

COMMENT AND RESPONSE

A RESPONSE TO ANDREW NOEL

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Andrew Noel's paper "Ócutl, or 'Being the Torch': Examining the Conversation between Indigenous Voices and Colonialist Discourses" seeks to provide a perspective on the contemporary struggle of the Mayan people against the powers of globalization and neoliberalism. As he states, the paper seeks both to "study native and liberation theologies as a means of critiquing the discontents of global economic structures" and "engage in a conversation regarding the exchange between Western discourses and indigenous perspectives of resistance" (39). Noel asks the question "How can writers engage in this conversation while ignoring the fundamental ideas spoken through indigenous perspectives?" (47). I seek to ask this very question of Noel's focus on native and liberation theologies. Because of his desire to remain within the bounds of more traditionally defined "theologies," Noel's paper does not mention the Mayans' premier voice in the struggle against neoliberalism and globalization: the Zapatistas.

Noel's paper alludes to an alternative indigenous theology that is not connected to the Catholic Church as much as it is connected to the controversial native identity itself: this alternative ideology, to me, is found in the ideology of the Zapatistas. In his critique of the convergence between Catholic and native beliefs, Noel notes that "native forms of theology have risen out of the pervasive sufferings of indigenous peoples." Yet the sufferings have also allowed theologies independent of the Catholic Church to emerge. Perhaps the same theologies that Noel later considers to be both "controversial" and contrary to dominant society (42) are not the product of a native-based Catholicism. Perhaps the theologies are an entirely different religiosity based in something outside of and independent from the Catholic Church where man is the "theos" that determines both the goals and the means of action, a loosely defined theology such as that of the Zapatistas. In the words of Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos, "Our weapons are not used to impose ideas or ways of life, rather to defend a way of thinking and a way of seeing the world and relating to it, something that, even though it can learn a lot from other thoughts and ways of life, also has a lot to teach" (45).

As a group, the Zapatistas are composed almost entirely of indigenous Mayans who have maintained a strong indigenous identity contrary to the global culture propelled by globalization. Although their identity is tied primarily to their ethnicity and not to commonly defined "religious theologies" such as those of the Catholic Church, the Zapatistas remain a telling and powerful display of Mayan resistance to global economic structures. Certainly, the inclusion of their rhetoric would complicate Noel's study of native and liberation theologies; however, a conversation pertaining to the voice and resistance of Mayans within the struggle with globalization and neoliberalism should certainly include the strongest and most influential voice in that struggle (Hart 193–221).

The Zapatistas' postmodern ideology challenges the notion of reconciling liberation theology and native theology, making the argument more an issue of perspective than of doctrine. While the theologies function within a modernist framework, the Zapatistas function in a postmodern one, mak-

ing their identity and vision far more relative. Instead of reconciliation, the Zapatistas seek a two-way education between mestizos and the indigenous populations in order to break the potency of “native inferiority” while also serving to increase the sovereignty of both cultures through beneficial exchange.

Although the Zapatistas are not theologically bound according to Noel’s standards, they do display incredible teleological influence where the telos is individual and cultural authenticity, an incredibly motivating end for oppressed peoples (Peters 161). Because the Zapatistas are fundamentally atheist, they are influenced more by Zapatista postmodern ideology than by liberation theology. The greatest influence upon the Zapatistas, and thus much of modern Mayan thought, comes from Subcomandante Marcos, a white professor turned rebel who for many years spoke both to and for the Mayan Zapatistas. The voice of Marcos, although different than those Noel mentions, lends both weight and complexity to Noel’s discussion of “border-crossers” (40).

Noel speaks of the loss of Mayan sovereignty, an issue the Zapatista Mayans have literally taken by force, claiming parts of Chiapas as sovereign Zapatista territory. The Zapatistas would, in fact, reinforce Noel’s claims about the subjugation of indigenous populations via Western supremacy, Greco-Roman values, and Eurocentricism.

Noel’s call for a realm of discourse that is equally open to native and Western voices is also answered in the Zapatistas. The Zapatistas offer an intriguing example of nativism in Marcos’s intellectual mestizo voice speaking for the Mayan campesinos (Chasteen 335). In addition, they seek a realm of discourse that engages the powers of globalization on equal grounds, using the Internet to enter the global anti-neoliberal debate (Txema 5).

From this perspective, the use of *ócutl* is not abstract to those who have a defined understanding of Zapatista rhetoric, as the Zapatistas end many of their public showings by calling upon their followers to “light the torch” and join the struggle against globalization. The difference, however, is that the Zapatistas are seeking dignity and not necessarily direct reconciliation. This lack of reconciliation can also be seen in regard to Kearney and Varese’s concept of “othering.” One should note that modern indigenous rhetoric as propelled by the Zapatistas embodies the same conceptualization of an “us versus them” society—this is, however, formulated along lines of oppression rather than ethnicity. Noel states that the “contemporary character of the impoverished native is no longer despondent; it is unmistakably optimistic in its inclination to defy neoliberal constraints” (42). The question now is: Who are the optimistically defiant natives? And what forms of rhetoric and praxis are they using? The answer to these questions can be seen in the Zapatistas, leading one to note that what Noel calls the “true Mayan theology of liberation” (44) may be achieved not only through the Church, but also in spite of it.

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