

Zapatistas: new environmental subjects?

MSc Thesis Report

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Summary

This thesis focused on the investigation of the Zapatistas as new ecological subjects, i.e., “people who have come to think and act in new ways in relation to the environmental domain being governed” (Agarwal, 2005). Despite the Zapatistas have been extensively studied as a movement with a specific political consciousness, derived from the historical marginalizing (land) policies in Mexico, which propelled the creation and uprising of the movement and, later, their autonomy project, these factors have not been researched in the formation of their particular ecological consciousness. By focusing on the Zapatista case, the purpose of this thesis was to contribute for a deeper understanding of the existence and importance of alternative and more caring ways of thinking of and relating to Nature.

An (auto)ethnographic approach enabled participant observation, as well as the storytelling and narrative enactment of both personal and indigenous stories. These methods were used to access to the views and practices of the Zapatistas towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment. In addition, they allowed for the understanding of the processes that have influenced the collective subjectification of the Zapatistas in these domains. These processes were analysed through the lenses of a theoretical framework combining both agency-oriented and political ecology theories.

Through my encounter with the historical, geographical, cultural, and political contexts of Chiapas, as well as through the subsequent encounters in Oventik, it was possible to understand the Zapatista Tzotzil cosmovision. For them, the concept of Nature is extremely connected with the one of Mother Earth, a collective mother of all the natural elements, complementary figures on the holism of Nature. Therefore, the Zapatistas seem to work to establish a non-exploitative and caring agricultural system, based on the rhythms and temporalities of Nature.

The Zapatistas have created their own agricultural system – “The Other Production”, an agroecological project – that allows them to produce their food collectively, based on indigenous, actualized – but respectful - practices. This thesis found that their agricultural system is one that allows them to grow food without depending on external inputs from the State or big corporations, helping them to detach from manipulative, unsustainable practices. In this way, they seem to be able to secure their food, so their resistance, autonomy, and emancipation as Zapatista indigenous peoples, serving their politico-ecological fight.

This case teaches us the possibility of distinct ways of thinking about and acting towards Nature, which help us to defy the dominant rationale based on a capitalist, exploitative discourse, that has been promoting the destruction of the planet – and its people.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

On the 29th of October of 2021, during a cold Dutch night, I biked to Ppauw, an occupied ecovillage in the city of Wageningen. On my way there, my heart rate was incredibly high - more from enthusiasm rather than from the biking activity itself. I was about to meet the Zapatistas that had come all the way from Chiapas, Mexico, to various geographies in Europe. This trip was named by the Zapatistas themselves as “Journey for Life”, and it counted with the participation of many people from the twelve different Zapatista *Caracoles*. The main aim of this journey was to meet the “mutual stories, pains, furies, conquests and failures” ⁽¹⁾ that unite the different geographies – and their peoples.

In one of the open fields of Ppauw, I could barely find a place where to put my blanket and sit; the place was crowded by international students and non-students, who were there for the same reason as I was: to listen to the wise words of the Zapatistas. I immediately understood that I was not the only one that had previously heard about the movement; in fact, it seemed that many people, from many different countries, had come across their Revolution, through books or international encounters with indigenous and peasant communities. The Zapatista movement was not new to me – neither to most of the people trying to fit in the tiny spaces left to assist to the Zapatista discourse. But it was powerful enough for attracting people under the rain, people that had read the history and stories of the movement, but that wanted to listen to them from the hearts of the Zapatistas themselves – as it was my case. It seems clear, then, that Zapatismo continues alive in the hearts of many individuals across all geographies, most of them so distinct from the Zapatista, Mexican contexts.

This encounter with the Zapatistas in Ppauw only reinforced the curiosity and, I dare to say, the passion that I had for the social movement. The fact that the words of the spokesperson had to be translated to English, since they were uttered in Spanish language, was perceived by some of the audience elements as an inconvenience. However, for me, a Spanish speaker, it meant to listen to the guests two times, with my ears and with my heart – not necessarily in that order, or even in an exclusionary way. Listening to the history and stories of the Zapatistas that travelled to Europe, inspired me in such a great way, that I decided to study the literature available. Eventually, I happened to become so

¹ SIXTH COMMISSION OF THE EZLN. O CAMINHO PARA A EUROPA... Retrieved from <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/04/12/o-caminho-para-a-europa/> on 01/02/2023

embedded on the movement, that I wanted to know more about it – more than what was written in the books. I wished to write new stories, different ones, so others could be as inspired as me, by knowing the Zapatista movement. This desire led to the creation of the thesis – and the stories that compose it.

Problem description

Zapatismo (or Neo-Zapatismo)² is a social movement that has created its own autonomy project in Chiapas, Mexico. Community, subsistence, and smallholder farming, core practices guiding its creative project, help to secure basic human rights (such as access to enough quality food) to the indigenous groups who identify as Zapatistas (Howard, 1998; Vergara-Camus, 2011). This allows for an alternative development *for* and *by* (indigenous) “smallholder farmers and communities”, safeguarding their modes of living and relating to (their) land and natural environment. Some authors point to the independence of a capitalist, neoliberal State, with its particular relationships with the market when they refer to the Zapatista struggle (Earle & Simonelli, 2011; Vergara-Camus, 2011). Others, such as Martel (2019) and Oikonomakis (2019) have written about the Zapatista revolution as one against the Western capitalist system in general. Moreover, Lundström (2017) and Oikonomakis (2019) have defended that the fight of the Zapatistas goes beyond the economic system. Particularly, the analysis of the political fight of the Zapatistas has focused specifically on how the movement has positioned itself against neoliberal approaches and policies in the agricultural sector, which led to the expropriation of lands from the workers (Vergara-Camus, 2011). This is especially threatening to peasant communities, dependant on land resources and agricultural production, which is the case of the Zapatista communities.

To understand how the Zapatistas have developed those characteristics – related to sustainable agricultural practices, as well as their particular political project -, especially in relation to Nature³, the environment, and agricultural production, some events are of high importance. For the purpose of this work, the foundation (1983) and the uprising (1994) of the Zapatistas, as well as the construction of their autonomy on the present time, appear to be the moments that best illustrate the history – and the

² Neo-Zapatismo is sometimes used as an equivalent, to distinguish the movement from the one that supported Emiliano Zapata at the time of the Mexican Revolution (Oikonomakis, 2019). However, in this work, simply *Zapatismo* is used to refer to the movement.

³ Over this thesis, I will use the term “Nature” with a capital “N”, since its conceptualization in this work is based on the view of Nature as something more than physical, or as commodity, but rather something with spiritual meaning, to which human beings are intrinsically connected to. This follows the own Zapatista’s cosmovision and worldviews.

dynamism– of the Zapatista movement. Thus, in the next sections, I will elaborate on historical elements of that journey, while pointing out to the reasons that led to changes in the political strategies of the EZLN.

Creation (1983)

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was founded in 1983, in Chiapas, by an already organized rural civil society group, composed by 3 indigenous and 3 mestizos⁴ (Oikonomakis, 2019), the latter being elements of an “older, revolutionary organization that was called Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional” (FLN) (Oikonomakis, 2019). Some authors refer the spread of Marxist views to the communities in Chiapas as the lever for the creation of the EZLN (Berger, 2001; Cedillo, 2012) by influence of their “mother-organization”, the FLN (Oikonomakis, 2019). Yet, it seems that their struggle was more than a straightforward result of a systemic capitalist structure and class conflicts between an oppressive State and the people.

In fact, the EZLN was particularly engaged in fighting against the oppression of the State, which had historically marginalized indigenous communities. Some authors refer that the “political violence” exercised by the State against indigenous people of Chiapas appears to be the reason why, even though the economic and social problems were spread nationally, they were the ones who felt the necessity for revolting (Berger, 2001; Cedillo, 2012; Maxwell & Harvey, 1999).

These economic and social struggles seem to be related with historically marginalising land policies in Mexico, which allowed for the displacement of rural peoples through control of land access, use, and property. Even after the 1910’s revolution for Agrarian Reform, which “forced the Mexican state to concede the provision for collective land” (Martel, 2019), the indigenous people were still excluded from the right to fertile land. Instead, even if the revolution has led to the implementation of the Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, which allowed for land redistribution, the indigenous communities were given the poorest lands, while the best ones were targeted for “state elites” (Howard, 1998). The Zapatistas that came to Europe in 2021 confirmed that “The Mexican revolution in 1910 didn’t reach Chiapas [...]. This was a problem in Chiapas

³ *Mestizos* is used to refer to those who are directly descended from one indigenous parent and a Spanish-descendent one (Oikonomakis, 2019).

[...] From this point, it was not possible to live. That's why we started organizing as Zapatistas" (Zapatista spokesperson personal communication, 29/10/2021).

This continuous marginalization of indigenous rural communities as well as other related factors, such as land degradation, deforestation, and water scarcity, promoted by large private entities, are referred as levers for the mobilization of indigenous people in Chiapas (Howard, 1998).

Uprising (1994)

The tensions between the Mexican State and the indigenous communities increased over the years. In the mid-seventies to the beginning of the eighties, the Mexican State, threatened by a debt crisis, shifted towards a neoliberal approach, which included the industrialization of agriculture (Martel, 2019; Vergara-Camus, 2011).

The focus of the State was, then, in increasing productivity. For that, the government began to capitalize and privatize agriculture in Mexico (Martel, 2019; Vergara Camus, 2011), through the implementation of reforms on the Article 27. These led to a transformation in the agrarian system: they ended with the redistribution of land and, consequently, with the communal lands system – the *ejido* system. This shift in the role of Mexican agriculture impacted especially the peoples of Chiapas, where the most *ejidos* were found in Mexico (Jung, 2003). Land tenure struggles and the derived increasing poverty in Chiapas, which separated the workers from the means of production, allowed by the reform of the Article 27, are considered by Berger (2001) the main drivers for the Zapatista uprising in 1994.

Even though changes to the land tenure policy can partially explain the marginalization of rural communities in Chiapas, it seems to be related to a more complex systemic array of issues. On top of economic, social, and political exclusion, these were impacted by environmental problems levered by the privatization and capitalization of the agricultural sector (Martel, 2019). Aiming economic prosperity, the Mexican government prioritized different large projects of resource exploitation – from hydropower and oil exploitation infrastructures to logging and ranching activities. These are believed to be responsible for environmental degradation in Chiapas. In addition, increasing fertilisation of the soil to meet productivity requirements promoted land degradation. Vulnerable lands affected by these unsustainable projects were the only ones

accessible to rural communities. Thus, the neoliberal restructuring of the State, which led to the end of the communal land system, as well as to resource exploitation promoted by infrastructural projects, enhanced their marginalization.

The environmental issues derived from those processes, made that the lands that were assigned to them were not enough even for the communities' sustenance, aggravating economic inequalities in Chiapas (Martel, 2019; Veltmeyer, 2000). The authors argue that this "struggle for land and marginalization in terms of resource access" created in rural communities of Chiapas a "different identity" from the other ones who shared the same economic struggles arising from a liberal economic approach. It was actually at the time of the shift to a neoliberal politic system that the EZLN had an exponential increment in the number of its members (Brysk, 2007).

This marginalization seems to be associated with a more systemic complex threat to the "indigenous culture" (Martel, 2019). Due to the nature of this problem, there was a shift in the behaviour of the individuals of the EZLN, and thus in the own aim of the movement: from fighting, to also organize themselves as an autonomous rural indigenous community. This was the moment when the EZLN decided to create their own governing system, avoiding their dependence on the liberal system promoted by the State (Brysk, 2007).

Although, some authors defend that it was the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that ultimately determined the Zapatista uprising. The Zapatistas themselves shared with the audience in Ppauw, in 2021, that "We were forgotten and lived an unfair life. This [...] forced us to stand in weapons for the Mexican government to realize that as indigenous municipalities we still exist. On the 1st of January of 1994 the Free Commerce Treaty [NAFTA] starts. That is why we started the movement" (Zapatista spokesperson personal communication, 29/10/2021). Indeed, it was in the day the agreement was signed that the EZLN declared war against the Mexican government (Martel, 2019; Veltmeyer, 2000; Vergara-Camus, 2011). In any case, the Zapatista uprising emerged from a common need of fighting for the land that was more than a physical space rich in resources, but a space "full of symbolic and emotional meaning", at least for them (Martel, 2019).

Cedillo (2012) argues that the particular context and experiences lived by this group of rural people had an influence on the identity of the movement, which opted for an armed fight, opposed by other indigenous groups, as well as the Zapatistas themselves: "Somos producto del encuentro de la sabiduría y la resistencia indígena con la rebeldía y

la valentía de la generación de la dignidad que alumbró con su sangre la oscura noche de las décadas de los 60, 70 y 80. [*We are the product of the encounter of the indigenous wisdom and resistance with the rebellion and bravery of the dignity generation that lit up the dark night of the 60, 70, and 80 decades with its blood.*]” (Miralles, 2004).

However, some authors consider that the structural factors that led to the foundation and posterior uprising of the EZLN did not necessarily *create* a specific identity. In fact, some features of the movement are hardly explained as a simple product from systemic/structural issues, rather than from a “cultural rebellion, contrary to what Veltmeyer (2000) has defended. Indeed, the Zapatista movement is clearly characterised by revolutionary aspirations that, not only pose them passively against capitalism, neoliberalism, the oppressor state or even, generally, “the system”, but that seems to have constituted a *boost* for their autonomy project, initiated in 1994.

The present history of the movement, which is distinct from both moments of creation and uprising, with the aim of taking the State power (although deeply influenced by them), seem to corroborate this argument.

Autonomy project (1994-present)

The autonomy project of the Zapatista movement started in the year of their uprising, even though it was not a decision taken right after that, in January. It was in March of the same year, 1994, that the movement started its demands for autonomy, despite of being reduced to its “cultural, political, and judicial” spheres (CCRI del E Z L N, 1994), rather than focusing on taking the State power. Oikonomakis (2019) refers that, in the three subsequent months from the uprising (on the 1st of January of 1994) “something happened within the organization and the communities”, something that marked the beginning of the construction of their autonomy project; something that made them switch from a simple oppositional resistance – against neoliberalism, capitalism, and the State – to a creative one, constructed by the Zapatistas with specific demands (Trujillo & Ramírez, 2010). “They discussed how was it before 94, how the community solved its problems and realized communities solved their own problems by themselves. There is when we started naming our own local authorities in our watch community. Like that we don’t depend anymore on the bad government. We are autonomous. [...] 19 December 1994 we made the declaration of the 38 autonomous municipalities with their local and municipal authorities”, as it was told by a Zapatista spokesperson in Ppauw (29/10/2021).

However, they added that “The civil society that belongs to other organizations, [...] also saw the situation was wrong and needed change. We thought they would join, but it didn’t happen. They raised in a different way. They took the streets to ask the government to stop the fire. They said there is another way to solve the problems that existed in the communities. Also on the national level, but we also had to obey the Mexican people, as the fight we do is not only for us as indigenous people. It is also for the Mexicans. We had to obey them as EZLN. We had to leave the weapons aside to start a dialogue with the government”. Esponda & Barrios (1995) agree that the fight of the EZLN does not belong singly to the indigenous communities in the jungles of Chiapas; it is a national-spread fight against poverty, promoted by the neoliberal, marginalizing State policies. Therefore, the EZLN agreed on dialoguing with the government authorities, during what was called the “San Andrés Peace Talks”. Gathered in the municipality of San Andrés Larráinzar, in the Highlands of Chiapas, the administration of Ernesto Zedillo – the president at that time - and members of the EZLN tried to elaborate a “document recognizing indigenous rights and culture”, especially regarding their “right to self-determination and autonomy” (Mora, 2017). It was, indeed, during these talks that the Zapatistas tried for their territories to be claimed as “autonomous” and “indigenous” and recognized as such, officially. Even though both parties signed the San Andrés Agreements on February of 1996, the Zapatistas did not have much faith in its successful implementation– what would come to be proven (Holloway & Peláez, 1998; Mora, 2017).

Thus, even though the demands were agreed on paper, they were not materialized in practice. Still during the conversations in San Andrés Larráinzar, the government continued to attack the rights of the Zapatista indigenous communities. It was in August of 1995 that the first autonomous site – *Aguascalientes*, denominated at the time – was inaugurated. However, this first rebel site was destroyed by oppressive forces, as it was confirmed by one of the spokespeople for the Zapatistas in Ppauw (29/10/2021): “In 1995, a year after we raised, Ernesto Zedillo, Mexican president betrayed us sending armies to our communities to capture our leaders. What the armies did was destroying our constructions, local stores, clinics. Our companions left the community to avoid the clash”. Although the Zapatistas had the right to build infrastructures for their autonomy, they were aimed to be destroyed in the plans of the State.

Despite of that threat, the Zapatistas responded to the attacks with the construction of five new *Aguascalientes*, in 1996: La Realidad, Oventik, La Garrucha, Morelia, and Roberto Barrios (EZLN, 2003; Mora, 2017). Here, the Zapatista civilians, who were not

active in the military activities of the EZLN, created their own authorities, and implemented projects that were deemed essential for them to be autonomous: “education, justice, agrarian, and health-care projects” (Mora, 2017).

These were sites of encounters between the Zapatistas and those who they called “civil society organizations”, such as non-governmental-organizations, or independent people whose aim was “to help”. However, the vision of these organisations as the ones who could help the Zapatistas, as if they were incapable of fighting alone – which they had proven contrary in 1994 – made the Zapatistas decide the death of the *Aguascalientes* (Mora, 2017). These were to be born in a new shape, with a new name. It was in 2003 that the *Caracoles* were born as a site of full autonomy for the social movement, where the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* – the “coordinating bodies for the multiple autonomous councils in the five Zapatista areas” (Mora, 2017) - were formed. The military part of the EZLN acknowledges that the fight for autonomy could no longer be a military project, but a civil one (EZLN, 2005). This civil project is currently implemented in numerous Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ), organized in clusters of twelve *Caracoles*, focusing on key demands of the movement: health, agroecology, education, and communication (Earle & Simonelli, 2011; Híjar González, 2008). This civil project is, undoubtedly, a political one, through which the Zapatistas realize their independence from the oppressive State and market forces. Moreover, it allows for an alternative development for (indigenous) smallholder farmers and communities, safeguarding their traditional modes of living and relating to (their) land and natural environment.

Research aim/objective

Various authors argue that these struggles have created a new political identity, through a two-way process: the encounter of political conscious people with indigeneity and the creation of political consciousness on those same peoples (Holloway, 2002; Oikonomakis, 2019). Indeed, the Zapatista political fight cannot be fit into pure Marxist or anarchist lines, as some authors have tried to argue (Ceceña *et al.*, 2011; Esponda & Barrios, 1995). They are said to be building their own political history, through a Revolution that does not aim to take the State power, but to create spaces of radical democracy within autonomous communities (Holloway, 2002). Apart from the political choices that provide Zapatismo with a new vision in how to organize socially to resist to the State – or more generally, to the system’s oppression -, those who insurged in 1994 were deeply engaged in constructing an alternative system with particular ways of doing

agriculture and preserving their lands and environment – that would later constitute pillars for achieving their project of autonomy.

During the meeting with the Zapatistas in the ecovillage of Ppauw, in the Netherlands, they highlighted the role of agriculture for their autonomy, and how they practise it:

“Another duty of the council is making organic compost to avoid contaminating Mother Earth. With this we grow our own feed. Everything we have done as Zapatistas, the council must promote it, our culture, how we speak. We speak different languages [...]. All of this cannot be forgotten, must be preserved. Same goes for all the native seeds. They cannot be lost; they are also our culture. What we do is that what we consume most, is what we grow. Its beans, corn, and veggies. The way we do the work is that we have our family jobs but also collective ones. There are families that work a lot. In the recovered lands there are rules. Chemicals cannot be used; herbicides, etc. There is an agreement that the land is there to be worked and not mistreated. We also had difficulties because we worked and then there were plagues. Then we tried polyculture, mixing crops in an area to avoid this. This goes for the recovered lands, there we plant beans, corn... but we see this a bit difficult in the villages where there are no recovered lands. There, there are Zapatistas that even if they use the organic compost, it doesn't work. Then we saw difficulties cause it's not flatland, but steep. There you are forced to make live barriers, that are very time demanding. But these are difficulties we face...” (Zapatista spokesperson personal communication, 29/10/2021).

