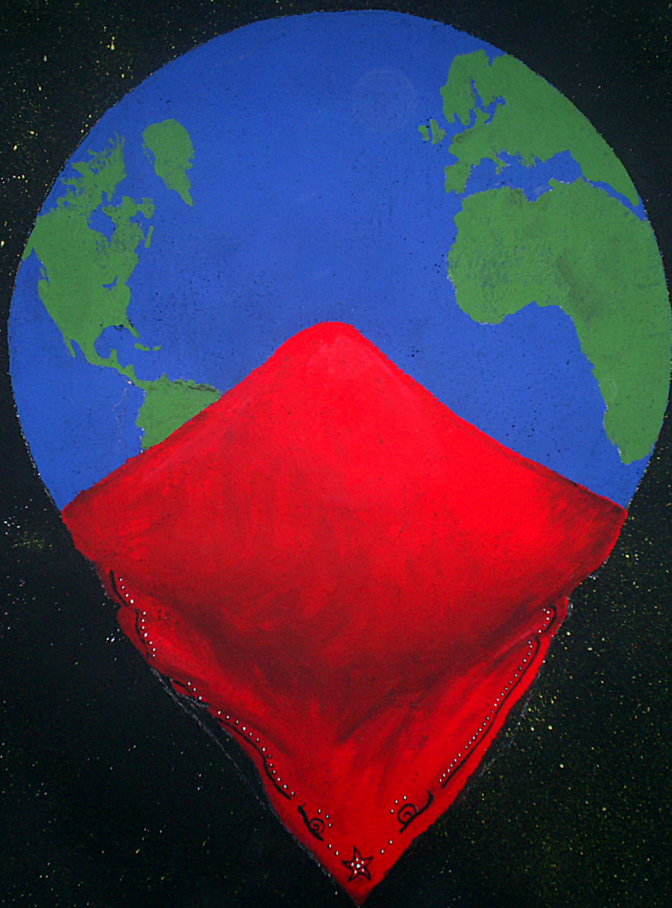


# Zapatista Stories for Dreaming An-Other World

Subcomandante Marcos

*Translation, Introduction, and Commentaries by*  
Lightning Collective



*Foreword by*  
JoAnn Wypijewski

“This is a beautiful, inspired project. In a joyful Zapatista gesture that all readers will welcome, this volume invites us to play, to walk on different, and even contrary, paths through smooth and crystalline translations that bring these *Other Stories* to life. The translators’ commentaries preserve a delicate balance of expertise and autonomy, as they illuminate the historical, political, and cultural forces that provoked the stories’ creation. Among these forces are Zapatista women, whom the translators rightly dignify in their meticulous and provocative introduction. This volume is a gift to so many of us as we (attempt to) bring the Zapatista imagination to our students and organizing communities.”

—Michelle Joffroy, associate professor of Spanish and Latin American and Latino Studies, Smith College, and codirector of Domestic Workers Make History, [www.dwherstories.com](http://www.dwherstories.com)

“From the beating heart of Mesoamerica, the old gods speak to us through the tales of Old Antonio, while a glasses-wearing, pipe-smoking beetle brings it all back to Western discourse, as together they entice us to share the Zapatistas’ revolutionary struggles from below and to the left. The Colectivo Relámpago (Lightning Collective), based in Amherst, Massachusetts, translates and comments with bolts of illumination zigzagging across cultures and nations, bringing bursts of laughter and sudden charges of hot-wired political energy. It seems like child’s play, yet it’s almost divine!”

—Peter Linebaugh, author of *Red Round*  
*Globe Hot Burning* (2019)

“On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation not only had the nerve to stare down the proclaimed End of History and launch a war against the Mexican government, a war against neoliberalism, and a war against racial and patriarchal capitalism in all its forms—while, in the process, recuperating tens of thousands of acres of land that was stolen from the Indigenous peoples of Chiapas—but they did all this with a sense of humor, with poetry, and with, in a word, literature. *Zapatista Stories for Dreaming An-Other World*, expertly translated by the Colectivo Relámpago, offers an excellent introduction to, and commentary on, the vast anti-archive of the Zapatistas’ *other* literature.”

