

## COMMENT AND RESPONSE

### A RESPONSE TO MARGARET-ELLIOTTE CZENTNAR

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The larger portion of my piece “Ócutl, or ‘Being the Torch’” was dedicated to the rhetorical challenges of representation, and in the example of the Zapatistas one finds a curious case study of *living* rhetorics of representation; that is, simply put, authoring to be a voice for the voiceless. Czentnar depicts Subcomandante Marcos as the Girouxian border-crosser par excellence, arguing that Marcos signifies the “exile for whom being home is often tantamount to being ‘homeless’ and for whom his own identity and the identities of Others are viewed as sites of struggle over the politics of representation, the exercise of power, and the function of social memory” (Giroux 178–79). However, Marcos is difficult to place within this definition of the border-crosser, and the intricacy lies in various linguistic twists (depending on whom you ask: the Mexican government, the *companeros*, the EZLN leadership, inter alia):

- First, and certainly most frequently, Marcos can be perceived as *a representative of*: that is, embodying the role of the spokesperson for the indigenous of Mexico, providing their voice, etc. He is a writer, a speaker, and, most importantly, a leader.
- Second, Marcos can be seen as *a representation of*: Marcos not only provides a voice for the *companeros*, he *is* the *companeros*. There is no distinction between Marcos and the indigenous of Mexico. They are unified in his one persona.
- Third, he can be viewed as re-presenting: the work of Gayatri Spivak, as I discussed in my essay, points to a critical discrepancy between representation and re-presentation. Marcos, thus, perhaps re-presents the people of Mexico by assuming the position of their voice. As a result, his voice is heard, and theirs are silenced.
- Fourth, Marcos is the “empty signifier,” the backdrop against which the multitudes of indigenuity operate and become integrated into the Symbolic Order of resistance.

It is the fourth mode that further complicates notions of representative discourse, and for a number of reasons. The work of Slavoj Žižek is extremely applicable here, especially when examining the role of the “empty signifier” as representation within the spaces of revolutionary politics.

In this case, what the empty signifier suggests is the establishment of a framework that makes resistance possible; that in the neoliberal-capitalist “utopia,” new spaces are able to emerge as moments or sites of subversion. Yet is it not that this framework is still always-already existing within the larger mythology—in the Barthesian sense—of the global capitalist ethos? As the Zapatistas create autonomous zones, establish their own farming communities, instill certain values, and so on (which is argued to be a response to the evils of neoliberalism), they are *wholly dependent* on neoliberal superstructures to form these spaces. Žižek, commenting on the Zapatista movement, notes: “It is clear that such a structure can function only as the ethico-poetic shadowy double of the existing positive state power structure” (“Blows against the Empire?”). It is not a response, but simply a *different space*. It is this different space that we often refer to as “revolution.”

Thus the empty signifier does not merely replicate or mirror the conditions of revolutionary spaces; it defers meaning to the logics of postcolonial rhetorics. A dialectic exists as such: resistance depends on authority. But in another sense, does not authority also depend on resistance? First, resistance must position itself as a dialectical opposite to an established Order as necessitated by the Order's self-legitimization of power; that is, without the incessancy of critiques against it, the established Order would have no authority to maintain stability by force. As Žižek writes in *For They Know Not What They Do*, "law [Order] needs crime [transgression] to affirm its own reign by means of the crime's 'sublation'" (32). Order faces its own realization through the creation of transgression, and vice versa: without an (unjust) established Order, resistance would have no authenticity.

Thus an empty signifier—here, imagine Marcos at the center—encompasses both Order and resistance. The mask is critical to the emptiness of what is signified: it includes the multitudes of the indigenous Zapatistas who invest in Marcos as a "voice," yet it also indicates the brutality of Order inflected upon subversive centers of power. In no way can this dependence on neoliberal superstructures be considered an ethical dilemma, as I am certain that it is unnerving to some. Nevertheless, what the empty signifier reveals, particularly in Marcos's case, is that representation is not as one-sided as it seems.

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### **Works Cited**

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