This raises the question that the ones who joined the movement have created consciousness around sustainability and the threats that an industrialized/modernized agriculture could pose to their land – and thus dignity, freedom, and justice. I will argue that, if that is the case, this “ecological consciousness” is expected to have influenced their preference for agroecological practices, and the way they express themselves in relation to Nature. In fact, the commonly experienced struggles derived from marginalizing (land) policies promoted by the Mexican State (and, more general, the neoliberal system which impers nowadays in Mexico), appear to have influenced their choices both in the political and the environmental spheres. Interestingly, contrary to the “Zapatistas as new political subjects”, the literature available has not addressed the impact

of the referred struggles and the creativity of the peoples of Zapatismo in their ecological consciousness, thus has not addressed the question of their collective identities regarding Nature and the environment.

By focusing on the Zapatista case, I hope to demonstrate the implications of new epistemologies and ontologies in relation to Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, different from dominant knowledge forms from “the West”, are possible. These are relevant for a more integral and holistic understanding of different ways of relating to Nature – and to the world – thus to acknowledge the value of indigenous and traditional forms of agricultural knowledge, considered, sometimes, ancient and inappropriate.

Finally, I believe that reading and knowing about other views and practices around Nature can help one to welcome new “truths”, ones that are not yet spread in society – neither in academic circles. This can be helpful for decolonizing academia and knowledge in general, which has been property of hegemonic rationales from universities, States, and several corporations, for whom profiting from Nature is more important than caring for our planet.

Research question (s)

In the light of the research gap identified before – about the lack of literature on the Zapatistas as subjects with a new/different ecological consciousness – as well as the aims proposed for this thesis, I propose the following main and sub research questions:

How did the Zapatistas develop themselves as new environmental subjects and how do they continue to develop themselves as such?

1. What are the views of the Zapatistas towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment?
2. What are the practices of the Zapatistas towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment?
3. How did the Zapatistas come to share the same views and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment?

Theoretical framework

For answering the proposed research questions, I will use a political framework which combines agency with political ecology – based on a structuralist approach. For

accounting for agency, social movements theory will be introduced. Regarding the latter, I will start by mentioning the work developed by Robbins (2012), and then introducing new insights of the theory, especially provided by works in the Latin-American context. Finally, these will be combined in order to argue for a framework that entails both agency and structure – in this case, the process of subjectification - since I believe this combined perspective is the most insightful for my research, as I will explain later.

Social movements theory: agency is key

New social movements theories or, more generally, “contemporary studies of resistance”, offer advantages when analysing their formation and dynamics, by considering the “politico-economic structures”, the “agents’ own experiences”, and their relations (Lundström, 2017). These theories enable one to put emphasis on the social movements themselves, instead on the structures where they are embedded; and they offer deeper understandings of social movements which go beyond claims against capitalism and the means of production, as in the Zapatista case. Social movements, as Tilly (1998) argues, “link two complementary activities: assertions of identity and statements of demands”, with the prior being emphasised, principally, in the first stages of a social movement, which can be applied to the Zapatistas. In my own research, I wanted to understand if it was the case, and if/how it had changed, depending on which one must be prioritised to “negotiate” with the ones they want to appeal to, ultimately shaping their behaviour. This negotiation is, again, both dependent on structures – whether they are historical oppression from capitalism or indigenous culture – and on agency – especially on the ability of changing ways of conversation and behaviour depending on interactions with other parties.

In the case of the Zapatista movement, this approach combining both agency and structure can be useful to understand two characteristics of the movement: (1) it can provide an explanation on how the Zapatista movement can be distinguished from other social movements in Latin America, if one considers that the Zapatistas ultimately opted for the insurgent route, i.e., seizing the “State power through armed struggle” (Oikonomakis, 2019), contrary to others, who struggled to conquer the State power; (2) it accounts for the ways in which the ones who became Zapatistas in the context of marginalization in Chiapas, chose to “rise up in arms”, an *act* in which other indigenous communities in the same place did not engage. A brief explanation of both statements

seems important to justify the need for agency-structure explanations of social movements:

- (1) As it is widely recognized, many social movements in Latin America become guerrilla movements, trying to claim what Holloway (2002) refers as “power-over”. This type of power is the one exercised by the State, *over* the ones who are under its control. Oikonomakis (2019) distinguishes this road to achieve social change, from a very different one, which he names as *the emancipatory road*. The latter is different from the previous, in the sense that it does not aim to claim the State power in order to achieve social change. Indeed, it is usually through “the participation in the politics of autonomous self-governance”, beyond the institution of the State (and, thus, beyond its power) (Holloway, 2002; Oikonomakis, 2019). Social change is, then, achieved through the creation of new institutions, alternative to the state ones, “by the movements themselves”. These are structured in a “horizontal, directly democratic, and build in a communitarian fashion from below” (Oikonomakis, 2019), providing the social movements themselves *the power to construct alternatives, without exercising power over anyone*, as it would happen with structures hierarchically organized (Holloway, 2002; Oikonomakis, 2019). *Even though, in its primary steps, Zapatismo intended to conquer the State power, posteriorly it shifted its strategy towards autonomy building* (Holloway, 2002; Oikonomakis, 2019). This change of strategy, as well as the simple idea of emancipation, imply agency from the individuals who jointly declared war against the Mexican State in 1994 (Lundström, 2017). This shift of the Zapatistas into a “community in arms” (Holloway, 2002), an insurgent movement, was enabled by their *decision* that, even though influenced by structural aspects, cannot be regarded as a direct and “automatic” consequence of those (Della Porta & Diani, 2006).
- (2) *The context of Chiapas is one of marginalization, especially regarding land access, which affects mainly the various indigenous communities dispersed in the state.* This marginalization is, indeed, attached to capitalist and State structures that exercise oppression over the indigenous peoples of Chiapas; thus, they clearly influenced the creation of the Zapatista movement in this geography. However, the fact that only a fraction of the oppressed peoples of Chiapas decided to insurg against the Mexican State – the ones that *chose* to participate in the movement – defies the simplicity of structural explanations of the movement. Again, I

highlight the capacity of the subjects (in this case, the “communities in arms”) to act, beyond oppressive structures (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Lundström, 2017).

By acknowledging the latter, one goes beyond the deterministic views of the orthodox Marxism, which try to explain social movements as objects conditioned by the capitalistic system (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Lundström, 2017). Indeed, structural models place “disproportionate emphasis on the environment external to the movements, viewing the movements themselves as passive recipients of the external stimuli” (Oikonomakis, 2019). Even though various authors have pointed out serious limitations to political ecology (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Lundström, 2017; Oikonomakis, 2019), which derives from Marxist political economy, I believe that it is still important to consider structural aspects in my research.

Political ecology theory

The Zapatista movement seems to be a product of an interaction between economic, political, and environmental factors. The interdependencies between “economics, politics and nature” in environmental complexities, are the focus of political ecology (Robbins, 2012). Indeed, political ecology takes a holistic approach regarding environmental problems: they are undoubtedly and intrinsically linked to social inequalities, that should be targeted in order to achieve sustainability. Apart from considering capitalist structures as crucial for understanding environmental degradation and the marginalization of specific social groups – especially poor rural communities –, the theory looks at how different discourses around the environment and their dominance threatens the envisioning of alternative perspectives (Stott & Sullivan, 2000). The dominance of these discourses is related to the existent power relations within the realm of knowledge. This is the focus of some of the Michel Foucault’s work, cited by Leff (2021), which can be important to understand if the views and practices of the Zapatista communities are a reflex of their own knowledge – both theoretical and conceptual, including the meanings of “Nature”, “natural resources”, and “environmental preservation”; and practical, which should reflect on their agricultural practices/behaviour towards those.

Enrique Leff (2021) acknowledges the intrinsic relationship between the political and the environmental spheres in the indigenous (and peasant) world, by stating that “Environmental politics is a politics of being, but overall, a politics of life and existence,

a claim for the recognition of people's rights for survival, cultural difference, ethnic styles, and autonomous modes of being-in-the-world". Thus, for achieving equity, not only an economic and political hegemonic rationale has to be defied through autonomy of indigenous and peasant groups, but their control and management of the Nature and lands where they inhabit should be allowed, enabling alternative and sustainable views and practices towards Nature in accordance with their "cultural values and social imaginaries".

Leff (2021) refers to the "pre-Hispanic styles of sustainable development", grounded on indigenous culture, which involves a holistic view on Nature and the environment, where its elements are not perceived as mere "resources", but as something in deep connection with their whole lives. These significations applied to Nature and the environment, reflect then in the indigenous tradition of collective management of Nature and land, built on social relations reflected on communal rights and management of the land, as well as in their sustainable modes of consumption. Through their traditional knowledge, then, the indigenous peoples of Latin America offer an alternative to the economic rationale and allow the "decolonization of knowledge, the reinvention of territories and reappropriation of nature".

Giraldo (2019) goes further in the examination of the distinct features between the hegemonic and the Latin-American indigenous rationales around Nature. In dominant Western cultures, humans understand Nature as a separate entity from themselves, through a differentiation between the observable and material, and the spiritual, the non-physical – what is deemed as metaphysics. The author argues that this is a dangerous dichotomy, since it removes the deep connections between humans and the spirituality of Nature, leading to the perception of the Earth as something merely physical, that thus can be manipulated to serve humans. Contrarily to this, the indigenous cosmovision does not engage in any metaphysical philosophy; rather, Nature is conceived in its totality, where physical aspects are entangled with spiritual meaning, promoting their connection to Earth.

For instance, the literature about Mayan indigenous peoples reflects on the ways on which their cosmovision counters the hegemonic rationale around Nature and the dominant approaches for its management. Before the Spanish colonization in Mexico, it was relatively easy to understand how the indigenous people related to Nature, through the land that covered their geographical space. During pre-Hispanic times, then, the geographies populated by different indigenous groups were more-or-less

straightforwardly connected to the views and practices that were characteristics of those people. But this fact made that people connected to a land in more than a physical way: they established deep spiritual relationships with Nature, “conceived as Mother Earth” (Ruiz, 2016). Damián & Alberto (2010) argue that the Spanish conquer signified, then, not only the colonization of the physical land and the indigenous workers, but also the Mother Earth, with *her* spiritual nature. However, Ruiz (2016) talks about the Mayan-descendant cultures in the present time; indeed, these cosmovisions were not only alive before the Spanish occupation, but they also resisted the occupation – and later forms of colonization. The indigenous cultures to which I refer posit the human being and Nature at the same level, with interdependent relationships of reciprocity. Specifically, they are based in a Nature that “structures itself as a whole”, in which centre one can find the human being. In addition, the relationship between humans and “rocks, plants, and animals” (Damián & Alberto, 2010) is one of meaningful interconnectedness and they all belong to Nature; for this reason, neither Nature itself nor its elements should be owned by humans (Obregón, 2003).

These are common features of the Mayan-derived cultures that exist on the present days. However, there are several groups, distinguished, for instance, by their cosmovision and linguistics. In Chiapas, the Mexican state where the Zapatistas formed, rose up in arms, and built their autonomy, Tzotziles, Tzeltales, Tojolabales, and Choles are among the Mayan-descendant groups that have fought for their right to existence. For the purposes of this research, it is important to briefly focus on the Tzotzil cosmovision.

The Tzotziles, being inspired by the ancient Mayan culture, think of Nature as the whole in which they take part, together with other natural beings and non-beings (Méndez *et al.*, 2016). For them, everything has a soul: the human beings, the animals, the plants, and the rocks. This spiritual characteristic comes to be shared because all the natural elements, like the ones referred before, are children of the Mother Earth; this implies, in turn, that they are all at the same level, so the humans have no right to own any of them. Thus, the Tzotziles feel the responsibility to care for their *siblings* and for their *Mother*, a vision that contrasts with the industrial and capitalistic views on Nature, that have led to earth’s destruction (Damián & Alberto, 2010).

The Mayan-derived cosmovision appears to be still alive: it has resisted to the reforms made to the Article 27, to the Green Revolution period, as well as the subsequent attempts to modernize the entire agricultural system in Mexico (Ruiz, 2016). This was only possible because of its powerful nature; however, it does not imply that the cultures have

remained static. In fact, they are highly dynamic, changing in time and in between different Mayan-descendant cultures (Damián & Alberto, 2010). Nevertheless, the main features remain in the minds and hearts of the indigenous peoples in Chiapas, who resist, through their daily agricultural practices, to the threat posed by ongoing and increasingly neoliberal policies.

Posing emphasis on both structural conditions – such as the political and social marginalization of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, as well as the influence of the Mayan cosmovision on those - and the agency of the subjects influenced by them – that allowed them to choose to insurg, and then, to create their autonomy project -, can indeed “enrich the understanding of the preconditions in which resistance agents are cultivated” – or *formed*, as subjects of resistance (Lundström, 2017). Subjectification as a process, implies then that one does not have a pre-existent identity, but this one is constructed. This process of subjectification, of how a particular group of people is formed into political – and, in this case, ecological – arenas, where they *act*, is worth accounting for this research, where the ecological consciousness of the subjects is part of their political identity.

Subjectification

In the way that Lundström (2017) defines it, a group of people identifying as X, is “united by a common set of values and aspirations”, “attitudes, world views, and lifestyles”, or even “shared experiences of actions” (Della Porta & Diani, 2006), can be said to sharing the same identity. However, it is not enough that the ones who share the identity identify themselves within a certain movement; they must be recognized by the others (within and outside the group) as such (Lundström, 2017). The authors offer a deeper explanation this process of subjectification: a (collective) identity is generated through the “interaction between structural tensions and the emergence of a collective actor that defines itself and its adversaries on the basis of certain values and/or interests”. In this way, this identity production implies “collective action”, and the latter is enabled by identity production (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Thus, this process of subjectification cannot be fully understood by putting the emphasis only on the structural and systemic issues composing the context where specific social movements arise; to acknowledge the

role of agency is required. Taking “identity as a social process”, then, implies also the dynamism of identities, and the “continuity” of the process of subjectification (Lundström, 2017). In this way, I will look at the process of subjectification through the political framework combining the political ecology – which accounts for the structural levers for the Zapatista identity – and agency-oriented approaches – important for acknowledging the role of action of the subjects who identify as Zapatistas, as well as the one of their “adversaries”.

The process of subjectification is important to understand how different actors come together into the same collective identity – in this case, the Zapatista identity. Indeed, the issue of subjectification (how one comes to be a subject) is important to understand if the Zapatistas can be deemed as new environmental subjects.

I will defend that the Zapatista movement, even though sharing some similarities with other indigenous/peasant movements, has particular characteristics that allow people to identify a community as Zapatista. Indeed, some authors argue that Zapatismo can be considered a collective identity, belonging to those who suffered from marginalization in land access and resource use in Chiapas (Arias Marín, 2004; Howard, 1998). Because the aim of the study implies understanding factors that led to the development of a movement that is different from others, it seems important to analyse the case through the “Environmental Subjects and Identity Thesis”, proposed by Robbins (2012). Even though this thesis belongs to the realm of political ecology, it seems an important complement to the process of subjectification explained above. This thesis analyses how one’s actions “within ecologies” are shaped by and help to shape their perceptions about the environment (to which there are linked) and, ultimately, their identities. Authoritative control over natural resources and the environment are prone to lead to the emergence of social movements, composed by people commonly threatened by economic, political, and environmental shifts (Agarwal, 2005). **In this way, new environmental identities - defined by Agarwal (2005) as “people who have come to think and act in new ways in relation to the environmental domain being governed” - emerge.** This thesis helps to put into perspective the foundation of social movements as a product of shared struggles and common perceptions of environmental problems, that influence their (ecological) subjectification and its continuity through their common actions and lived experiences. Therefore, the application of this agency-structure rationale to the analysis of the Zapatista movement seems to be useful to analyse it as a possible identity product, different from other (Mayan) indigenous groups.

This thesis will argue that this does not mean that the Zapatistas, as new environmental subjects, are completely different from others. In reality, there are many indigenous groups around the world that share a holistic view on Nature, attached to spiritual meanings, and many more who have suffered from similar marginalizing land policies in various geographies. Truly, it is highly probable that several indigenous and peasant groups have caring feelings and practices towards the natural environment, that contradict the hegemonic rationale around Nature and agriculture. Then, for the purpose of this thesis, “new environmental subjects” are conceptualized as those that have developed different knowledges and realities around Nature, entailed to their cultural descendance and to their past experiences, that counter the modernized, hegemonic politics of production, in their specific - geographical, cultural, and political – contexts (Giraldo. 2019; Giraldo, 2022).

Chapter 2

Methods/methodology

Methods vs methodology

For this research, and generally in research, it is important to clearly distinguish the difference between methods in research and research methodology, although both are intrinsically connected (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). In simple terms, methodology refers to “principles that guide our research practices and/or researchers’ relational *responsibilities for their research and participants*”, influencing the methods chosen when conducting research (Datta, 2018).

In my research, this meant that the methodology applied was one based on a decolonizing approach, that accounts for the views of the participants themselves, especially regarding Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, rather than trying to look at the case only through Western-academic perspectives. Therefore, the selection of the methods was influenced by the belief that an ethical and respectful research must include the words and descriptions of views and practices of the Zapatistas themselves.

In fact, methodologies impact not only the tools selected for researching, but the conceptual framework developed before the field work (Knowles & Cole, 2012). Thus, I argue that the choice of methodology needs to be thought carefully before the encounters with the ones that will participate in the research to be conducted.

Methods appear to be a much simpler feature. They refer to the “tools, techniques, or processes” selected to conduct the research. Willox *et al.* (2013), emphasise “our responsibility as social science researchers” to prioritize methods that account for the voices of the unheard, such as indigenous communities, without interfering in their “living experiences”.

The decisions taken in relation to the methods to be applied in the research, were influenced by a previous exploratory work done in Oventik, in the summer of 2022. Guided by ethical and moral concerns, I decided to go, by myself, to Chiapas to see the reality of the indigenous communities situated in there; more precisely, I spent three weeks in the Oventik Caracol, with Zapatistas, learning the Tzotzil language and about life in general. Even though this exploratory work was, afterwards, included in my own findings, my primary intention for this first visit was to discover the place and the peoples

I wanted to “research”, with the aim of doing something that could be meaningful not only for me, academically, but for the communities themselves. Thus, the methods I propose reflect the ethical and moral insights provided by the connections – including emotional- that arouse during the intense five weeks in a Zapatista autonomous site.

The research methods that would be further explained were selected with the intention to give space for the voices of systematically marginalized indigenous peoples of Chiapas to be heard, to be included in the myriad of discourses available; and, perhaps, if not too ambitious, to facilitate real change. Moreover, some ethical issues and previous agreements with the Zapatista communities influenced this choice.

On the field: ethnographic approach

An ethnographic approach - which allows researchers to “observe and analyze [sic] how people interact with each other and with their environment” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011) -, seems to be insightful one to understand Zapatistas’ ideas and views in relation to Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment. However, becoming immersed on the socio-cultural context is not enough; as Atinkson (2007) stated, people conducting ethnographic research should take an “emic perspective”, i.e., avoid previous conceptualizations before conducting the field work. This, I believe, is the only way in which one can enter in the conceptual world of the ones “native” to the context, in this case the Tzotzil Zapatistas in Oventik. Despite having already defined the theoretical/conceptual framework of the study, this decision was taken posteriorly to my first encounter with the place and the peoples. This is one of the reasons why I conducted what I call an “exploratory work” previous to the field work.