—John Gibler, author of *I Couldn’t Even Imagine They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks against the Students of Ayotzinapa* (2017) and *To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from Inside the Drug War* (2011)

“Thinking through the heart. This collection reminds, (re)grounds, and expands our collective sense of possibility—as the Zapatistas so creatively have continued to do for over twenty-seven years. From the alter-globalization movements to the horizontal assemblies in Argentina of the early 2000s through Occupy and the Movements of the Squares in the 2010s to our pandemic solidarities and mutual aid networks in the 2020s, prefigurative, autonomous, and affective movements continue to move with the Zapatistas in our hearts and minds. The influence and inspiration are beyond words, yet this collection gives words, placing crucial stories of the Zapatista communities in historical context, giving us more lenses through which to see the world and our movements within it.”

—Marina Sitrin, author of *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the COVID 19 Crisis* (2020) and *They Can’t Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy* (2014)

“Since they first captured my attention in 1994, the EZLN’s struggle and the writings of Subcomandante Marcos/Galeano have been a constant source of hope and inspiration. During our current time of monsters, the stories that form this wonderful ‘accidental archive of Zapatista struggle’ invite us to once again embrace radical hope, to work for futures not yet born, and to affirm yet again that other, more just, worlds are indeed possible. Revolutions have come and gone, to paraphrase Emiliano Zapata, and the EZLN keep on with theirs.”  
—Alexander Aviña, author of *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside* (2014)

“*Zapatista Stories for Dreaming An-Other World* is more than the English translation of *Los Otros Cuentos*, written by Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos. It is a poetic and political dialogue between Zapatista thought and the historical contextualization of a group of activist translators inspired by the struggles of the Indigenous peoples from Chiapas. The members of the Colectivo Relámpago (Lightning Collective) make a hermeneutic reading of the Zapatista fables, from a profound knowledge of the stories of resistance in the Maya region.”  
—R. Aída Hernández Castillo, author of *Multiple (In) Justices: Indigenous Woman, Law and Political Struggle in Latin America* (2016) and *Descolonizando el Feminismo: Teorías y Prácticas desde los Márgenes* (2008)



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**Subcomandante Marcos**

*translated with commentaries*

*by Colectivo Relámpago*

*(Lightning Collective)*



*Zapatista Stories for Dreaming An-Other World*

Colectivo Relámpago © 2022

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## Translators' Note

Our name, “Colectivo Relámpago,” or Lightning Collective, was chosen when we imagined producing a quick set of English translations to support a solidarity project initiated by the Zapatista secondary school in Oventic. But our name turned out to be ironic, since, rather than lightning, our speed has been that of the snail, or *caracol*, a recurrent Zapatista trope: *We advance, yes, but slowly*. We sought to translate in a way that preserved the liveliness of these Zapatista stories and ended up finding them infinitely fascinating and revelatory, the more we researched their context and associations for our translations and commentaries. Because our experience was so unusual and so unexpected, perhaps we also haven't wanted our collective to end—and so became very good at discovering “futures yet to be born, paths not yet walked, dawns yet to break.”

All proceeds from the sale of this book will go directly to Zapatista communities.

Translated with commentaries by Colectivo Relámpago  
Antonia Carcelén-Estrada, Margaret Cerullo, Marina Kaplan,  
and Zack Zucker  
Amherst, MA, 2022





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# Foreword

“After the flame comes the smoke; after the smoke follows the word.”

—Subcomandante Marcos, “The Story of Noise and Silence”

Characters smoke a lot in Zapatista stories. Old Antonio, the *guerrilleros*’ guide to Indigenous history, culture, and perspective, rolls cornhusk cigarettes, pauses in his narration of many of the tales here, looks into the fire, inhales and watches as smoke curls from his mouth into the air. Don Durito—a beetle-turned-political analyst and dreamer, foil for Subcomandante Marcos’s ego, voice of conscience, and vehicle for allusions to other literary and popular traditions—smokes a pipe, steals tobacco, and leaves a trail. Marcos smokes a pipe and has his tobacco stolen, thus encountering the wise and comical beetle Durito.

