exclusion to protect certain ideas or identities, conjuring neofascist formulas (Traverso 2019).

This does not mean that political organizations should not delimit their scope. Limiting scopes are still operative against structures that deny emancipation to other oppressed sectors (Dean 2019; Nascimento 2023). Still, criticizing contradictions regarding gender justice within Zapatismo is a necessary debate. What remains to be questioned is to what extent criticism provides analytical tools for the refinement of the Chiapas utopia or if it completely rules out Zapatismo as an emancipatory lexicon.

Against imperfect utopias lie perfect paradises. In this logic of perfect politics, there is no more work to do on the second day of the revolution, as if capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism had imprinted no influence. This is entirely inaccurate. The second day of the revolution, as experience has shown, is rarely a moment of rest. At the heels of the uprisings lie internal disagreements in addition to escalated external aggression against collective enfranchisement (James 1989; Losurdo 2015). In this sense, Defensa Zapatista is a revolutionary character in the *pas k'op* perspective. Unlike English or Spanish, this term for revolution is ever-progressive. There is hardly a "post" in this conceptualization of revolutionary ideals, affirming that revolutions are not static products and never fully completed processes. Instead, revolution is a continuous construction, poles apart from

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political paradises wherein all differences have withered away. The major problem with articulations of the lofty high ground of perfect politics is that, if taken seriously in guerrilla communities, they would cause militants to obsess over perceived flaws in their original project, causing decreased morale, and ultimately leading them to disorganize, having concluded that the struggle is not worth the warped fight alongside contentious comrades. As a result, the matrix of capitalist domination would remain unscathed. As a child carrying over five hundred years of experience, Defensa Zapatista knows that the advantage of imperfection is that it also gives precarious combatants a chance to get involved in the making of the utopia.

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