Moreover, I intended to do what Schensul & LeCompte (2013) introduce as “establishing relationships to facilitate entry”. Generally in ethnographic research, the authors point out, one must build trust within the community (in total or with some responsible members) to get access to the physical space where the encounters are made possible. Furthermore, having a formal permission can be a requirement posed by the communities that will receive the researcher; this was the case on my “exploratory fieldwork”, which constitutes a formal way of “filtering” those privileged to get access to the *Caracol* as a living space. Thus, this formality will have to be renovated when conducting the field work. This careful process, I believe, becomes essential when conducting ethnographic-based research; this allows the maintenance of ethical and moral

requirements which are (or should be) a priority in social science researchers, especially when they are “outsiders” to the context of the study.

For building trustful relationships with the research participants, I successfully learnt the Tzotzil language, by taking Tzotzil classes with the Zapatistas themselves. In this way, before engaging with the research itself, I was able to speak and write the language, as well as to understand it in (small and limited) conversations with the Tzotzil indigenous communities in Oventik. The language is, in fact, one of the requirements, Eriksson & Kovalainen (2011) defend, for an “outsider” researcher to get immersed in the socio-cultural context to be studied. For the purposes of my study, learning the basics of Tzotzil language seems necessary for understanding Zapatistas’ worldviews, especially regarding (Mother) Nature.

This immersion experience is only possible with participant observation. Participant observation has been defined as a “process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting” (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). As the name indicates, it constitutes a process in which the researcher observes the socio-cultural context of research, while participating in the same. In this case, the participant observation was allowed by my lived experience as an “outsider” in the daily-day activities of the Zapatistas in the Oventik *Caracol*, which include not only Tzotzil classes, but also cooking and sharing meals, weaving, working on the *milpa*, singing, dancing, praying, and, most importantly, generating and sharing stories. These are the physical, cultural and social spaces where “aspects of ‘we’”, the collective subject, is present, and enabled (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Lundström, 2017). Thus, they seem to be valuable for understanding the continuous subjectification of the participants of those social practices, “linked by interests, values, common histories” (Lundström, 2017). I aim to collect and collectively write stories in these contexts and through these practices, by engaging in the agricultural, cooking, weaving, and other communal activities. I intend to listen, share, and co-create stories during the Tzotzil classes too, since they are elaborated based the Zapatista context, where topics around Nature, more-than-human relations, the struggle, and the project of autonomy are key.

Narrative research: a tool for decolonizing research

Indigenous practices and ways of generating/perpetuating knowledge have been identified as essential to defy the current colonizing methodologies/methods that

dominate academia (especially in Western countries) (Cadaval Narezo, 2022; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). This is particularly important in research work which engages with indigenous peoples and/or knowledge, whether as an object or as a partner for the research process. One way of doing this, is to use narrative research.

Indeed, oral stories have been central to indigenous communities to share their views on the world and Nature, as well as to represent their living experiences (Willox *et al.*, 2013). The textual representation and/or analysis of the latter, constitutes what is defined as narrative research (Salkind, 2010). However, simply engaging with narrative research does not guarantee our responsibility as social science researchers when engaging with indigenous communities. In fact, the same definition of Salkind (2010) on narrative research indicates that it aims “for an in-depth exploration of the meanings people assign to their experiences”, usually through interviews and “analysis of written documents”. This definition confirms what Susana Caxaj (2015) states in relation to the “mainstream Western academy”: that narratives are out there, somehow detached from their narrators, to be analysed through the lenses of dominant knowledges in Western academia; as something that has no meaning, thus requires the researchers’ active meaning-making of the words and living experiences of those who do not understand the academic/Western language (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021).

Moreover, narrative research refers to a myriad of methods that have in common the use of narratives or its analysis in certain research, ranging from more formal interviews to storytelling (Moezzi *et al.*, 2017; Salkind, 2010) and narrative enactment.

In the present work, a mixture of storytelling and narrative enactment will be used. Storytelling refers to the act of telling stories, which goes beyond the mere act of narrating them: these stories are told through words, but also through the emotions, feelings, and deep meanings attached to them – and to the teller. In its turn, **narrative enactment refers to the way in which Zapatistas’ narratives are “actively revived”** (Lundström, 2017) in their daily lives. In this thesis, they are only distinguished from the fact that, while some stories refer to past experiences that were not revived through the daily practices in Oventik – those that enter the realm of storytelling -, others were re-told through their enactment in the context of the *Zapatista Caracol*, in which I had the opportunity to participate as well – as a listener and a writer myself.

I believe these methods are relevant both in ethical/moral aspects, as well as in relation to the research questions I proposed before. Indeed, using stories simply as an object of analysis does not seem enough to understand the community’s ideas, views and

beliefs around Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment. The way stories are *told, re-told, and performed*, reflect their emotions and cognition attached to their simple physicality as narratives, need to be accounted for. van den Berg & Rezvani (2022) posit this type of methodology within the realm of feminist methodologies, since they go beyond mere measurements and observations. These stories are not about the objectivity of the words, but they are an expression of how “the authors infuse emotions into the text”, related to both “personal and political issues”. Thus, I hope that these are also reflected in this thesis, which intends to be a rich conglomerate of stories and authors, thus their emotions and feelings.

In addition, it is important to emphasise the way stories are shared and the way they are performed through their practices towards Nature, which reflect indigenous culture and cosmovision, in order to detach from the dominant colonizing Western research approaches.

Storytelling and narrative enactment

As mentioned previously, oral stories and living experiences are of great importance for indigenous communities. More than the stories themselves, the way that they are told accounts for their relevance on understanding people’s “beliefs and values” (Wilcox, 2013), which are reflected on their particular practices.

In the realm of this research, storytelling and narrative enactment allow me to explore oral symbols and the words told by the indigenous peoples in their own language, particularly in relation to Nature and land, and how they are materialized in through their behaviour. Through stories, one can describe not only their views in relation to Nature, but to connect them with meaningful practices around agriculture and farming. Both storytelling and narrative enactment methods are, then, a “mode of constructing reality” (Fairbanks, 1996), allowing for including indigenous knowledge. In this particular case, I am interested in showing the reality of the indigenous Zapatista communities of the highlands of Chiapas, through my own story of participant observer in the field, as well as from the perspective of the people I had the pleasure to live in that context, materialized in their oral stories that I intend to (respectfully) write. In the latter case, I will not be the teller. For this purpose, I will choose to write my own story intercalated with indigenous stories that belong to the Zapatista indigenous peoples, which structure will be explained further in detail. As a result, I collaborated with Zapatista people to write the story(ies)

that will, hopefully, serve the purpose of this research, contributing to the co-production of knowledge beyond the researcher/participant dichotomy (Datta, 2018; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). This type of collaboration was done through dialogue with the education promoters from Oventik. They would tell me stories in Spanish, that I would copy to my journal literally, so they could preserve their authenticity. Because it is important to agree on which topics and stories are included in the research, as well as those that must be omitted (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021), we communicated openly, daily, on the stories that I could transcribe to my work, after translating them to English language.

More than facilitating an ethical/moral commitment, I believe this collaboration between me and the research participants allowed me to understand better the reality of the case, since “our aesthetic understanding of reality is formed and informed through our embeddedness in the generative and creative process of story” (Lewis, 2011). This is especially important to engage with alternative knowledge and discourses around Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, generated and perpetuated in a reality in relation to which I consider myself as an “outsider”.

My story as (more than) a researcher

My own story as a researcher will be my story as a person who lived within the rich and complex context of Chiapas, and posteriorly as one that lived among the Zapatistas in the Highlands of Chiapas. My story is the story of a complete being composed not only of a cognitive part – that allows me to rationalize over the things I observe – but also of emotional and spiritual parts that, I believe, account as much as rationality when conducting research with indigenous communities. To being able to write and tell my story as such, the method named by Ellis (1999) as “Heartful autoethnography” will be used. It refers to an “ethnography that includes researchers’ vulnerable selves, emotions, bodies, and spirits; produces evocative stories that create the effect of reality; celebrates concrete experience and intimate detail; examines how human experience is endowed with meaning; is concerned with moral, ethical, and political consequences; encourages compassion and empathy; helps us know how to live and cope; features multiple voices and repositions readers and “subjects” as coparticipants in dialogue; seeks a fusion between social science and literature [...]; and connects the practices of social science with the living of life.”. Basically, what Ellis develops as an alternative method to understand human life experiences and cultures, is an expansion of

the autoethnographic work to include the researcher's own emotions and feelings. More than allowing for a description and interpretation of the researcher's physical experiences on the field, it accounts for the more-than-physical experiences derived from the encounters with the peoples and the spaces (being physical, cultural, or even political).

I materialized these (simultaneously physical and emotional) personal experiences and encounters in my own story, written day-by-day through journaling. By transforming my daily encounters in the field into words, I hope to transmit to the readers the physical sensations and emotions that the socio-cultural context of the Zapatistas in Oventik provided *me* (Carteret, 2008). For the purposes of this research, not only human encounters, but also more-than-human ones – with Nature and its elements, particularly – will be considered in my story. In doing so, I consider this method as a type of narrative inquiry that is relatively recent in social science research: lyric inquiry.

The term “lyric”, even though often reduced to a synonym of poetry, refers to a type of “embodied language”, used to produce written material where the writer- and teller- put their own “self”. Performing lyric inquiry is, then to “engage in all manner of nonrationalist writing”, using, for example, figures as speech such as metaphors or euphemisms to *tell* the research. This type of narratives/stories have the advantage of creating in the reader close-to-live experiences, as if they were present in the socio-cultural context that is being *told*. By using lyric inquiry in exploring the Zapatistas' views and practices towards Nature, I aim to make their “world come alive”. This seems important to give the same value and truthiness to their knowledge as the hegemonic worldviews (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Again, this method will allow me not only to try to answer to my research questions, but to do so in a respectful and meaningful way. In the one hand, the lyric data it provides, allows for challenging the Western dominant academic knowledge, based on rationality, objectivity, and validity. On the other hand, a lyric text can be more appealing to the public, to which it aims to speak directly, by involving each one of the readers in the story; this should allow for more accessibility of the text to different audiences. Finally, this method is argued as capable of providing “voice and agency for both the researchers and participants”, which I consider highly important in research with indigenous communities.

However, as I referred before, my story can just go as far as it is: *my* story, *my* views, *my* emotions, *my* experiences. The other stories, the ones told me by those who have the right to them, because they belong to them, because they are indigenous as the peoples, will be reserved to their voices and worldviews. Regarding these, my mission as

(more than) a researcher, is to be a messenger to the other side of the world; above all, to listen and to make others listen (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Therefore, as previously stated, my intention was to write collaboratively with the people telling their stories. In this way, I hope to equalize my position: myself as a listener, rather than the single writer. Even though this particular piece of work, the final outcome of my research, was written by myself, I simply translated and incorporated the stories of the education promoters, so their identity as storytellers is protected. This allowed me to be a learner, (more than) a researcher.

Indigenous stories

Oral stories have been central to indigenous cultures, since they allow the share of their worldviews, “ways of understanding, learning, and acting with the different spheres of life” (Datta, 2018). As such, indigenous stories transmit their epistemologies and ontologies, which are based in a holistic, spiritual view of Nature and its elements. Thus, they translate their deep connection not only to human beings but to “non-humans” - to Nature and the environment, far from an exploitative relationship where just the human beings benefit from natural *resources*, a vision that is widely assumed through Western colonizing perspectives (Datta, 2018). Thus, indigenous storytelling and narrative enactment seem to be essential methods to incorporate in this study, which aims to understand Zapatistas’ worldviews and human/more-than-human relations, especially regarding Nature. In reality, “it is through [...] storytelling, that humans narrate ways of knowing and being” (Lewis, 2011). These stories go beyond present worldviews: they are deeply attached to a traditional culture, with its own history, thus they offer insights about indigenous cosmovision, perpetuated and *re-told* in their socio-cultural contexts. This does not mean that there is no space for new stories to be generated and told, entering the complex process of meaning-making of the world. Indigenous stories are the translation of their “collective memories” into words, where subjects who share a collective identity have mutual and “specific understandings of past events that assign meaning to contemporary resistance activities” (Lundström, 2017). Therefore, this methodology not only enable the perpetuation of their past resistance, but its continuity in the present and in the future, enabling the continuity of the (ecological) subjects – and subjectification. Because of this, I believe that the combination of more ancient stories, from Mayan culture, with stories situated in a historical context of revolution and autonomy, is a

powerful tool for understanding how the Zapatistas' ideas, views and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, developed and evolved.

The indigenous stories present on this thesis shall not reveal the identity of the tellers; fictitious names would be given to those who shared their stories, struggles, and emotions. This seems particularly important on the realm of this research since the individuals participating in the storytelling live in a context of imminent war and other threats to their livelihoods – and autonomy of being. Protecting their identities, even though it was already part of the plan I proposed to the people who participated in the research, was re-asserted as important by the education promoters themselves. Thus, I chose to substitute their real names by the ones of revolutionary figures from the Zapatista movement – Ramona, Elisa, Móises, Esther, and Marcos, all renowned sub commanders of the EZLN.

The oral stories shared during my ethnographic research will be complemented with previous written and published narratives of the EZLN, particularly their *comunicados*. Including this “produced-material” can be valuable for my methodology, as a way of understanding the process of (ecological) subjectification, through the dynamism and continuity of the stories - a “dialogue with the past” (Lundström, 2017). In addition, I hope that the inclusion of previous generated stories can fill some gaps derived from the limited time the process of creating a MSc Thesis allows for allocating to the field work.

Particular to the Zapatista context, some of their stories can be read in the murals that are dispersed all over the State of Chiapas. i Puig (2022) states that these are beyond mere paintings on the wall: they are objects full of meaning, illustrating historical events (referring, for example, the figure of Emiliano Zapata), ideas (as in paintings alluding to Nature and its elements), collective activities (such as working on the *milpa*), or even political ideals (especially in those referring to the project of autonomy). The same author states that these “boost new political identities”; thus, they also potentially represent Zapatistas' ecological consciousness and their process of ecological subjectification. In addition, the inclusion of visual elements can facilitate the accessibility of the story, the readers' immersion on it, as well as their understanding of the alternative worldviews and the *stories* I want to *share*. In this sense, the popular saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” seems to be corroborated even in research. Furthermore, images can represent what, sometimes, is impossible to (fully) translate into words, especially when they refer

to abstract concepts such as “poverty, [...] racism, war, genocide, [...] utopia” (Weber, 2012), and others present in the indigenous stories and their enactment. Therefore, it seems of great importance to include these visual stories as a complement to the written ones.

In sum, I have chosen these art-based methods because they help me to understand better the creative side of the Zapatismo as a revolutionary movement, which is beyond reactive to oppressive structures, especially regarding their ecological subjectification. The worldmaking dimension of the Zapatismo, is what accounts the most for their current project of autonomy, which enables the continuity of the (ecological) subjects. This is only possible through the perpetuation of the subjectification process, for which the generation and telling of stories is essential. In what relates to me, and to my position as co-author, I hope to transmit the deep emotions, connections and relations with the place, its people, and Nature, that simple discourses are not able to transmit (Eisner, 2008). I hope to honour the indigenous stories, which translate their knowledge into words, a knowledge that deserves to be valorised as much as the “usual” academic one (Cole & Knowles, 2012). The later, I believe, will only benefit from the incorporation of indigenous knowledge, their worldviews, for the constitution of new “truths”, in the Foucauldian sense. With these methodological choices, I hope to contribute to the renewal of the image that the word “research” has among indigenous peoples, to which “‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). I hope to contribute to the renewal of how Western research is made, beyond what Guba & Lincoln (1994) define as the “rape model of research”, where “the researcher comes in, takes what he wants, and leaves when he feels like it”.

Outline of the story(ies)

As I briefly explained previously, the findings of this study will be presented through a compilation of stories – derived both from my experiences and understandings, and from the ones of those who I encountered in Chiapas.

The general story starts with a prequel, that serves as an introduction to the context of Chiapas and to the subsequent stories told – or that even happened – at the Zapatista *Caracol* of Oventik. This prequel is specifically based on my story as a person that travelled to Mexico from Europe, thus it explains the geographical, cultural, and political contexts of Chiapas that I encountered throughout my “outsider” perception. In addition,

this prequel includes a specific meeting between me and a professor of “Indigenous cultures of Chiapas”, which enables me to introduce insights around the demography of Chiapas, political history in Mexico, colonization, Tzotzil (Mayan) cosmovision, and Zapatismo. These are topics that will help one to understand further the generation and telling of the subsequent stories.

The latter, as I explained before, are a mixture between my experiences in Oventik and the stories shared by many education promoters with whom I learnt Tzotzil during my stay. The stories present in this work do not account for the totality of those I have gathered during my fieldwork; rather, they were selected from the wider collection based on the importance I believe they have for the purposes of this research. To these different stories I will call *encounters*. The “The Mushroom at the End of the World” inspired this designation. In this work, Anna Tsing (2015) explores the world of matsutake, a rare and special mushroom that grows in the most inhospitable locations – such as radioactive environments. Rather than focusing only on the mushroom, Tsing explores the relationships between this and other natural elements that enable its existence, through meaningful meetings - with industrial forests, traders, and even cooks – to which she calls *encounters*. For the purpose of this research, I believe that this notion can be valuable, because it gives a deeper meaning to the emotional meetings I had in the *Caracol*, whether it was with humans or with other beings or non-beings.

The first encounter is with Oventik itself; however, this goes beyond a geographical situated meeting, since the space is one full of struggle and fight, love, and resistance. I believe it is important that this is the one that introduces the encounters, since all the subsequent happened and are told in the realm of its context. The Tzotzil language composes my second encounter; it is based on the classes I took in the school of languages of Oventik, which introduced me to its linguistic analysis, that allows one to understand how the Tzotzil Zapatistas relate to Nature through their oral and written expressions. This is the topic of the third encounter: with the Mayan Tzotzil cosmovision, which is divided into six sub-encounters. The first sub-encounter explains the interconnectedness between Nature and human beings, as an essential part of the indigenous cosmovision. This relationship is then illustrated through other sub-encounters, where indigenous stories prevail. Stories about a tiny pine, the Mother Earth, the land, the corn and, finally, the moon, were the selected examples, since they represent indispensable elements to which the Tzotziles feel connected to. These are also the elements that I encountered that I believe to be the best for clarifying the Zapatista Tzotzil cosmovision, as I hope to show

you. However, as I referred previously, the Mayan Tzotzil cosmivision does not seem enough to explain how the Zapatistas in Oventik developed their specific views on Nature. For this reason, the fourth story is about my encounter with what I call the “Zapatista cosmivision”, with an emphasis on the notion of the democracy within Zapatista communities. I believe this focus helps to shed light on how the Tzotzil Zapatistas relate democratically to the world – thus to Nature itself. Particularly, the second and third encounters allow for a deep understanding of the indigenous views on Nature, that counter the hegemonic rationale. The analysis of their practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, is done in the fifth encounter, where the Tzotzil Zapatista mode of food production is highlighted. This encounter is also divided into sub-encounters, where stories of the other production as a political project, the *milpa*, the soil, the seed diversity, the bees, and the *cafetal*, are presented. During this encounter, the indigenous storytelling also predominates, since it is through the indigenous agricultural practices on the physical land that one can understand how they developed. Indeed, these are stories of traditional and others more innovative ways of working the land, while promoting diversity and the harmony with Mother Earth. Moreover, the narratives that compose the fifth encounter fall under the method of narrative enactment: they are continuously generated in the daily lives of the Tzotzil Zapatistas, which I was also able to perform by working the land. Finally, the sixth encounter offers an overview of the stories condensed in the previous encounters, thus it is aimed at establishing rational (and emotional) explanations of the interdependence between the Tzotzil/Zapatista cosmivision(s) and their agricultural practices, as a tool for resistance and autonomy.