The first time that smoking appears in this collection, it might seem to be simply a mechanism to move the story from point a to point b; another time, it seems a common thing, just something people do, perhaps strange, even shocking, where smoking is taboo but an ordinary activity nonetheless. It might seem to be the storyteller’s way of giving his tale some air with an extra rhythmic beat, another literary device. One might read right past it—especially when confronted with a talking

beetle who wears spectacles, reads the newspapers at a tiny desk, and comments on the nature of neoliberalism. Soon enough, though, through repetition, what is, in fact, a common thing *and* a literary device is clearly something more as well.

Emblems in emblematic stories invite questions. In the tradition of fable and myth, the breath of life, manifested in the spiral of smoke, predicates thought, which bursts into the world, carried on the air, in the word. The word made flesh, or corn in Maya cosmology; human beings, that is—not religious deities or vanguard heroes—create their gods and their revolutions.

In Western left tradition, we are typically uncomfortable talking about gods, except perhaps in the context of the folkloric. We also often have a narrow definition of revolution. These stories, translated into English with commentaries by the Colectivo Relámpago (Lightning Collective), knock such limitations on their head. As the Colectivo explains more fully throughout, the stories were written between 1992 and 2000, most as part of, or complementary to, communiqués from the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, in a context of fire and blood, in an effort to inform the world about events then unfolding in Chiapas, and to inspire global solidarity as a practical means of gaining support and maybe protection. Each story was thus embedded in the struggle of the present in which it was written. But the struggle had a past, and it has not disappeared with the passage of time and headline news.

That past stretches back thousands of years, to the formation of Mayan culture and the subsequent effort of the people to save their languages and spiritual constructs, camouflaged and altered but not obliterated, after the cataclysm of conquest. The occupiers' history records some organized rebellions since July 11, 1562, when a Spanish Inquisition put thousands of Mayan images and dozens of hieroglyphic codices to the torch in the Yucatán—the word rendered smoke and ash. In neighboring Chiapas and environs, four rebellions (among how

many in the lingering present of unrecorded time?) stand out. One hundred fifty years after that auto-de-fe, which, according to its Franciscan supervisor Fr. Diego de Landa, the Maya “regretted to an amazing degree and which caused them great affliction,” the Indian Army of the Virgin rose up against the Spanish political and religious powers and principalities. They did not win, but their revolt was remembered. One hundred fifty—some years later, the people’s religious iconoclasm and passive resistance to *ladino* economic control in the late 1860s resulted in the massacre of many hundreds of them in San Cristóbal de las Casas, in 1869, and an ethnic/state campaign bent on extermination.

Another century on, in 1974, “radical Tzotziles—the People of the Bat—forced the whites and mestizos off Indian communal lands,” as the great journalist John Ross recounted. That same year, at a conference in San Cristóbal celebrating the quincentennial of Bartolomé de las Casas, “the first defender of the Maya,” Indigenous people were in charge. In the early 1960s, they had confronted their bishop, Samuel Ruiz, demanding to know whether the Church cared only for heavenly rewards. Ruiz chose humanity. His embrace of liberation theology, with its “preferential option for the poor,” prefigured the choice made by a conclave of Latin American bishops in Medellín in the world-shaking year of 1968 and led to the creation of Catholic base communities. Catechists in Chiapas—in particular the women who were their most active members and translators among the six Indigenous language groups in the highlands and jungle—became the cadre along with secular radicals and the largely mestizo band of guerrilla fighters for what would become the most world-shaking Indigenous revolt: the Zapatistas’ armed uprising and seizure of San Cristóbal and six other municipal seats on January 1, 1994, in what they call *una guerra contra el olvido*, “a war against oblivion.”

Which returns us to these stories. Written as they were in a context of revolt, they are revolutionary documents. Also,

and simultaneously, they are literary documents. It is easy to accept the latter, brimming as the stories are with symbolism, metaphor, humor, and conflict, as well as to think of them as entertainment, designed to charm readers and keep them interested, or as a means to whet the appetite, an *amuse bouche* to the really nutritious political meal—tasty but separate. Except that history, the journey of people through time, is no more neatly divisible than are human beings. Plutarch called history a poetess, for good reason.