Scope and limitations

Even though I intend to address the Zapatista movement as a whole, the research was restricted to one of the autonomous *Caracoles*, Oventik (*Caracol II*). It is located in the Mexican state of Chiapas, more specifically in its highlands. Oventik is the only physical place where international people (meaning those who are not Zapatistas, particularly those who come from other countries around the world) are allowed to interact more closely with the movement and its peoples. This is due to the restrictiveness of the access to the movement itself, which carefully safeguards its safety, including as a mechanism for defending themselves against their objectification, promoted by interested

researchers. In addition, the research will be restricted to one specific category of actors: the Tzotzil Zapatista communities.

The region of the highlands of Chiapas is mostly occupied by Tzotzil and Tzeltal communities, both deriving from Mayan descendance. However, in the more limited location of the *Caracol* II, the Tzotzil communities are the predominant ones. In fact, the Zapatista communities and municipalities covered by the autonomous government (*Junta de Buen Gobierno*) of Oventik are of Tzotzil ethnicity. Then, a limitation to the cosmovisions accessed to represent the Zapatistas in general, derives from the fact that only the Tzotzil language was analysed. However, this should be representative of the other Zapatista indigenous groups (because of their common Mayan descendance and physical location in areas occupied by the Zapatistas).

Furthermore, the research was determined by the individuals present in Oventik. The Tzotzil communities inhabit various autonomous municipalities in the highlands of Chiapas, but no individual lives permanently in the *Caracol*. It is, indeed, a centre where people gather, among other events, for assemblies, as well as for educational purposes – which includes a school of languages (CELMRAZ), where committed internationals are welcome to learn Spanish or Tzotzil languages. Thus, the views and practices to be analysed belong to those who participate in these gatherings in Oventik. Boas *et al.* (2020) alerts to the fact that “making assumptions for an entire community” from a restricted and particular group of people that belong to it, can undermine the reliability of the conclusions of the researcher. However, in this case, in which all the Zapatista communities are connected to the same social movement, with specific ways of relating to Nature, as well as with established rules for the type of agriculture they practice, the previous concern should not pose a problem.

Regarding the practices, including the set of agricultural ones developed and applied by the peoples, there is also a limitation. Because of the impossibility of access of non-Zapatistas to the communities where the agricultural practices of day-to-day take place, I had to restrict my research on the Zapatista agricultural practices to those happening in the fields near the *Caracol*, where the internationals are allowed when accompanied by officials from the CELMRAZ, as well as to practices orally communicated by those.

Chapter 3

Findings

Prequel

1. The state of Chiapas

During the trip from the airport of Tuxtla Gutiérrez to the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, which would accommodate me on the first weeks in Mexico, a lot of road signs indicating that I was entering the special State of Chiapas. Green, and all the other colours, and the land, and the culture. While, in reality, the people who had the power to choose to put the signs on the road – the State entities – disrespect each one of those written realities. In the end, just words. And, in the background, an indigenous person working the land, so uphill, so downhill, so uncertain, as their future under the power (over) exercised by the State. Or the colonizers. I am still not able to distinguish them.

Chiapas is the Mexican state with the most and various indigenous cultures, each one with its particularities in relation to their natural resources management, health, life, culture and cosmovisions (Méndez *et al.*, 2018). The city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas is situated in one of its regions, the Highlands, with an altitude of over two thousand meters, where the rain is common, and the temperatures are more amene.

The city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas is commonly referred to as “*pueblo magico*”, meaning “magical town”. Indeed, at the first sight, the city appeared to me as a magical place: colourful, the houses and the people, from various countries. However, these are curtains that hide the reality that I would know afterwards: what Hernández Cordero & Cordero & Sánchez (2018) call “touristification”. Since the last century, the city of San Cristóbal has been rebuilt for tourists, prioritizing the “cultural consumption” of the national and international visitors, over the interests of the locals – both indigenous and *mestizos*. The number of the latter increased in the city, due to their interest in searching for “the exotic” – the indigenous peoples and their ways of living. Paradoxically, one of the levers for this tourism increment was the Zapatista uprising: it attracted people engaged in social fights, particularly those inclined to the left. Indeed, the authors note that most of the tourists in the “post-conflict” times were international. It seems, at least to me, quite paradoxically that those who were aligned with the Zapatista ideals were among the subjects who promoted this “touristification”. The Zapatista movement is

highly indigenous and, as I would understand later during my fieldwork, somehow against this phenomenon, since it promotes the romanticization of the indigenous person and the indigenous work, which was traditionally devoted to the land. With the “touristification”, the land loses importance in the livelihoods of indigenous peoples, who turn their efforts into practices directed to the visitors – such as artisanry. On top of that, the authors defend that the enhanced importance given to tourism is one of the tools for the continuous “low-intensity war” that is present in the State of Chiapas, which aims to debilitate the indigenous power – and, especially, the strength of the Zapatista movement in the region.

The “touristification”, the marginalization of indigenous peoples, the transformation of a city that is not to its peoples, but to the tourists. In the market, the colours mix with the suspicious look of indigenous peoples when I ask for local fruits. Here, I shall enhance the “local”, not mine, a representation of the colonizing past (and present). Their suspicious look makes me deviate my look, the look that belongs to a white person from Europe, a stranger. I have an uncomfortable feeling of non-belonging, of superficiality, of black and white, trying to fit in the yellow, orange, green, red, from the fruits, and clothes, and the souls. And I see others like me, comfortably enjoying the bracelets and clothes that they bought from indigenous children. In times like this, in the peak of globalization, the work on the lands is no longer the main occupation of indigenous peoples; tourism has taken over, and it has become the main source of income of the indigenous peoples around San Cristóbal de Las Casas; so, while the children sell things, the parents sell them, to capture the attention of the many people from outside.

This “touristification” phenomenon can, then, be understood as a threat for indigenous peoples – and their ways of living. By attracting tourists to the city centre, where visitors can fulfil their desire of encountering the romanticised, exotic indigenous, one is distracted from the rural areas, that become available for State control and military presence, without significant notice. Not just the rural physical spaces are forgotten, but with them also the significance of those for the indigenous peoples. The latter are no longer perceived as human beings attached to their land, but as those who sell their funky artisanry and foods in the market in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. And these activities slowly – but forcedly – take the time and space of the indigenous and allocate them in the direction of the tourists. The new generations of Tzotziles no longer grow up surrounded by corn and trees, but by money and tourists. The new generations of Tzotziles are no longer attached to the significance of Nature and land for their identities, but to the significance of capitalist exchanges with non-locals. I shall highlight that this

is not the case for every single indigenous person or community, but it is a generalization that made after observing the spaces and the peoples. While this scenario might be true for the communities surrounding the cities of San Cristóbal, such as the ones of San Juan Chamula, others – especially the Zapatista ones – have actively tried to resist to this new form of colonialism through their work on the land, which enables and enhances their attachment to it and to Nature.

When one leaves the market, a countless number of elements from the police – municipal and national – and from the military, try to pretend that they are in the city to protect its residents and visitors. Indeed, the existence of these forces is claimed to be important for the security of those who live or visit the city. Despite of that, their apathic faces and uniforms hide the unfortunate truth of their violence. I see one element of the police exercising *power-over* an indigenous man that is selling candies on the street. He takes them without words: the candies and the dignities; with a single hand, with no single “can I?”, with no single money in return, the police officer takes them. A reflection of the violence of the State institutions towards a community of the land, of wool, of artisanry, of all the things that have been taken away from them by the State – and that Zapatismo has been trying to fight.

I walk into the main square. My feelings? Just fear of the security forces who are deemed to protect me and everyone around me. I honestly believe I would feel safer without their presence. My feelings? Also anger. And frustration. After almost 30 years of the Zapatista uprising, which propelled other communities (particularly indigenous and/or rural) to fight for their rights; after a (clear) modernisation – and gentrification, or, if you want, a new form of colonization - of the colours, and the food, thus the land, the spaces of this city, one of the five taken by the EZLN on the 1st of January of 1994 -, there is still the same army, owned by the Mexican state, diminishing the expression of indigeneity, culture, freedom, land, and life.

2. The *mestizo* teacher

As a product of the interaction in between of my uncomfortable positionality with the “touristification” situation, as well as with the apparent marginalization of indigenous peoples in the “magical town”, I decided to sign up for classes about “Indigenous cultures of Chiapas”, in the Instituto Jovel, located in the centre of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Understanding the culture itself – regarding the Mayan cosmovision – and the history of

the Mayan peoples, to which most of the members of Zapatismo identify with, seemed essential for my research – and for my own comfort. I was extremely excited – getting a deeper comprehension on the aspects that make up the lives of those I was interested in was not for less. Together with my excitement, the expectations were high: I was in the right place to learn about it; I was in a city with a high Tzotzil indigenous presence; and I would be able to learn from the peoples. When I arrived at the institute, though, in a sunny morning, I was confused. This *mestizo* man comes to me and asks, “Shall we start?”. This was not the person that I was expecting to give me classes about indigenous cultures of Chiapas. I realised that I was engaging in something that levers the colonization of those who the teacher aims to proudly talk about, to promote, as a kids’ toy sold in the local market to the naïve tourists. Classes about the indigenous cultures taught by a very good-looking, westernized man, in a very fancy place. I should have suspected... The classes were obviously formulated for tourists who wanted to engage with the Mayan-derived cosmovisions, since they were aimed at introducing various important topics regarding the ways of living of the indigenous peoples in Chiapas.

However, this does not mean that the classes were not useful; on the contrary, they prepared me for some aspects around demography of Chiapas, political history in Mexico, colonization, Tzotzil (Mayan) cosmovision, and even Zapatismo – which would become essential topics for my research – that I will describe in more detail below. This man is not indigenous, so it is clear that he does not talk as a person who has lived as the indigenous individuals and communities he studied. However, it is important to state that, despite he might have a different outlook and mindset regarding some aspects – such as the role of the State, which he admires – he still lived at the times of the increased indigenous oppression in the past decades, and he was in the city of San Cristóbal when the EZLN declared war against the Mexican State. So, even though I ended up not agreeing with some of his ideals, I learnt a lot with him. The text that follows is, then, based on these important insights that I gathered during the lectures, that serve as an introduction to the place and the peoples I encountered before and after them.

As I was telling you, I encountered this *mestizo* man, who does not require a name to have his identity in this story. This was, obviously, a very planned encounter, one of those that you schedule as you do with everything that has to do with your life within modern society, whether it is in Europe, where I come from, or in Mexico. So the classes were also very planned by the teacher, who already had the selection of the books ready since the 15 years he has been teaching indigenous Mayan cultures. An education system

to which I am used to, but that would prove to be the most possibly distinct from the one I would encounter later during my journey, in Oventik – an alternative education system, based on indigenous (Tzotzil) cosmovision.

Chiapas is the Mexican state with the most percentage and different groups of indigenous people, in which the Tzotzil and the Tzeltal communities, the ones more present in the region of the Altos de Chiapas, where Oventik is located, are the ones with the highest number of individuals in the state. “Before the Spanish [colonization], there was a lot more indigenous presence in Chiapas. Now, they are reduced by more than half” - the teacher would explain to me right on the beginning of the class. “Then, they started to exploit the land and the peoples, with the consequent mix of indigenous and Spanish cultures, derived from successive rapes.” As I knew, the indigenous peoples are deeply connected to their lands, and now they seemed closer than ever: they were united by colonization of and violence towards their bodies.

Historically, indigenous peoples in Chiapas, as in many other parts of Mexico (and the world) have been marginalized through land distribution policies. In the country, the concept of “private property” was not familiar until the Spanish arrived. It was the introduction of the “encomienda” system that allowed for the first land properties to exist, on the hands of the Spanish colonizers. “Encomienda” is traditionally referred to as the “portions of Indians living on the allotted lands” (Anderson, 1985) – those owned by the invaders. This is the first time that, in Mexico, a system where some (privileged) people owned, in practice, the land, and allocated different indigenous (disadvantaged) people to work for them. Just to clarify, “legally, encomienda did not confer property rights, but holders of the privilege also received most of the earliest land grants and had the advantage of conscript labor [*sic*] during the planting and harvest seasons” (Prem, 1992). In practice, the Spanish were owners, while the indigenous peoples were their slaves.

Then, all the land rights of Indigenous peoples, who have lived and taken care of those since forever, the land itself, and the resources that were essential for their lives, were taken by the hands of the colonizers. Five hundred years ago, the condition of the indigenous peoples in Chiapas changed: the access and use of land and its resources became limited. “Beans, corn, and squash was the only thing that they had access after the Spanish colonization. The cultivation of these three plants became more than just a mechanism to produce food. These foods have been tools for resistance and autonomy for more than five hundred years, and still are in the present.” After pointing the limitations that the colonizers impinged to the indigenous peoples in the access to land

and food, the teacher developed the topic by commenting on the time limitations imposed by the new production system brought by the colonizers. “They did not have a lot of time to produce for themselves. The little time they were not actively in the conditions of slaves in the lands owned by the Spanish conquerors, they were building their (very limited) freedom in their small plots, in their own houses, through the cultivation of these three foods. After centuries of the Spanish occupation, they got used to eat only that.” I must be honest: I do not share the opinion that their diet *is* based on this triad because they simply “got used to eat this”. It is still the only thing they can afford, the plants that they can grow in the poor lands that were possible to be occupied by them. They are the foods that allow their resistance and autonomy from the governmental/corporate inputs. These are also the crops that they are the most knowledgeable about. It is part of their identity, which does not arise simply by a matter of habit, but by a matter of resistance. And this is because, even though the colonization period is over in history books, it is still very present in the lives of those who have to face the consequences of land, body, and even mind violence exercised over them five hundred years ago. This violence is perpetuated not only through the inevitable attachment to the colonization history, but also through the most present form of colonialism in Mexico: the one promoted by the State.

After describing the characteristics and the farthest history of the Mayan peoples’ encounter with Spanish conquerors, the teacher invited me on a journey through the political state of Mexico, from the Mexican Revolution, in 1910, until the present day, referring to different political parties that governed the country during that period, while drawing back to the Zapatista movement. “Before the Mexican Revolution in 1910, eighty per cent of the lands were in a few hands... They were divided in *haciendas* [over one million hectares], *fincas*, and *ranchos* [equivalent to four hundred or less hectares]. Just so you have an idea, the Chiapas state equals two *haciendas*...”. This was probably the information that clarified me the most about the inequality of the land distribution policies in Mexico, that led to the Mexican Revolution. The Mexican revolution of 1910 was a social revolution, made by the civil society, out of their discontent regarding land policies in Mexico. The most famous face of the revolution is the well-known Emiliano Zapata – even though the teacher would tell me that he had a *hacienda*. “Zapata organized the civil society in Morelos, while Pancho Villa was doing the same in the state of Chihuahua. The two only met in Mexico City while the Revolution was already happening, even though they had mobilized people for the same goals.” I immediately thought “oh, what a coincidence”, before I reflected deeply about the simultaneity of the two mobilizations:

it was a sign of the *status quo* at the time: from the North to the South of the country, the people were disappointed – or even tired, angry – with the state of the country promoted by the State: one of poverty, marginalization, and degradation of the environment in the rural places, enhanced by oppressive national policies, as it is known from the literature. However, as it is recognized, and it was confirmed by the teacher, “the Revolution did not present a solution to the problem. The president that was in the government at the time of the Revolution was assassinated not so long after, being substituted by a person with a different project. It was not until 1934, with the government of [Lázaro] Cárdenas (1934-1949), that things became better. He came from a humble, numerous family, so he had lived the necessities in his own skin. He allowed for the redistribution of almost 50% of lands, and supported rural places with infrastructures, including watering systems, machinery, and transportation facilities; on top of that, he created a financial system for the rural areas, with very low-tax loans.” This description, however, provoked different feelings on me. Instead of viewing this governance as an alternative, a better one, I was rather suspicious of this populist, nationalist man, who subsidised peasants and thus, made them State-dependant. My suspicion was also fed by the literature I had revised before about the historical marginalization of rural communities until the present day, especially in Chiapas. Later, the teacher would confirm that the South had remained forgotten. Still, I sensed the trust of the teacher in the current political system: he continued bargaining Manuel Avilla Camacho (1940-1946) for implementing a public health system “for all” – while diseases and deaths were increasing in the poor/peasant/indigenous communities, with the lack of access and transportation to hospitals. By claiming that Camacho had provided “health for all”, the teacher was refusing the equal existence and dignity of indigenous and peasant peoples of Mexico, which is one of the most common strategies of marginalization promoted by the State. I could have guessed the political inclinations of this teacher: apart from being a *mestizo*, he had owned a *rancho* with his family, thus he had owned, as well, his indigenous workers. So, even though he has a great sense of history and the Mayan cultures, he demonstrated to lack awareness on how he describes indigenous peoples as different – inferior- beings. I remembered my own positionality: a white woman from Europe doing research in the Mexican context. So, obviously, I did not try to enlighten him about some dangerous approach to Mexican indigenous peoples that he chose to use, most probably unconsciously because of his own biases. Instead, I let him continue: “Afterwards, from 1970 until 2018, all the progress built by the two [Cárdenas and Camacho] was lost. Those

were the times where there were seventy million poor people from a total of 130 million Mexicans. The rural peoples were completely forgotten, marginalized.”. Indeed, during the fifties and the sixties, was the time of Mexico to welcome the Green Revolution Project, just before the adoption of increasingly neoliberal land and food policies in Mexico, that culminated with the signing of the NAFTA Agreement on the first of January of 1994 – the day of the Zapatista uprising, which would introduce the last content of the Mayan culture class.

The teacher narrated me the story has follows:

“This second revolution [the Zapatista] happened almost a hundred years after the Mexican Revolution of 1910. It was during the government of Carlos Salinas (1988-1994) that the discontent of those who would form the EZLN arose. They were more than ten years preparing for this revolution, when the EZLN occupied five cities in Chiapas: Las Margaritas, Altamirano, Comitán, Ocosingo, and San Cristóbal de Las Casas – which initials gave the name to the Subcommander Marcos. He was the one that supposedly organized the EZLN in the jungle in Chiapas. It was the perfect spot: hidden and close to the border with Guatemala. There was no active vigilance from the Mexican State, so the EZLN could do their weapon trafficking. They were militarily prepared by *ex-guerrilleros* from Guatemala, while they were receiving also hints on political organization from the people who came from the city.” Even though this description of the uprising, as others found in literature, seem to indicate that the uprising was a surprise attack, the teacher believes the contrary. “The government says that they did not know anything about the uprising, but it appears that they did...In the 80s, the military would come running, saying that they were just doing routine practices. But the truth is that they were suspecting that something was being prepared against the government. The Zapatistas felt that they were very close to be discovered, so their appearance was kind of forced... they were not 100% ready, but they decided to uprising in the important date of the 1st of January of 1994, when the NAFTA Agreement signing was scheduled. This Agreement was very unequal regarding Mexico versus USA/Canada. They had [have] the technology, the subsidies, and we had the poor lands and Mexican subsidies. So we were in a very vulnerable position to submit to the North American forces and wills.” So, the EZLN decided to declare war against the army and its supreme: Carlos Salinas. “When the EZLN irrupted the streets, the government and the military forces thought that they [the EZLN] were coming from Guatemala, that they had decided to invade Mexico... they had the same costumes used by the Guatemalan military forces. Immediately,

military forces from Tuxtla Gutiérrez – a city close to San Cristóbal de Las Casas - came. They closed all the entries and get-aways of San Cristóbal [de Las Casas]. They were hundreds of millions of soldiers, fighting against the EZLN. The latter were provided only with wooden rifles, very very old weapons. Carlos Salinas gave orders to kill anyone who was indigenous and that was present in the cities occupied, mainly in San Cristóbal de Las Casas... because it was a 100% indigenous attack! Some Zapatistas were able to escape to the mountains, where bombings started on the second day [2nd of January of 1994], in the surroundings of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. In the city of Comitán, nothing happened, neither in Las Margaritas or Altamirano. But in Ocosingo... it was a disaster! Soldiers from all the Yucatán Peninsula! The civilians were helping the Zapatistas, but when the soldiers arrived, they started a war that lasted for 2 weeks, charged with high-tech weapons. A lot of civilians died because the Zapatistas were hiding in private houses and churches. The disaster was even bigger because of the particularities of the Mexican army: they are no good in taking care of basic needs; there was no water, electricity, or communication, until the 5th day of war. People could not leave their houses, because there were countless helicopters flying over the houses, looking for Zapatistas. They destroyed everything, including essential bridges for passage of civilians. At least a thousand people died in Ocosingo. But I guess they were much more. A lot of dogs were eating the dead people on the streets. And the journalists could only access the places after the 5th day of massacre. After 2 weeks, the soldiers migrated to the jungle in search for Zapatistas. And, after one month, Carlos Salinas declared the end of war. The demands of the Zapatistas started to be built after this month, supported by the red cross and the bishop Manuel Ruiz. They served as intermediaries for the communications between the governmental bodies and the EZLN. So a week of talking in the San Cristóbal Cathedral started. The place was surrounded by 3 protection belts: the red cross, the civilians, and the federal police. They were one week, day and night, elaborating demands for land, education, work, and dignity. Camacho, the mediator sent by the State, gave the reason to the Zapatistas, while Salinas moved to Cancún. However, he was still in control: at the same time the demands were being elaborated, he started the plans with the Mexican army - building military camps, after recruiting people. There was one federal soldier per two inhabitants of Chiapas. They built military bases and started to apply low-intensity war methods: paramilitary groups and other actions were organised to create conflict within the communities. These practices were inspired by American practices during the Vietnam war, for example.”

The questions that remained unanswered in my mind were as many as the feelings of solidarity with the indigenous, especially Zapatista peoples, as well as the anger that invaded me, towards the oppressive State system. Unfortunately, there was no time remaining in the class. “Tomorrow we will visit the community of San Juan Chamula, one of the most oppressed by the State forces. I want you to keep this history-brief in your mind during our trip, so you can clearly see its consequences on the peoples and the state of Chamula” – advised the teacher. So I did.

In the community of San Juan Chamula, almost everyone identifies as Tzotzil, thus they share the cosmivision that I was about to discover. The teacher drove me and Melodie (a professor of indigenous cultures taking the classes with me) to Chamula. On our way there, we were told about the community’s resistance to money, a reflection of their (and overall Mayan) traditional values. The teacher said that even the politicians of the communities have the cosmivision of serving the others, not themselves. This is one thing that remembers me about the “*Todo para todos, nada para nosotros*” [“Everything for everyone, nothing for us”] from the Zapatistas. Probably one of the few values that the communities of Chamula (at least the ones who are visible when you walk into the city), share with those that now form the Zapatistas: the prioritization of spiritual things and true connections against the material values. Just unlike the Mexican government. I have my suspicions about it.

We were invited to enter the church in the centre of Chamula, which seemed to be just a catholic church inspired by the colonizers’ architecture. However, has one say, “do not judge one by the exterior”, I should have applied that to that sacred place I was about to meet. If one enters, the symbols and elements more present are from Mayan culture. On the inside, the only catholic thing one can see are the saints – and even those are covered in colourful dresses. The rituals, that are occurring every day, during the whole day, are still the same practiced by the Mayan peoples since their ancestral times. I could get immersed in an explanation about the Mayan celebrations/rituals – those practiced by Tzotziles and Tzeltales, the indigenous communities more populous (and well-known) in Chiapas. Among the elements, cocoa, tobacco, corn, sugar cane, and egg. Also, a bottle of ‘pox’, “medicine”, and one of Coca-Cola. The elements of Nature illustrate how indigenous peoples view it: as sacred, meant to be protected. The inside appeared to me, then, as a reflection of the Tzotzil soul, covered by a mask that protected them from being more oppressed by the colonizers. If you enter the church, you see that the Catholicism never existed in their minds and hearts. However, my mind was confused about the

presence of the Coca-Cola among all the other miracles offered by nature. As I would know later, the Coca-Cola is very strong in the indigenous culture, and nowadays it is actually used in their rituals to “heal the soul”, by expelling (burping) the bad energies and lucks. The reason why this American drink has a strong presence in the indigenous cultures is because, in the sixties and seventies, when the company arrived at Chiapas (and Mexico), they promised jobs to the peoples and started to build roads and other infrastructures – obviously, with the government in this partnership for salvation through modernity. However, with the facilities of modernity came the bads of capitalism, capable of subjugating and manipulating the ones who just aimed at a better life – or, if you prefer, a better social status. Now, even though some could see behind the dark, opaque curtains of these capitalist interventions, most of the indigenous peoples still believe in the sacred power of the drink. And so, Chiapas, a region where there is a historical marginalization of natives, aggravated by the NAFTA agreement (on top of other previous acts and projects that allowed for the capitalization of agriculture with consequent massive displacements of indigenous peoples), a region where there is no treated, drinkable water, a region where rain is abundant but where the water scarcity is prominent and aggravated by the monopolization of the resource by Coca-Cola, trust the company. Chiapas, the region in the world where people consume this poison the most. So, even though that the catholic church does not seem to have had a great impact in the indigenous cultures, some aspects seem to have changed in the hearts and in the heart of Chamula. Migration, drugs, and guns. The American Dream, contaminating the peoples and the places, full of houses marked by the Florida’s architecture, in the middle of the highest region of the Highlands of Chiapas. The PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), the corruption of the State, and the peoples. And the Christian church, which is intertwined with the latter. The main square surrounded by the essentials: the church, the maternity hospital, the Coca-Cola store, and a PRI building. These are their new most visible characteristics: of the right, of the State, of the marginalization and manipulation. The perfect example of “the other way”, one that deviates from the revolution, that communities take when presented with modernity, globalisation, capitalism, neoliberalism, statism. I just think to myself “I cannot wait to be with the Zapatistas”- however romanticizing that was.

Thus, as you might now understand by this detailed description, I had a lot of insights that I wanted to discuss in the class. However, I stucked myself to a question that appeared to be important for my understanding of the Mayan culture in the historical context that had been described to me: “why have the Chamulas been so resistant to the

Spanish/catholic colonization, but not to the pandemic American Dream?”. The question did not seem to be that hard to answer for the teacher. “There was a lot of resistance to the Spanish/ catholic church colonization, indeed, and the peoples were able to keep their Mayan cosmovision. It was more important for the colonization the manipulation by the church rather than the physical violence. So the peoples did this effort to collaborate with the conquerors in getting the catholic architecture, as well as some traditions from Europe, because they were still able to perform their cosmovision in their own lives. Basically, they had other tools for supporting them, they were united as a community to keep their traditions. They could still access to some degree of life quality, not determined by accumulation, but by the freedom they had to perform their rituals with their sacred elements. However, in more recent times, there are numerous factors that debilitate them: drugs, political parties, religions, and all the fake hopes brought by people who migrated to the United States.” The perfect combo for controlling their livelihoods! He would continue – “But some of them resisted to American projects, like the ones promoted by Monsanto. Monsanto wanted to patent the corn from Chiapas. The indigenous resistance did not let this happen. It was Monsanto versus their corn, Monsanto versus their identity. Apart from being their main food, corn also represents the essence of their bodies and connection to land; so they had to defend it.”

The importance of the corn for the Mayan cosmovision was not news to me. I was delighted to know that, as the Zapatistas, the Chamulas were actively defending their corn. Later, I would know that this is quite overrated: numerous families from Chamula are dependent on government subsidies for their agriculture, entangled with the NAFTA Agreement and, thus, to the adoption of North American modernized varieties. Could this be a hint on how the Zapatistas had deviated from other indigenous communities who received the same modernization threats, regarding their views and practices towards Nature? The topic of the corn and, more generally, the agricultural production, is one that would be proven to be of major importance for my research, as the relationship between the Zapatistas with land – and Nature – is also essential for their cosmovision.

Overall, the classes that I took with the *mestizo* teacher somehow introduced me to the conjuncture of the events that led to the Zapatista uprising – namely the political history of Chiapas and the consequent marginalizing agricultural policies taken by the different governments. In addition, the brief explanation of the Tzotzil cosmovision, which is deeply entangled with a strong spirituality between the human beings and Nature, and with the resistance against the views of the Spanish – and more recent forms

of – colonization, introduced the ways of living I was about to experience with the Zapatistas. After these classes, then, I was ready – or almost. It was time to move on to my next encounter, the one that drove me to Chiapas: the encounter with the Zapatista communities.

First encounter: the Zapatista Caracol II of Oventik

This first encounter encompasses two instances of my fieldwork: the one I would conduct during what we call, in non-indigenous, European societies, “summer”, and the one I carried out in November of the same year. Thus, the story that follows does not follow the time of the clocks, but the time of the encounters. This is a time that is far away from linear, one that is closely related to the temporalities of Nature: almost cyclical. Thus, also the events described are sequenced not as a storyline; this, would prevent me to focus on the encounter – and the numerous encounters within it -, what matters to understand the topics I want to address on my research questions. Views and practices towards Nature, and how they came to be shared, are better described by looking at the lived experiences and stories, rather than on the timeline that they follow. In a context like a *Zapatista Caracol*, time is even more of a construct than what we (the ones that come from a European, or a non-indigenous societal group) would expect. Here, the rhythm of Nature is prioritised. My aim is to invite you to also prioritise the temporalities and rhythms of Nature, so you can deeply enter the stories that follow. I am aware that this is not something that you find very easily in academic works, as this one; you may consider it almost criminal, terrorist – just as some did with the Zapatista movement. It is not that they are essentially wrong, but they create fear, since human beings are afraid of the unknown. Just like in academia, in Western circles specifically, one fears the unexpected ways of writing, of telling, and prefer instead to decide what is acceptable, through unnatural, rigid rules. However, these have no sense in research that is oriented to understand different views and practices towards Nature – and life. Honestly, I am insecure to propose this invitation, as I was scared to let my social constructs about progress and linearity go. But trust me: you may encounter, as I did, many other ways of perceiving the world, Nature, and they might help you to understand them better. Let go all the constructs that limit your understanding, as I let go the routine that I encountered in the cities of Chiapas: the indigenous selling their products in the market to tourists (most of them colonizers of things and thoughts), the Coca-Cola’s big, pollutant transports, the thousand different kinds of police working, playing with the peace (not in

peace), acts of violence. The world like this, as the death of hope portrayed in daily life. I was about to – and you are about to – enter another world, a world “where many worlds fit”.

The time is now. It is time to go to the mountains through the most beautiful road surrounded by Nature. Now is the time to travel to Oventik- the Zapatista *Caracol* II. I cannot put into words the (mixed) feelings I was invaded by during the one-hour-and-a-half way there. But I guess it is worth trying. Excitement and anxiety; happiness and fear; love and revolution. Love and revolution on the murals that amazingly paint the houses in this autonomous centre. Portraits of Che, Zapata, Ramona, and many more yet to be explored – not exploited. Figures of the rebellion against the oppression, power-over, the corporations, the State, and the rich and their bloody hands. Worth 30 minutes waiting for my permission to enter because, even though I had the permission elaborated by the Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Center of Mayan Languages, Tzotzil and Spanish (CELMRAZ), where I came to learn Tzotzil, I had to wait for the final “yes” - the approval by the *Junta de Buen Gobierno* from Oventik. A waiting time a thousand times shorter than the five hundred years (and counting) of the marginalization of indigenous peoples in Mexico (especially in Chiapas). While waiting, I had the blessing to speak to a man – which I didn’t know, but that would later become a great friend of mine -, very literate in the Spanish language, contrarily to most of the Zapatistas that are from Mayan descendance. Immediately, he started to narrate passages from *comunicados* [communications] given by the *Subcomandante* Marcos (the face of the EZLN and of the Zapatista rebellion from 1994 onwards). The passion that arose in me by listening to Zapatista words, proffered by a Zapatista person, is inexplicable.

This beautiful exchange of words, countries, languages, and dreams was forcedly (in a good way, not like the Spanish occupation or the further indigenous land disposessions) interrupted by two Zapatista boys – who belong to the Zapatista *milicias* – who came back from the *Junta de Buen Gobierno*, to give me green light to enter to a new world. The murals painted the main street’s surroundings and painted my soul. The diversity of and on words, colours and topics depicted in the numerous murals, match the love for diversity (the acknowledgement that diversity is to be allowed, even promoted, inside a group that some try to categorize, by homogenizing and classifying it first) that belongs to the Zapatistas’ identity. Apart from historical revolutionary figures, allusions to agriculture and land (represented by the corn, the mountains, the indigenous faces), to women’s rights, to autonomy and anticapitalism, can be admired. It is a whole world. Not

surprising; Zapatismo is a world, for the whole world, *desde abajo y a la izquierda!* [from below and to the left!].

But what touched me the most were the faces. The faces of the future of Zapatismo, the members that have no reason to threaten you but threaten to steal your heart and soul with their contagious smiles; with no doubt, they force you to surrender to their innocence and wisdom, to their purity and dirtiness, so natural, as the surroundings. The Zapatista soul is inside all of those who smile and look at you with extreme curiosity, happiness, and suspicion, as it is in the exterior, in what nurtures them and whoever dares to enter in that gate after waiting. I am deeply in love with them, and I guess this was the day I saw the most genuine form of love: life in community, in autonomy, in true connection with the wholeness of the world.

Everyone welcomed me as if I was part of them, of this giant family that is the Zapatismo. And I am trying to do the same. Still, fear invades me: my positionality, as a white European person scares me, because it makes me feel so small, so impotent in the middle of such a strong continuous fight, among so many beautiful fighters for dignity and life.

Though, my fear has been challenged since I passed through the magic doors opened to the inside of Oventik. The photos in a small gallery illustrating the Zapatistas' path since their uprising, in 1994; the sweet handmade doughnut offered by that man who preached (and continued during months) Marcos; the people who prepared an abundant meal for my cosy and cloudy night; all of them made me more fearless (or, at least, less fearful). However, this fear was not allowed to enter the fun *baile* [dance] that I was invited to. Dozens of people from the Zapatista from 5 to 500 years old (at least in wisdom) welcomed me in their symbolic party for celebrating the end of their education year. These education promoters and students come from all around Chiapas, from various autonomous Zapatista communities, which centre is in Oventik. All the same, equal humans, though so different, not only in their origin (physically/geographically speaking), but in their hairstyles, clothes, ways of dancing and expressing. When they invited me to join, I was doubting about how, in a scale from one to ten, I would feel comfortable when I entered the auditorium, full of energy and joy; in the end, the scale did not matter, because it cannot tell you how much at home I felt.

Sitting next to the dorm, writing before bed, I see all of those who were dancing slowly coming to their respective beds. They stopped dancing but remain smiling with the same joy and strength as before. I suspect their smiles do not go away, never. Just like

their strength and fight for dignity in a world which is more upside down than the broken chair next to my bed. I close my eyes, and the next time I open them, I will be opening my ears as well, to listen to the Zapatista – and other - voices and stories that helped me to understand the questions I proposed for my research.

The days at the *Caracol* as a student of Tzotzil language followed what I perceive as a regular structure with a surprise factor. Even though every day was divided between Tzotzil classes in the morning, followed by a collective class in the afternoon, the content of those varied amazingly. Regarding the first, despite of all of them being aimed at learning the indigenous language, the contents covered flowed as the winds that visit Oventik each day. From Tzotzil/Mayan cosmovision to the Zapatista fight, the education promoters enacted this learning story with me, that composes the written one that I am presenting you. Concerning the collective classes, they changed completely from activities on the fields – corn and coffee – to *tortilla* making and philosophical discussions on Zapatismo. They also provided the ground for new stories to arise, as well as for the enactment of others, such as the ones that encompass the work on the fields.

Thus, the stories that follow take place in numerous contexts and invite the participation of different protagonists – from Zapatista people to bees and plants.

Second encounter: the Tzotzil language

Before entering in the encounters that enlightened my understanding regarding the Zapatista views on and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, I consider important to share with you the story of the Tzotzil language, as practised to me by one of the education promoters, to which I will be referring to as “Marcos”. Marcos comes from a municipality close to Oventik, in which most of the peoples identify as Tzotziles (84% approximately). Most of them, as many members of Marcos’ family, do not speak Spanish, but they were able to keep their indigenous language alive. “The language resisted together with our cosmovision, including in relation to Nature”, Marcos would tell me. I was increasingly more secure that learning Tzotzil in a Zapatista context was the best way to approximate myself to a better understanding of their views and practices in relation to Nature.

The Tzotzil language descendance was not news to me: it is one of the indigenous languages in Chiapas with Mayan roots, specifically developed later from the very similar Tzeltal. However, Marcos was more interested in explaining me the real meaning of

“Tzotzil”. “There are two versions. One affirms that it comes from the word ‘Tsots’, meaning ‘strength’ or ‘wool’ from a sheep. I believe this meaning was useful during the colonization period; the Tzotziles wanted to preserve their own identity, so they created traditional outfits made of lamb wool. But some say that the language was called ‘Zotsil’ before, which relates to the word ‘zots’, meaning ‘bat’. This is because we used to live in caves. Also, the bats are very symbolic in the Mayan culture, it is one of the birds that walks during the night... and now, very symbolic in Zapatismo too: we also walked during the night when we were preparing for our insurgence.” Indeed, the Zapatistas refer a lot to ‘bats’, not only in their stories (insurgente Marcos, 1999), but also in their practices. They are not only Zapatistas, but also Tzotziles, and their life in the Highlands of Chiapas recalls this unified identity. The story and the history of the language is very important for Marcos, as for the other indigenous Zapatistas: “We refer to our language as ‘bats’i k’op’, the ‘true word’, the ‘true language’; its importance is reflected in this concept, that differs from other words or languages. For example, the word of the government is ‘k’op’, it is not a true word.” However, he explained that the State does not consider their language as existent; rather, it calls it a ‘dialect’. Thus, to rescue the language is very important for their resistance. “There are a lot of young people that left and that are ashamed of their own language”, he continued. “But us, the Zapatistas, in our autonomous education system, promote the rescue of the original languages.” For them, to rescue the language is to rescue a cosmovision, a way of seeing the world, shared by the same peoples. This only confirms the importance of learning and analysing the Tzotzil language for assessing the views of the Zapatistas in relation to Nature and the preservation of the environment.

Third encounter: the Mayan cosmovision

The main aim of this third encounter is to try to engage deeply with the Mayan cosmovision, specifically the one that is shared among the Tzotzil people. I consider that this section is of major importance to understand the views of the Tzotzil communities in relation to Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment. As I would understand, the Tzotzil cosmovision and, more generally, the Mayan-descendant ones are fairly dense and complex; it includes a wide perspective on the natural environment and its spiritual significance, while it is specific enough in how the human nature and the other beings and non-beings should be perceived. Thus, this encounter will be sub-divided in different encounters, particularly: with the interconnectedness between Nature and human

beings; with the tiny pine; with the “Mother Earth”; with the land; and with the moon. These were the themes most referred to during my stay in Oventik, so they would be recurrent in this – and subsequent encounters. I will consider each one of those as different sub-encounters. This categorization does not imply a hierarchy between what I call encounters and the sub-encounters; rather, it helps shedding light on the interdependence of the stories, and their protagonists, different beings and non-beings of Nature.