Timing, technology, and identifying the enemy as a global phenomenon all make the revolt of the *Chiapanecos* since 1994 different from its historical antecedents. Land and freedom were demands of the Indigenous long before Emiliano Zapata made them the slogan of the Mexican Revolution. Autonomy and dignity were the cries of “the people of corn” from the moment the first bearded white man regarded them as subhuman. These four—land, freedom, autonomy, and dignity—are bulwarks against oblivion. The full communiqués detail the exploitation in Chiapas, the Zapatista program against it, and the ruthlessness of the government/paramilitary response: notably, the executions in Ocosingo, in January 1994; the scorched-earth attack, in February 1995; the massacre of civilians in Acteal, in December 1997; the deceit in negotiating peace accords from 1995 to 1997—that last, a feint in the state’s overall strategy of extreme violence, which persisted with invasions of Zapatista villages in 1998 and after. The dates are important. The commentaries at the back of the book explain the stories’ temporal and political context. They come last so that the reader might first surrender to the imagination, to the surreal.

As in any uprising of the subaltern, when “weapons talk,” to borrow Subcomandante Tacho’s phrase, they declare, *hear us! see us!* He was speaking of guns, but the widely circulated communiqués were weapons too. Form and content were purposeful. Like freedom dreams, the stories are grounded in their strategic moment at the same time that they transcend it.

They signal a breathtaking revolutionary ambition by reversing the mirror: *see us!/see yourselves!*

Taking the oldest literary forms, the stories assert the stature of the Mayan worldview within the storehouse of human civilization's vast and varied inheritance; in doing so, they reintroduce humanity to itself. And be not deceived, however fanciful the language or whiskered the date, nothing about this project belongs to the curio cupboard. Consider again the nature of the enemy:

In the new world order there is no democracy, no liberty, no equality, no fraternity.

In this war of conquest everything and all of us are subjected to the criterion of the market—anything that opposes it or presents an obstacle will be eliminated. It implies the destruction of humanity as a sociocultural collective and reconstructs it as a marketplace. Opposing neoliberalism, fighting against it, is not just one political or ideological option, it is a question of the survival of humanity.

That was Marcos speaking in 1999, in the first instance, to the Spanish writer Manuel Vásquez Montalbán and, in the second, in a 1998 Zapatista communiqué. Both observations condense the Zapatistas' dualistic perspective: yes, their struggle is particular, localized; and, yes, it is global and won't be won by a seizure of state power in this place or that. Nor is the way forward clear cut. "The Story of the Little Mouse and the Little Cat" in this collection involves a struggle over resources between figures of unequal power and position. I'm not spoiling the story by revealing that the resources have all gone bad.

More than two decades after Marcos made the above observations, the exigencies of a pandemic have concentrated political attention on the actions of national governments, but who will argue for the health of democracy, liberty, equality,



and fraternity? Who can boast of humanity, when even among leftists there is nonchalance toward mass death?

By the most charitable assessment, we are afraid—and confused. In other words, we are in exactly the position as human beings facing a crisis since time immemorial; we are in the position of our earliest ancestors, trying to know the world and imagine a way forward. Some of us pretend to know perfectly well, but we don't. The wise “walk with questions,” like the gods in these stories.

While representing vital elements of ancient tradition, these gods are not replicas. The Zapatistas honor Indigenous history; they don't essentialize it. Like the deities of the *Popol Vuh* (commonly translated as the Book of Counsel), these gods consult, decide, and stumble. Creation is a result of trial and error, of making and remaking. Like the gods of antiquity, who fashioned humans first of mud, then of wood, and finally of corn, these gods are dissatisfied. They must repeatedly confer and come to an agreement again and again. In legend, the mud people could not keep their form and had no understanding. The wooden people could stand and speak but had no soul, no discernment or memory. All of creation participated in destroying them. The people formed out of maize and water were perfect. They knew and understood everything. They could see beyond the dimensions of reality into infinity. They were like their makers, and so the ancient gods, uneasy, adjusted their creation:

And when they changed the nature of their works, their designs, it was enough that the eyes be marred by the Heart of the Sky. They were blinded as the face of a mirror is breathed upon. Their eyes were weakened. Now it was only when they looked nearby that things were clear.

The story gods show no interest in being worshiped. Plopped into politics, they scratch their stomachs and help