The story of the encounter with the Mayan cosmovision can be described as an eye-opener to a different world – a “world where many worlds fit”. Because of that, also this story is a story where many *words* fit, where I asked permission to use the Tzotzil language in my own work. Without doing this exercise, it would be impossible to describe accurately the Mayan-derived cosmovision. As I learnt with Marcos in the last encounter, the language is a great part of their identity; it is the tool that they use to express themselves as Tzotiles, as well as to describe the world as they see it. They want other people to engage with this alternative conception of Nature and the world, so I take this desire to my relationship in this story, the one between me, the teller, and you, the reader.

To engage with this encounter, the first thing to be aware of is that, as I was taught by the education promoters, the spiritual is always greater than the material; and that, from this relation, the human being and Nature are not separated entities, both are born from the Mother Earth, so are deeply connected – in the world, as in the language, as I will tell you further. The Tzotzil helps to diminish the differences between humans and other children of Mother Nature, by expressing their similarities through words. I do not recall who told me, but for sure a wise Zapatista Tzotzil person, that “from the language, we understand that we [human beings] are not isolated. We are related to Nature, to all the plants and other beings”. Rationally, and emotionally, then one must live physically accounting for this more-than-human livelihoods.



Figure 1: “Our philosophy is the ‘human being as part of Nature’”, Oventik

Encounter 3.1.: interconnectedness between Nature and human beings

Firstly, they all have ‘ch’ulel’. Marcos would explain to me that this is the basic principle of life: “We all have ‘ch’ulel’. We all are alive; we all have feelings.” Everything, including not only people but mountains and other natural elements, even rocks, have feelings, so they should be treated equally as other beings, such as humans. They even speak! Also, “everything that has ‘ch’ulel’ is considered to be ‘ch’u’, ‘life givers’: the sun, ‘k’ak’al’, our collective father, the one that takes care of the peoples; the moon, our collective mother; the land, our ‘balumil’, which receives the rain [‘jo’]; all of the trees, and the mountains where they abound, ‘te’tik’. Even the stones [‘ton’] have a ‘ch’ulel’”. All of them are sacred, so they must be preserved as all the other elements that one might consider sacred. Esther, another education promoter that I had the pleasure of meeting during the Tzotzil classes, told me that “A lot of pueblos use it in the sense of something sacred. They apply it to food, the sun, the rain, the fire, the tree, and the mountains. For example, the rocks are the bones of the Mother Earth, the water its blood, the earth equals the body, the trees account for the hair and hairs of our Mother Earth, which protect her from the sun. Thus, everything that is hugged by our collective Mother Earth [or, as we in “Western world” would call, in Nature] is interconnected by the same body structure, that breathes as us, because of the presence of air and its oxygen!” The tone in her voice created a joyful song; however, this rapidly changed. “The ‘ch’ulel’ is in disuse, - Esther continued - because of the capitalism that arrives very strong to the communities. Capitalism threatens the Mayan cosmovision, the unity of the Earth with the people. ‘Ajvalil’, the bad government, the authorities, they are not with the ‘ch’ulel’ that is characteristic of people; theirs is tiny. They are always above in the hierarchy; it transforms them in other people. The ‘ch’ulel’ is in constant danger in this system of domination, destruction, in us and in the other elements of Mother Earth”. I had to remember of the *mestizo* teacher that I met in the first days of my stay in Chiapas – and that you met in the first stories of this text. I had to remember his trust on the good intentions of some political figures that were more “socially inclined”, who the teacher claimed to put in practice some policies that benefited the indigenous peoples. I had to think of my suspicion of his positionality as a *mestizo* man while talking so surely about indigenous peoples. And I guess my suspicion was confirmed: the political parties never thought about indigenous peoples as having the same rights of living in their own ways,

the same rights of existence, the same rights of being. As it was confirmed by the Tzotziles in the *Caracol*.

At this point of the story, you might be as hopeless as I was by hearing that these people are in a place with less 'ch'ulel'. But Esther clarifies: "everyone can be good, even if they were bad people at some point of their lives. The 'ch'ulel' is always in the body, so there is always hope. The Zapatistas try to search for the humanity even of those who can be considered our enemies... we try for them to come back to themselves, those who are overshadowed by the power, the money – they do not allow you to see, to be in harmony with all the peoples. There is a separation that is mandatory, because of this blindness. This blindness can be very cruel. For example – she directed her voice even more towards me - what is the thing that really gives *you* life? Apparently, money. Before, everyone knew that, if a grain of corn or bean falls, you must take it from the floor and keep it safe, because those are our base. But now, that is rare... it happens frequently, but with coins. But that is because they [the system, the capitalism, the government] dominated your thoughts. In the *pueblos*, we recognize that money is the devil: it steals people's 'ch'ulel'. When you have money, other people come and steal it; it leads to a bad action, which corrupts your 'ch'ulel'. People hide the money because it is bad, because people that do not have it will want it and so they will do something bad to get it. The money is easily lost..."

The story of the 'ch'ulel' enlightened me about the similarities between the threats that the system poses to Nature, as well as to the people themselves implicated in this oppressive way of life. In fact, there seems to be an interconnection that is impossible to break between the oppression of the various 'ch'ulel'. In the end, we are all the same, and we all came the same womb of our collective Mother Earth.

"Everyone can grow their 'ch'ulel'; it is a process", Esther told me. Immediately after, she introduced me the fundamental ingredients for developing the 'chu'lel': consciousness, especially political and ecological, achieved, in the words of Esther, through "your third eye, the spiritual one, the one that allows you to see more with the other two eyes"; dignity; understanding about the world; strength and love, which she considers to be the same; and, finally but very important, soul and spirit." This development is not linear neither follows the progress rationale that we are used to in modern society; as Esther told me, the 'ch'ulel' is developing through waves and surprising paths. "Also, it is said that the 'ch'ulel' never dies. Before our culture was mixed with Catholicism, the bodies were put directly in the soil when a person dies, so

the ‘ch’ulel’ could be liberated, while encompassing the Nature’s cycle”. Being connected to the natural cycle, through their whole lives, is very important for the Tzotzil communities.

Another deep connection that the Tzotziles have with Nature is through the sharing of ‘o’on’: the heart. As the case of the ‘ch’ulel’, the ‘o’on’ is also present in everything, from human and other beings, to trees, plants and even rocks in their central part. The deepest parts of the jungle, like the one where the Zapatistas found refuge to prepare their revolution, are called ‘o’on’. What defines something to have an ‘o’on’? – I asked Esther. I would learn that every natural element that the Mayan ancestors have met has ‘o’on’ - everything that the Mother Earth gave to them, basically, and to which they are eternally grateful.

“To do something with your heart” has a much deeper and broad meaning in Tzotzil; they even have a verb for it: ‘o’oninel’, than one could only translate to ‘to heart’. It refers to the heart, but it tells you about the responsibility that you have in the commitments you make in your life. “Just like in the Zapatista fight – Esther explained. In the fight you need to put your heart. Also, in the art of sowing, if you sow something, you need to put your heart: caring, with responsibility and dedication, until the harvest”. This heart connects you with Nature and land, not only through the similarities that humans share with their elements, but by caring, by ‘hearting’, by loving deeply the Mother Earth.

I am still confused about the difference between both terms – ‘ch’ulel’ and ‘o’on’. The latter has a definition, while the first is more complicated to define, as the interpretations of this magical force of giving life vary between people within Tzotzil communities. Maybe the important thing is not to differentiate them, but to understand that they both exist in harmony and complement each other, within each one of us and in every single aspect of Nature – or, better, Mother Earth. The Mother Earth tells us another story of interconnectedness between the Tzotzil humans and Nature, the one of the bodies that are created by *her*: both humans and trees’ elements of the body are called by the same name in Tzotzil. I pass you this story by telling it via illustration.

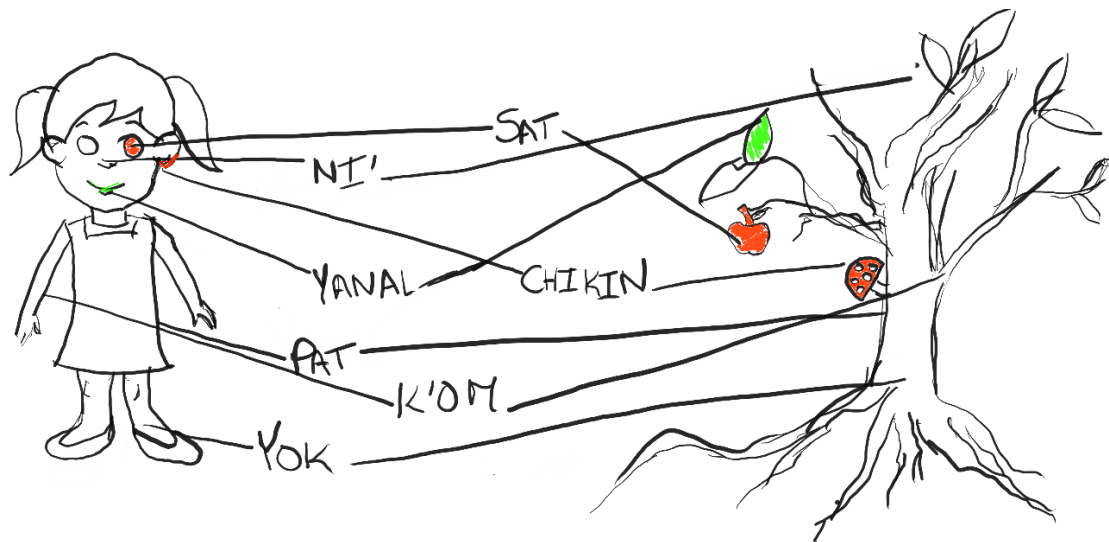


Figure 2: The Tzotzil common denomination of human and tree body parts

This illustration depicts more than the simple Tzotzil words for referring to the parts of the human body, or the parts of Nature. More than focusing on the translation of the words, my intention with this drawing is for you to understand how we – as human beings – are connected to the other children of Mother Earth. Indeed, in the Tzotzil language, the parts of a tree receive the same name as the different elements of the human body. For example, ‘yok’ is, at the same the same time, our legs – but also the part of the tree trunk that holds it. Then, we are sustained in the same way, we are connected to the same physical land through the same kind of physical body part. It becomes clearer that human beings, in the Tzotzil cosmovision, are not a different entity from the other beings born from the same collective Mother; thus, we are connected to her in the same way, loved by her at the same scale – surpassing hierarchical relationships.

From this sub-encounter, I started to understand better what had led me to choose to go to a Zapatista community to understand better their cosmovision. There is no such thing as the human being separated from the physical and spiritual Nature from where we arise; the environment leaves the exterior space, and enters in our bodies and minds, shaping our relationship to it. For the Zapatista Tzotziles, this is a holistic relationship, horizontally structured, that leaves no space for hierarchies between humans and other beings – and non-beings. This encounter is the one that made me open my eyes and mind for a very different way of thinking the relationship of humans and Nature; in the light of the dominant views on Nature and the environment, the Tzotzil perspective is one new to the truths we know – or we are forced to believe to know -, one that is opposite to the

neoliberal rationale, based on the maximization of Nature's extraction and exploitation. This is a new cosmovision, one that denies Nature as a separate entity; rather, it insists on its close connections to humans, provided by the existence of Mother Earth.

As if it was not enough that human beings share the same characteristics with the trees, they are also believed, by the Tzotzil people that I met, to share similar mental, spiritual, and even emotional features with us. To clarify this argument, I welcome the story of the tiny pine.

Encounter 3.2.: the tiny pine

I once told Marcos that I was very interested in understanding better the Tzotzil cosmovision through the stories of the indigenous peoples themselves. Thus, one day, he brought me this book, "Habia una vez una noche" (Marzucchi, 2004), used in the Zapatista primary schools. One particular story struck me. This is a *leyenda*, a legend from 2002, written by – even though I would just know it later – the brother of one of the education promoters, Moisés. The exercise could not deviate from the aim of learning Tzotzil; so my task was not only to get to know this story, but to learn it first in Tzotzil, and translate its meaning to Spanish. Here, I call you to admire the beauty of written Tzotzil before you engage with the story in English words.

[Tsotsil]

Jun bik'it toj oy ta yo'lol te'tik. Li ya'nale yoxik tajek chil ti schiiltake. –
Ko'oliltajek – xi la chal ti bik'it toje mu la sk'an ti ko'olik ti ya'nalike. Li ya'nal
ti bik'it toje ja tak'in.

K'alal ji och ak'ubale, ta o'lol ak'ubale jital jun elek'. Li elek'e ji yil jun tek ti
ja' oy yanale ja tak'in le ju'une, li elek'e la xixba skotol ya'nal li te'e. Li te'e ji
och ta ok'el. Ji yil ti mu'yuk xa ti ya'nale t'anal jikom.

-K'usi ta jpas – xi li te'e.

Ja lek taj k'anbe ya'nal li tak'ine sventa muxa x-elk' anik. Ta jun k'ak'al ji tal
jun sutum-ik', li bik'it toje ji k'as ti ya'nale.

La jyal ti bik'it toje.

-K'usi ta jpas. Laj yelk'anik li tak'in ka'nale, lek oy, tak k'an li ka'nale k'usba
oy toox ta ba'ije sventa moxa xi spoj beik.

VIRGÍLIO slumal JOLIK'ALUM

[English]

There is a tiny pine in the middle of the woods. His compañeros see that his very green leaves are the same. The tiny pine says that he does not want all his leaves

to be the same. So the tiny pine changes his leaves. He puts his leaves made from gold.

When it started to become night, when it is already in the middle of the night, a thief came. The thief saw a tree that has his leaves made from gold and, so, the thief took all the tree's leaves. The tree started to cry. He saw that he no longer had his leaves and that he was naked.

-So what am I going to do? – said the tree.

-Better I am going to ask leaves made from glass, so they are not stolen anymore – said.

So he asked his leaves made from glass.

It is said that one day a wind swirl came and broke all the tiny pine's leaves.

The tiny pine said:

-What am I going to do? They stole my gold leaves, they broke my glass leaves, so I am going to ask my leaves as they were before, so they are not taken away anymore.

VIRGÍLIO, *pueblo* of JOLIK' ALUM

In this story, the protagonist takes the soul of a tiny pine. The tiny pine is described as having agency enough to decide to change *his* leaves, even though this decision is made from sadness, of not fitting in, of being marginalized by the other trees in the woods. All the trees of the woods, then, are described as being actors in the same space, of being bad and good, bullies and bullied, ashamed and sad. The tiny pine is as so sad as alive, as emotional: *he* even cries. *He* cries out of being naked, disproved of the organs that provide *him* with food and clothes. Even though *he* has agency to choose to which material to change *his* leaves to, there are external forces that act upon this tiny pine, making *him* to turn back to having *his* original leaves as (very) green needles. This tiny pine makes this story just as a human would, and *he* suffers from misfortunes as a human would, and *he* has the opportunity of coming back to who *he* used to be - like a human. *He* has choices, that depend on *his* will. *He* is not inferior to a human; rather, *he* writes and acts on this story as an emotional, rational being, just like all the others sheltered by Mother Earth. This pine can be seen as an example of the other beings that are interconnected to Nature, but also to human beings. By sharing the same physical, mental, and even emotional and spiritual connections with human beings, pines – and other trees and plants – are placed

side by side with us in this world, where the natural, horizontal relationships contrast with the ones created by human beings for the capitalization of Nature.

And this tiny pine, as a protagonist, as commonly other protagonists do in other stories, offers us a lesson through this legend: that the natural, what is given by Nature, what makes us what we are, and connects us – even if, sometimes, not in the best way – to our neighbours in the woods, as in the entire planet, is the best we can have. The Mother Earth appears to be wise enough to provide us with what we need. The ambition of other materials, richer ones, like gold, can lead us to poverty of spirit; while some beautiful, delicate others, will make us less resistant to the conditions we were adapted to, previously. In the plant world, seeking for variety is sometimes thought as manipulating species for giving them new properties, through genetical engineering. However, this practice makes them less resistant to the natural context where they grew up. The true diversity should, therefore, come from respectful practices towards trees and plants, that allow for the preservation of their original traits, offering them the best conditions for continue living sustainably in the places where they were born – in harmony with the Mother Earth.

But who is Mother Earth? After the past stories, I believe you are mentally and spiritually ready to meet *her*. So welcome her in this story.

Encounter 3.3.: the Mother Earth

‘Jme’tik balumil’, Mother Earth. ‘Jme’’, our Mother, but one that is collective, enunciated by the suffix ‘tik’. This Mother is, then, a common one, *from* and *for* everyone, the one that gives birth to everything that exists in Nature. It also means “the one who feeds and gives everything to all”. ‘Balumil’: Earth, land, *pueblo*. This implies that, then, the land is never thought of something to be sold, but something closely human, to be taken care of as one would take care of their own mother. “Seeing the Earth with its land as our collective mother is very strong in the *pueblos*. Without land, the peoples cannot live, survive. Everything that we need comes from land”, Marcos would enlighten me. So, the same way we do not exploit our own mother, we are not intended to exploit the Mother Earth, but to be grateful for the birth *she* has given to us, and to the other things we encounter in our lives. Marcos does not seem to be worried about using the words of ‘land’, ‘Nature’, and ‘Mother Earth’ to mean the same. In the end, if one exploits the land, it is doing it to the Nature, and to the Mother Earth. This vision helps to reject the idea of Nature exploitation, its immensurable use for our own well as human beings.



Figure 3: “The land is not to be sold!”, Oventik

To deepen further my understanding of the story of the Mother Earth to the Tzotziles, I openly asked in one of the collective classes with the education promoters: “What does Mother Earth mean to you?”. I invite you to meditate over their answers:

1. Esther: “Everything we need comes from the Earth. In the *pueblos*, if you do not work on the lands, you are unable to survive. In this case, we feel that *she* [the Earth] is our mother, because *she* feeds us. It is not a personal mother, but a collective one”.
2. Moisés: “the Earth is not a commodity. *She* is sacred, from where we get everything, and so there is a very strong connection between us and *her*. You cannot sell *her* or treat *her* whatever way you want; the life is to be respected! You do not sell the mother.”
3. Elisa: “But in the cities we are already used to being alienated from our separation from Nature and the Mother Earth. When this system started – I do not know anymore what to call it: neoliberalism, capitalism, or socialism.
4. Marcos: “The present humanity has this problem: we want to be above Earth; it breaks the relationship. And this process has been very strong within the dominant culture. This world is in destruction, and that is what the *pueblos* do not want. So, the unequal relation between the worker and the boss, the exploitation, that is very strong, as well as the destruction of the Earth – that is what we do not want!”
5. Elisa: “Taking from the Earth what is necessary is not going to destroy *her*. The problem is that the people take until they can no longer because of their thirst for money. Like the big projects for progress, made by big corporations supported by the Mexican government.”
6. Moisés: “The system is what has created the idea of the Earth as a commodity, not the people that were manipulated and even commodified.

The capitalist system does not have ‘ch’ulel’. And the ‘ch’ulel’, in our society, is in crisis.”

7. Marcos: “And Earth is always more than simply Nature. I think more about the landscapes, that include the trees but also the peoples and the invisible.”

So, the concept of Mother Earth goes further: it is not equivalent to what we, in our non-indigenous languages refer to as ‘Nature’; that is ‘osil balumil’. Nevertheless, it is also important to attend to the latter, that is composed of two concepts: ‘balumil’, already referred to above, and ‘osil’. The latter literally means Nature, but it includes more than what is visible in the natural space. Marcos told me that “it contains the time and space. However, this time is not just the one on our clocks, but the times of the successes and failures that belong to the past, as well as the future.” In Tzotzil cosmovision, Nature is deeply related to history and the stories that happen in time, during the times of forever. So the value it acquires is also a product of accumulation – for those within capitalist societies to understand it better – of the indigenous peoples and their encounters with the elements of Nature. Over history, Nature has been dynamic, so the Bible of the stories of these encounters is also rich in variety, apart from content. Despite of that, this variety does not go beyond the limits of what is respectful, careful, and loving towards Nature; this is also essential for making sure that new stories can be built and told within this realm, by the peoples whose lives do not belong exclusively to themselves, but to the Nature surrounding them as well.

To understand better the difference between ‘Mother Earth and ‘Nature’, I invite you to listen to the words of the wise Elisa. “Nature – what I define as what is natural and visible, more associated with what is above the ground, physical- is different from Mother Earth, ‘jme’tik balumil’. The latter is the whole. The whole of what exists on the earth’s surface, but also under the ground – the rocks – and above it – the sky and its rain; everything that is a life giver. So, more than the physical natural elements, it includes the philosophy that form the Mayan cosmovision. Because Earth is mother, *her* duty is to care, to give life to everything that exists – physically, mentally, and spiritually, since it is attached to the concept of ‘ch’ulel’ as well.” Most of the readers/listeners/learners in what is called “Western world” would maybe criticise this gendering of Nature as something a hundred per cent essentialist. So, letting this story open as it is, I ask you to enter with me in this inception experience, so we can listen to another story within the last.

In one of the Tzotzil classes, I asked about the theme around gendering Nature. I questioned Marcos how he viewed the fact that the Mother Earth is associated with a female figure: “do you see it as having more similarities with human female body, do you feel like you are attaching a gender to the Earth, in this case the feminine one?”; and then I explained that this would create a debate in Academia, because of essentialist versus non essentialist views around the themes of Nature. I told him that some scholars would criticise the natural association of Nature with a mother, instead of a father, for example. He told me “I do not view the Earth as a woman. I understand why we, in our native language, do so; it was other times, and of course the mother would stay more at home taking care of her children, while the father would give some help. The father has also the duty to care, to help the mother to give life. Sun, ‘jto’tik’, is father. Without sun, the plants and people would not grow in the Earth’s ground. But look, even if I say that the Earth is Mother Earth, which implies a feminization of Nature, it only occurs on language; because for me it can have any gender, or even no gender. We are also taking these notes and actualizing this through reflection within the *pueblos*. We already had discussions about this. But understand that this is only the way we refer to what you call Nature; we are already discussing, because we are aware of some discussions in your countries... we want to improve.”

I let the conversation move forward, as Marcos explains me more about improving and keeping track of new learnings, as he is doing now, in our Tzotzil class. As I ask questions, express my doubts, concerns, and he does the same; as we do the same on the contrary direction, providing answers, clearing doubts and concerns, to each other. “They [our ancestors] irrigated our heads with the knowledge, both from the language and from experience... This was everything transmitted orally”, Marcos says, illustrating the importance of oral stories for indigenous peoples. Also, the role of language and experience of those who count many years of life, on the formation of their identities, both individual and collective ones. He continues, “it is a pity that they have not written these things for us... but now we have the opportunity to do it for our children and for the subsequent generations.” And I have the opportunity to do it through this work, in my own context. To keep record of stories, to re-tell them, is to keep them alive, so they can have a role in our world. This is only possible if we have a world to live in, a Mother Earth to take care of; so, even though I close here the story of Mother Earth, let it be alive in your minds and hearts, and allow her to let you see what your eyes cannot tell. And now, with that holistic approach, think about land. What do you see?

Encounter 3.4.: the land

In Tzotzil, 'jtekklum' means, literally, 'joint land'. Although it is often associated with the simple concept of 'land' I would learn with Marcos that 'jtekklum' is attached to the condition of 'community land'. I shall point to the difference between this 'community land' and what is referred to as 'communal land'. The latter corresponds to the *ejido*, the state of a land that is commonly managed and owned by the peoples, a category that emerges from the different types of land historically established through the Mexican land policies. The first does not enter that category; it is not a land that was recovered by the peoples to be common, but a piece of aggregated lands that serve the community – which works the land. There is also another essential feature to the 'jtekklum'; on top of that physical definition, "in Mayan cosmovision, the reference to land implies the connection between two things: the physical land, the territory, and the *pueblo*, the group of people with its own costumes, language, tradition, and culture", Marcos would elucidate me. Thus, the wide concept of land includes a physical area, but also a community that is deeply connected with its own space. The importance of the land for the indigenous peoples was enhanced by Marcos' "Like a plant, a person put their roots in the physical space. The peoples and their land, and their ancestors that planted their roots before. We never detach from them". In the *pueblos*, most people born and die in that same physical space: first, because of the marginalization and lack of opportunities outside the community, where they are not even recognized through their identities; second, because they start belonging to that space, that becomes more than just a space. The sentence from Marcos also tells you something very characteristic of the Tzotziles: the connection with their ancestors is essential because they allow them to understand the importance of their land – as something very different from that category in non-indigenous societies. This connection, then, allows them to resist to threatening rationales of land exploitation, as Marcos would explain: "The capitalist system occupies our hands and minds. It makes us to not know, or to unknow things we used to know, and we have no time or space to reflect about ourselves. But here, through autonomy, through connection with the land, we recognize our ancestors; this is also a fight. Our ancestors, and the connection we have with them, allow us to understand the importance of the Mother Earth, of the connection of the peoples, of the 'jtekklum', with the Mother Earth." He continued, "not to lose this connection is very important to us. Talk about our ancestors seems very interesting to us: how they made sense of the Mother Earth, and how they treated *her*. The land was not seen as a commodity, but as life!" And, just like

that, this story resembles with the one of the Mother Earth; this land is talked about in a very different way from the one we usually use in Europe. The land that Marcos talks about seems to be unknown, almost magical and threatening, as if it had as many feelings as us, humans. “Indeed”, I remember: we both have ‘ch’ulel’, given by us by the same collective Mother. Apart from being a life giver, the land also has the power to determine your responsibilities as a person that works in it. Marcos told me that “if you work in the community lands, you are doing an ‘a’mtel””, a *cargo* a type of work that implies responsibility with the community; a work that collectively promotes the autonomy and dignity of the peoples. “You do not seek a privileged position, recognition from the work on the land. Instead, you must put your ‘o’on””. ‘A’mtel’, including in the agricultural practices, is based on the idea of mutual help between the individuals of the *pueblo*. This idea is translated into the term ‘pak k’ak’al’, which means, literally, ‘to give back the day’. The system in the *pueblos* is not that strong, especially technologically; so, help is needed. Therefore, a person that belongs to the community is always called to help, to ‘give back the day’. With a sad expression on his face, Marcos shares that “this is more and more scarce, as people working in the community lands are diminishing in its number, since they go to work for the *finqueros* [the owners of the *fincas*]. If you work for a *finca*, you are doing a ‘kanal””, a ‘work’ within the capitalist system, commanded by a boss, where hierarchies prevail, even if you do not receive a salary, which is the case most of the times for indigenous peoples. He proceeds – “the reality in the pueblos has changed quite a lot. People go to the United States of America in search for a good life, for a ‘kanal’ that provides them with money for a good life. A lot of people migrated from Chiapas towards the USA to do seasonal works... The way to look at ‘a’mtel’ has changed... there is a lot of fraud in ‘kanal’. But, fortunately, many of those who migrated, continue with a “Zapatista conscience”. Many of us go to the ‘kanal’. But we know, we are conscient. We cannot change from the night to the morning”. Despite of this change in the agricultural system, Marcos seems to acknowledge that the Zapatista identity can be stronger than the capitalist rationale, in some cases. Later, I would also meet a man that migrated to work in the USA and came back with an unshaken conscience about the Tzotzil land. Thus, the resistance appears to be alive, helped both by the Tzotzil cosmovision and Zapatista values.

The story of the land is a story of this entity that does not have the aim to serve the human beings, as if it was a separate identity; the concept of ‘jtekklum’ implies that everything is connected, as a whole, the peoples and their land. I learnt with Marcos that

they “have been seeing the land being destroyed over several years. That is our biggest fear. If people would just use the land that they needed, without taking over others’ ones, the land would not be destroyed. But they [landowners, governments, corporations] steal and use the land as much as they want, for the sake of money.” So, the Zapatistas refuse the idea of land and resources’ exploitation, in order to avoid the destruction that they have seen with their own eyes, promoted by projects of big corporations that led to Nature degradation and exploitation of indigenous peoples. Projects promoted by the government in the name of the ‘development’ are a threat to the land in its most holistic concept, so they work every day, through their ‘a’mtel’, to resist to them.

Again, I shall highlight the importance of this encounter for the understanding of the Zapatistas as subjects with a new ecological consciousness, i.e., views on Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment that do not follow the hegemonic rational that has propelled the destruction of the environment and the scarcity of resources, through unsustainable practices. The land is not a natural resource; it sustains us, together with the other beings and non-beings. It is a part of our existence, one that the land itself has allowed to grow. It is not a resource that serves us; rather, the Zapatista Tzotziles believe that we should serve the land, by caring for it, in a reciprocal relationship, since it provides us with food - and home.

This cosmovision, the idea of preserving Nature and land and caring for it, then, does not appear to be only derived from Mayan cosmovision, but from the peoples’ experiences in relation to land exploitation, translated, in the Zapatista context, in their own fight. This seems to corroborate the hypothesis that the Zapatistas have grown a different, new ecological consciousness, derived not only from their descendance, but also from the struggles they lived – and live. Nevertheless, this fight for resistance is not possible to be achieved without complementing the story of the land with their protagonists: the foods that grow there. So, let me welcome the corn, the food with the most incredible meaning for Tzotzil communities, as Mayan descendants – resembling the introduction provided by the *mestizo* teacher.

Encounter 3.5.: the corn

Corn is so essential for the Tzotziles, that it defines the colours that exist in their world. The palette of Tzotzil colours might be more limited in number than the one we know from the colouring books, but each colour entails to it a much deeper meaning. Black, ‘ik’; white, ‘sack’; red, ‘tsoj’; and yellow, ‘k’on’ – the four colours of the corn that grows in Chiapas, compose most of the palette. This would not be complete, as expected,

without the colour of Nature, the green: ‘yox’. From this idea, one can understand the importance of agriculture – and Nature – in the Tzotzil cosmivision. Even the most elemental properties of things and beings, their colour, is not defined by human categories, but by those created by Mother Earth, long before the humans had the power of choice.

Most importantly, the story of the corn is the story of the human creation. The Tzotziles are considered ‘the true men’, ‘bats’i viniketik’, the ones created by Mother Earth through the corn. This food is the protagonist of the story of their existence as a body identified with the botanical aspects of the corn. Marcos explains me that “the corn is the sacred seed”, the one that translates the human condition in its most physical sense. “The white [corn], was used by the gods to create the bones, the yellow one the skin, the black the eyes and the hair of the first human on Earth and, finally the heart and the blood emerged from adding red corn to the combination.” The corn is what runs in the veins of the indigenous peoples; it is what they need for their bodies to survive to the fights of every day, as indigenous and Zapatistas. How could them view this food as a commodity? The corn is not a product to sell at any cost to the capitalist, as you would not sell your blood– in principle. Corn is life, not destruction; consequently, the agricultural practices around this sacred element are thought to preserve life – the one of humans and the others within Mother Earth. I request you to keep this thought on the back of your mind; this is not the time of contaminating this story with the more practical ones. I promise we will arrive there. For now, I ask you to concentrate on the corn as this spiritual element, with an enormous presence on the Tzotzil cosmivision.

As you might imagine, the harmony the corn’s – and other foods’ - agricultural cycle is not trusted in the hands of human beings; the farmers’ knowledge is limited, so they listen to the voices coming from the Mother Earth to guide them in the ‘a’mtel’. The Mother Earth recruited an especial entity for this task: the moon.

Encounter 3.6.: the moon

The moon, ‘u’, is also ‘jme’tik’, a collective Mother in the Tzotzil cosmivision. *She* also has the duty to care, as *she* has a special role in agriculture. Esther told me that “*she* is very important in the language and in the practices. *She* helps programming the activities on the land: *she* defines the times of sowing, pruning, and harvesting. When there is new moon [‘yunenal jme’tik’], the trees have more blood [‘sap’], so you must be careful not to prune in this time. On the contrary, during the full moon [‘syi’jil jme’tik’], you can do it. We watch the moon to see when we should sow the corn, for it not to grow

too much, not too little”. Not surprisingly, the stories I heard about the moon were told by feminine voices. The reason why it should not be as surprising, is because, in Mayan-descendant cosmovisions, the women are very connected to the moon. As Elisa, another education promoter, would say to me, “‘u’ also means cycle, because of the moon phases, which also gives the name to the female cycle, the menstruation, ‘jujun u’, ‘each moon’”. For the Tzotziles, we are deeply connected to the far agglomerate of dust – from which we are also made – that constitutes the moon. But, in Mayan-derived cosmovisions, “agglomerate of dust” will never be said as to refer to the magical and mysterious moon. In fact, more than being deeply connected to the moon, human cycles are the same as moon cycles in the light of the Tzotzil language, which is the wordy materialization of their cosmovision.

But something greater was bothering me. When I learnt about the existence of two mothers, my mind immediately made me ask “so, which one is the most mother, the most important?”, which was, at least, a stupid question, trapped in the capitalist, anthropocentric me (as I learn from Esther, this system lives inside our minds as, unfortunately, I confirm every day). “In Nature, there are no hierarchies” – Elisa remembered me. “Hierarchies were invented by the human beings, the ones who think in terms of the dominator and the dominated.” The explanation of Elisa embarrassed me. Even though I consider myself a radical thinker, I still fall on the trap of the dominant rationale, that enslaves most of the human minds of modern society. You learn a lot with a single sentence here at this school, you know?: to deconstruct yourself, your internal world, and to construct another inside world “where other worlds fit” (inspired by the simultaneous fight on the physical world). Scientifically, academically: other epistemologies and ontologies around Nature, life, knowledge, truth – that cannot be possibly disentangled.

Anyway, so the moon is also a very powerful being. *She* tells you when to sow and harvest the cultures of your culture. “However, as the culture is contaminated by modern economic rationales, our fields and agriculture practices are also being contaminated by new plants, or other varieties of our ancestral plants, that do not accompany Nature’s cyclicity.” The temporality, as the times, have changed; if we start doing agriculture that does not respect Nature’s rules, the mother moon does not serve for that much. The mother exercises her caring duties as long as we also care for *her*, and for the things *she* helps giving life to. Changes in temporality of culture, and agriculture, happen coincidentally with changes in how we conceive our environment and how we act upon

it. The temporalities change when we produce more, out of the natural cycle for the crops, to earn more money. The capitalist desire destroys the cyclicity that allowed us to connect deeply with the rhythm of Nature. The rhythm of productivity, the one considered “natural”, in modernity, is the farthest from naturality; what once was produced to exchange intra and inter communities, now serve the market as commodities. This is a mine field where many communities have entered, even the ones descendant from Mayan, which one – from non-indigenous circles – would expect to resist through their unique cosmovision in relation to Nature.

The Zapatistas seem to be, then, an exception – at least relatively to the dominant views on Nature. They keep Nature’s temporality *through* and *for* resistance and autonomy. Thus, they have a unique consciousness of belonging to Nature, of being part of a holistic, complex ecology, where every being and non-being (like rocks) are equally part of. Maintaining this view allows them, more than avoiding destroying Nature, to care for *her*. “The use of fumigants, pesticides, and fertilizers is not necessary if you respect Nature’s cyclical temporality. You only apply toxic compounds when you want to harvest forcedly, without respecting crops’ temporalities. However, there is hope: even in communities contaminated with other plant species and varieties, the native ones – corn, beans, and squash – follow the moon’s cycle. That is why they are so important for resistance and food sovereignty; they [the crops] only follow the cycles until they become commodities.”

The conversation with Elisa about the temporality, cyclicity, and its disruption on the realm of the natural – thus social, and cultural – world(s), led us to its wider consequences within the dominant system. This one has effortfully tried to separate, create the dualism between the material and spiritual spheres. This division is far from being harmless: it fights for and leads to the oblivion of the spiritual world, which is thought to – and I agree – distract people from productivity and work in the capitalist world. This polarity is, undoubtedly, a social construct that appeared with modern societies; indeed, in the *pueblos*, the material and spiritual are not distinguished as separate spheres, but as interconnected in the same whole, which constitutes the human and more-than-human worlds and its (intra and inter) relationships. Relationships are, in fact, the major threat for capitalism. It must disrupt material ones and immaterial connections to enter our societies, cultures, and minds, so it can enslave us and what we should be deeply connected to. And it did, and it can.

The forced disconnection between the material and spiritual world(s), and the consequent erasure of the latter, has clear environmental implications. “The destruction of Nature occurs because people only start recognising the problems that arise from environmentally destructive practices when they see, with their own eyes, the physical consequences. It is only when the rivers and soils are already looking sick that people realise what they have done to Nature. The problem is that, when symptoms are visible, Nature is already sick for a long time. It is already too late. Any time is a long time”- The importance of the spiritual, the connectedness with the Mother Earth, is essential for caring for it, for avoiding destroying it, at the bare minimum. Therefore spirituality, and the respect for Nature’s temporality, are essential for resisting the hegemonic knowledge, thus, as Foucault would agree, the dominant power structures.

The resistance, however, requires effort, fight, and time. The resistance is not an easy task, even for the ones who are constructing their autonomy in a country corrupted like Mexico. “The institutional system is very powerful. Once we show some resistance, it automatically fights back” – Elisa explained. The law of inertia rules what can or cannot do in resisting the State and the capitalist system, and the extent to which a fight is strong enough in bringing about change. “Our fight has been and will be long. Because we are trapped in a cycle: we do something, we get some triumphs; but, at the same time, the government fights back, so we end up almost where we started. But this “almost” is very important. This is what gives us hope.” Elisa did me the favour of illustrating, beautifully but sadly, this mechanism:

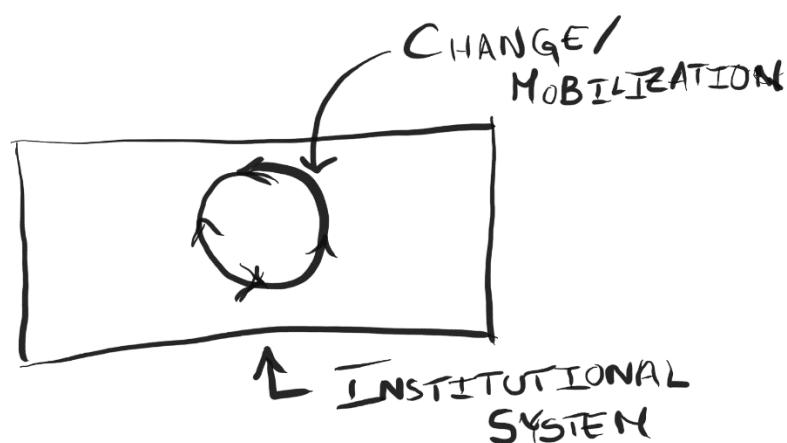
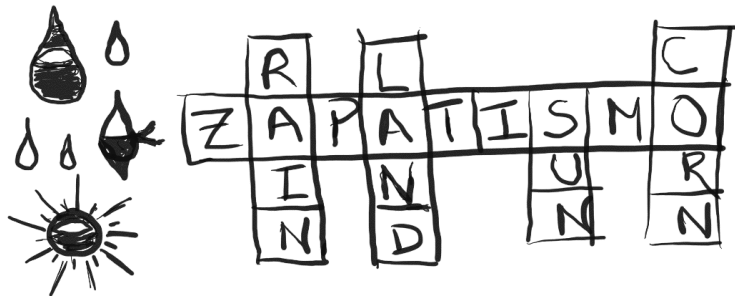


Figure 4: Schematic representation of the change possible within the institutional system, by Elisa

Unlike the institutional system, which has blocked the process of creativity through its capitalization, the Zapatista's ways of resistance are renewed through the openness of creativity to each one of those who want to build a new world. "I see this as an advantage to the side of the communities in this endless fight. Even though we are somehow trapped in this cycle that I just explained, we know that we are still fighting, things are being done, so there is hope". 'Oyuk smalael': 'let's have hope'.

And, suddenly, I realise that the story being told is not already the story of the moon; neither it is the story of the Tzotzil cosmovision. There are elements of this story that belong to what I dare to call "Zapatista cosmovision". In reality, it appears to me that the Mayan descendance cannot explain totally the relation of care that the Zapatistas have built and build with Nature. Thus, I propose a step further, by introducing the stories that Zapatismo tells us, that will ultimately reflect some aspects of the views of the Tzotzil Zapatistas towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment.

Fourth encounter: the Zapatista cosmovision



What does Zapatismo have to do with the rain, with the sun, with Nature?". This question was proposed as an activity to start one of the days at the *Caracol*, and we (the internationals), as well as our education promoters, were supposed to write our thoughts down and throw the paper in a container, where it would be mixed up with the others. The objective of the activity was to share ideas about this issue; so, to increase its effectiveness – as well as respect for everyone, without judgements – everyone had to grab a paper from another person, without anyone telling or trying to guess who had written each piece. What I read was amazing, because it was completely different from the ideas I had been constructing during this journey around Zapatismo and its connection to Nature. On the paper that was assigned to me, one could read: "For me, the rain that is more present in Oventik can have the relation that the fights, not only in Zapatismo also others, can get cold. They can even freeze; but also with the rain, maybe the fights,

rebellions, [the rain] can refresh and make grow.” I would later know, from recognizing the handwriting, that Marcos had written it. And that makes sense, as he tends to be very intelligent in seeing the big picture, thus capturing the good and the bad and the not-so-good but also the not-so-bad of the things. And the rain inspires him to reflect on the dynamism of the movement, that many of those who try to understand the movement from outside, are not able to understand; that a fight can move forward but it can always be repressed, because it does not aim for progress like modernization; instead, it flows as the Nature, and the people, and the struggles, evolve; and they can be refreshed with new insights, with new fights, as when it was decided that more power would be given to the will of the *pueblos*, to the civil part of the movement, to autonomy, rather than to the armed fight.

In the *pueblos*, people use this expression a lot: “it depends on the times”. Every thought or action is, then, embedded in a context highly marked by a specific time in history. Marcos illustrates this referring to the Zapatista fight: “The concept of fight has changed. Our weapons are the ones that aspire to be useless.” The war as the ultimate option for fighting. It was the last chance that they had to rebel; they were forced to use weapons because it was the only way they would be listened at that time, after so many years of oppression and marginalization promoted by the Mexican state. Even though the *pueblo* rose up in arms in 1994, when declared war against the Mexican State, the EZLN and its members never had military intentions. Following their own definition, they are an army for ending with all the others. Their final dream is to destroy the military function completely. They acknowledge that, if they are to be autonomous, there is no place or time for a military institution, which is vertically organized and inherently hierarchical, contrasting with the horizontal, mutual relationships and respect, that the Zapatismo has been building for the past 28 years (and counting). Marcos’ words clarify it - “After 1994, we started to ask things to the government, but it did not have a loyal word. They only wanted to give modernity, not dignity. So, in the present time, the fight is other: it is written in the 6th Declaration [of the Lacandon Jungle]; it is already another time”.

The Zapatista cosmovision has been highly dynamic since the EZLN was created in 1983, and especially from the moment of the uprising, on the first of January of 1994. I already knew, from the existent literature, that the Zapatismo as we know it today has numerous differences compared to what was previously referred as the EZLN – the politico-military organization that rose up in arms against the Mexican State. Thus, the stories that are written and lived today within the communities - such as the ones

belonging to the *Caracol* II of Oventik - are quite distinct from the ones of previous times in the Zapatista history. Now, it is the time of the civil aims of the Zapatistas to become the protagonists. It was in 2003 that the movement divided itself in its two main fractions: the politico-military instance – the EZLN – and its civil part, commonly referred to as Zapatismo. This division goes beyond the simple differentiation of two separate categories; it implies, in both, a characteristic cosmovision. The story of the Zapatismo that I intend to tell you here, departs from a time where the EZLN no longer intervenes in the civil issues. These are the responsibility of the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, the autonomous councils of each municipality, and the ones in the communities. This is the story of a Zapatismo that is practised in the twelve different Zapatista Caracoles. This is the story where the energy and efforts are focused on the construction of the ‘smeltsanel xkuslek stuk lumaltik’, the ‘autonomy of the peoples’, rather than in the direct attack to the State institutions. This cosmovision is, then, highly inspired by the Tzotzil one, since the indigenous people are the ones in charge of the civil part of the Zapatista movement.

This conversation, however led towards the topic of how Zapatismo is organized structurally as an autonomous movement. This story happens in the times of “an admirable and incredible advance towards the true democracy”, as Marcos defines it. The next section follows then this essential feature of the Zapatista cosmovision: democracy.

Encounter 4.1.: democracy

Democracy was one of the demands the Zapatistas presented to the State institutions, during the San Andrés Agreements (1996). Even though these were not respected, and the dialogue between the two sides was disrupted, the Zapatistas keep building their autonomy based on the principles of democracy.

During the Tzotzil classes with Marcos, democracy was then one of the central themes. ‘Ich’ bail ta muk’, democracy, means literally ‘big reciprocity’, which is translated, in this context, to ‘mutual respect’. This expression always existed in the *pueblos*, but it was rescued by the Zapatistas. Marcos would tell me that “we always had democracy in the *pueblos*. Obviously, it [the democracy] does not work in the capitalism. It does not work in the political parties. It works in Zapatismo because we have always had ‘ich’ bail ta muk’”. The bad government does not enter in this type of democracy. This is the democracy project within Zapatismo”. He goes further - “we always had different small practices of reciprocity even with other [non-Tzotzil] peoples. The Zapatista fight is not made from violence, but from peace, freedom, democracy, and dignity!”. ‘Ich’ bail ta muk’ is, then, a bidirectional relationship, where “I have to

recognize the other, and the other has to recognize me back”, Marcos would explain to me. There are numerous historical practices of democracy that are inspired by the Tzotzil cosmovision, and that are extremely visible in the Zapatista movement. For instance, the way decisions are taken within the *Caracoles* and autonomous municipalities and communities, follow something that has been called, in previous works (Giraldo, 2019; Oikonomakis, 2019), “direct democracy”. Deciding on something means that “all members of the pueblo must be in accordance. It takes a long time to make a small decision. But in Zapatismo, everything is done with heart; so, the people have and take their word and compromise, after a long reflection.”, Marcos shared. I asked him to precise the meaning of democracy for him, to which he replied, “it is hard... Maybe... I am closer to what is democracy because... We criticise a lot the electoral democracy. It is just worth instants; what we have talked here about is different. The democracy is not spoken alone, it must be practised in your own lives and within your families. In history classes, we talk about democracy. But within our family there is also lack of democracy. Many times we do not realise that we are creating hierarchies within our own family. It is a very hard work; it is a process. To change something that is rooted in society is deeply complicated. To unlearn, to deconstruct...”. I kept my interest, as I desired to understand his feelings on how much he thinks he lives in democracy. “We do not have the answer... - he told me. What we do is not because we had read Carlos [*sic*] Marx or other fights... What Zapatismo wants is another world; and this construction is done collectively. Maybe there are things that we already managed to achieve, but there is still a long way to walk. But yes, we do have democratic practices. Total, pure democracy, I still do not know what it is... but we keep walking.” Again, the inspiration on the Tzotzil cosmovision stands out. And this walk that Marcos refers to, is done within the movement, in their daily lives, in their practices, including those regarding to Nature and land. These also follow the reciprocity of democracy: “The elements of Nature are the purest, they have not lost this part. If you treat *her* good, *she* will treat you the same away. If you care for *her*, *she* will care for you. To achieve this, it is fundamental to grow collectively. If the mutual recognition is not practised by the communities, they are in danger of separating themselves from each other. It is essential to put the collective higher than the individual. The [Zapatista] movement has grown because of this. It is a way of resistance, a revolutionary way of improving, by recognizing other existences. Of course this is not supported by the bad government... because they do not have it!”.

I would later come to know that they have another type of democracy within the Zapatista *pueblos*, ‘ich’ ta muk’. The latter translates literally into ‘to receive greatness’, ‘to receive acknowledgement’. Therefore, this one is a unidirectional type of democracy; nevertheless, this one also helps them to respect everything that Mother Earth creates. “Everyone and everything should be recognized by its greatness. Everything that exists is unique, specific. We cannot change the roles of Nature, they are essential. The concept breaks with the idea of the human being as the owner of an object because the latter also has greatness, its own existence. It breaks with hierarchies. It is a recognition practice. You cannot *have* or *possess* something that belongs to Nature. In every decision you take, you must consider how it is going to affect the environment. It is a way of resistance.”

The encounter with the Zapatista cosmovision seems to provide the same lessons that I had gathered during the one with the Tzotzil cosmovision: Nature and humans are interconnected, thus they should care for each other, mutually, instead of establishing hierarchical, unidirectional dependences of human beings from Nature, through *her* capitalization. Being democratic is being reciprocal, thus participating in life with Nature, with the beings and non-beings that are deemed as “resources” by “Western perspectives”. In practice, establishing democratic relationships with Nature and the environment means to prioritize sustainable agricultural methods, that allow for a respectful and caring interaction with the Mother Earth. With our minds now opened to the Tzotzil/Zapatista cosmovision(s), it is time to step out of our brains and taste the land with our feet, which creates the context for the next encounter.

Fifth encounter: the Tzotzil Zapatista agricultural practices

After the failure of the San Andrés Agreements (1996) the fight for the autonomy grew stronger than ever. The complete detachment from the State meant that the Zapatistas, particularly in what concerns its civil part, had to invest in autonomous ways of providing the basic needs for the indigenous peoples within the movement. This project, apart from being autonomous, aspired to be alternative, to be designed and implemented in ways that benefited the indigenous peoples, that allowed for the recognition of their cosmovision and ways of living, after decades of subjugation to oppressive State policies. Education, health, communication, and production were the areas to focus on. For the purposes of the present work, I will focus on the alternative autonomous production, referred to as “The Other Production”, which forms the basis for the agriculture practised within Zapatista communities.

Encounter 5.1.: The Other Production

The concept of ‘The Other Production’ implies that this is a different project, one that is based on indigenous cosmovision and alternative practices. The story of this project is the story of an agricultural system that respects the vision of humans and Nature as part of the same body, the Mother Earth; thus, this is the story of practices that allow for caring for the land and foods that it provides; this is the story of reciprocity between humans and Mother Earth, where the latter thanks the peoples who care for *her* by helping in their project of autonomy – and resistance.

“To be able to govern ourselves we need to feed ourselves” (Val & Rosset, 2022). Therefore, the Zapatista autonomy is also about food autonomy through alternative agricultural practices, through agroecology. The “Agrarian Development Plan”, developed as part of The Other Production Project, was implemented first in the *Caracol* Roberto Barrios, in the period of 1998-1999 (Ávila Romero, 2007), where the agroecological works were structurally organized, so they could be implemented, afterwards, in the remaining *Caracoles*. The implementation of the plan was the responsibility of the numerous MAREZ (*Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas*, [Autonomous Rebel Zapatista Municipalities]), which represent various communities. The first agroecology school was held in El Prado community, in the autonomous municipality of Ricardo Flores Magón, becoming the pioneer in the agroecological production. The aim of this school was to train the ones who would choose to specialize in agroecology, who would then give agroecological training in each one of the Zapatista communities, with the objective of promoting and implementing the plan developed. The agroecological promoters have the responsibility to help the communities to produce their food organically, with respect and care for the Mother Earth, through the organization of workshops where everyone must participate. In these workshops, traditional indigenous practices are promoted through the share of theoretical and empirical knowledge; however, also new agroecological practices, learnt by trials in the collective lands, or through the share of knowledge of well-intended non-Zapatista people, are included. This ‘other production’ is then, based on alternative ways of providing food, ones that contradict the hegemonic rationale of industrialized agriculture that compose the ways of production in a neoliberal, globalized world, where markets and income weight more than the respect and love for Mother Earth. However, this is not the only point of distinction; The Other Production is a collective production, where the people work together to achieve their food autonomy and food sovereignty. In structural terms, this collective

production is divided into two ways of organization: the food that is produced by families and communities, in lands shared by those, to serve the needs at a local level; and the agriculture practised within one municipality, where people from various communities work in the same municipal collective land, so they assure the food provision to everyone within each municipality. Thus, the agriculture practised and the food grown depend on the characteristics of each municipality and *Caracol*, which are shaped by the land conditions of each region within the state of Chiapas. For the purpose of this work, then, it is important to narrow the context of the story to one that focuses on the agroecological production in the landscape of the Highlands of Chiapas. This is a story that does not come in the books since, for one to understand the particularities of the land, it is necessary to touch it with your hands, to know the ones who sweat under the sun and rain for producing the foods that allow them to have a good life – defined in their own terms. This is a story that I gathered by both listening to the wise words of the education promoters, which are farmers themselves, but also by working in the collective *milpa* – corn field - and *cafetal* – coffee field - of Oventik.

Encounter 5.2.: The Other Production in the Highlands of Chiapas

“In the Highlands of Chiapas there are no recovered lands”, Marcos would clarify me before we would go to the *milpa*, in a sunny morning of July. The story of these lands is not the one that is commonly associated with Zapatismo; these lands were not recovered in 1994, as many others in the state of Chiapas. “These lands are not referred as ‘recovered’ because they were not conquered in 1994 when the Zapatista insurgence. These are related to an earlier period. In the beginnings there were landowners, but soon there were a lot of peasant movements. The fight for the lands started before Zapatismo; in the seventies, many people gave their lives to recover lands from landowners, by establishing communities with peoples, mainly indigenous, against landowners”, Marcos explained to me. Despite of not falling under the category of *ejido*, these lands are, therefore, also managed commonly. However, Marcos tells us a major and important difference between the recovered and non-recovered lands, where the Zapatistas grow their foods. “In the Highlands of Chiapas we must harvest the hills... the land is of poor quality; it is hard to cultivate here. There is not a lot of work, then... the food that we grow here is not even enough for subsistence. We must buy corn and coffee both from Zapatista and non-Zapatista markets.” In the Highlands of Chiapas, to achieve food sovereignty is harder than in other regions, such as the ones that include the *Caracoles* of La Garrucha, Morelia, and La Realidad. Marcos told me that “in these *Caracoles* there

are recovered lands. These are communal lands where people work for the community two days a week, apart from their work in their family land, three days per week. There, the quality of the lands is good; they produce coffee and corn, and the corn annual cycle is much shorter, and the productivity is way higher! There, there is more access to work: they even have surplus to sell, after distributing the food for the Zapatista families! The recovered lands are better and more fertile, because they used to belong to landowners, that obviously had the most productive lands because they allowed them for capital accumulation”. These characteristics mark the division between the stories in the Highlands of Chiapas and those in the more productive regions: in the latter, one can see an agriculture-based economy, while in the regions with poor lands, people must dedicate themselves to extra works in artisanry for having an income. However, this does not mean that the communities in the Highlands of Chiapas are discriminated in their access to land. Marcos explained to me that “the peoples from the Highlands have access to those fertile communal lands. We organize ourselves to go in a *colectivo* [collective bus] to go to work in the Lowlands, six hours away from here by car.” People also have the possibility of migrating in between communities: later, in the second time I was in Oventik, I would talk with Moisés, that would tell me that his brother (the writer of the story of the tiny pine) was offered to move to the Lowlands of Chiapas because there he could have a life, because he would have access to food to his and his family’s sustenance. Thus, it does not matter where the food is produced; everyone has similar access to it. “The products that come from the recovered lands are collectively distributed, whether it is produced in Morelia or in La Garrucha, whether it will be consumed in Oventik or in one of the first two mentioned”, Marcos elucidated me. In the Zapatista movement, everyone has equal rights regarding land and food access, since everyone works the land and contributes to produce autonomy.

Despite the insightful explanation of Marcos, I was intrigued: is this production enough for guaranteeing the food sovereignty of the Zapatista indigenous peoples? “Unfortunately no – said Marcos as his eyes turned down to the table. Some things we can get through transactions within the Zapatista market, with the *compañeras* and *compañeros*. Even though the money is present, there is a product exchange. The *tortilla* is always bought to a cooperative. However, here, in Oventik, there are no Zapatista *tortillas* or coffee for drinking; there is no corn or coffee enough close for producing those to sell. Also, the beans are bought in the market because there are not enough for the subsistence of all the communities that are bounded by the Oventik Caracol. We have two

options: to buy from a Zapatista or a regular market. The priority is the price, so we sometimes choose the regular one over the Zapatista... But generally the prices are better in the autonomous market, because we do not look for accumulation of money, but for enough to survive”.

The focus on the corn and coffee in Marcos’ discourse is clear. It was also not news for me – and I expect, at this point, not for you as well, too – that this would be the case, since corn and coffee are foods that the indigenous peoples of Chiapas have been growing since ancient times. I was lucky enough to participate in two very practical collective classes: in July, I had the opportunity to work on a *milpa* while, when I returned in November, the field that needed maintenance was the one destined to growing coffee plants. Thus, in the next stories, I will try to tell you the landscapes, the plants, the more-than-human relationships that occur in those lands, and the feelings that are promoted by the deepest connection one can have with the land – and Mother Earth: by caring for and loving *her*.

Encounter 5.3.: the *milpa*



It was a warm morning, one of those where the sun, ‘jto’tik’, dries the soil irrigated by the previous night’s rain, while it burns your skin – if you are as white as me. I was told the day before to prepare for working on the *milpa*, ‘chomtic’, a corn field where there is much more than just corn. The agroecology in the Zapatista lands share the features of the traditional agriculture practised by the Tzotzil peoples in the Highlands of Chiapas: there, they practise the polyculture, an agricultural system that enables them to grow more than one plant species in the same field. Traditionally, the corn, ‘ixim’, grows in the company of beans, ‘chenek’, as well as with squash, ‘t’sul’ – the ‘three sisters’. To implement the polyculture system is extremely important in the Highlands, where the land parcels are very small and the production cycle is much slower, because of both the low land quality, and the lower temperatures and more frequent rain that characterize the

climate of the region. These are still the pillar crops for their agricultural system and food autonomy and sovereignty: “If there is corn, beans and squash, there is hope” – Marcos would tell me as we started to clean the weeds, using our hands and a hoe, on the field. These were the first domesticated plants, N explained, in these lands, dating back to around 4400 B.C., when the indigenous peoples started domesticating plants for their own subsistence.

In the Highlands of Chiapas, the seeds of the three crops are sown together around March, right before the season of the ‘cha-ukutik’, of the stormy rain, has started. The harvest occurs in the end of October until the beginning of November, during the ‘k’inabalkutik’, when the rain is usually continuous and softer. Or at least it used to be. If one respects the natural crops’ cycle, the land offers you only one production a year, whereas in the Lowlands there is the possibility of doing two crop cycles per year, given the fertility of the land and the climate conditions, where the cycle is shortened due to the higher temperatures. However, “some people that use modified varieties of corn and beans can have two cycles each year in the Highlands of Chiapas. But they have other problems, both to produce the crops, as well as in terms of the soil and plants’ health” – Marcos shared. Before entering on the explanation of these problems, I want to start with a happy story, one about the preservation of the soil’s health.

Encounter 5.4.: the soil

Caring for the soil’s health is essential for enabling the health of the food produced and the safety and security of those who depend on those for their food sovereignty. Thus, the soil nutrition and fertilization are managed organically, in a way that respects the plants as beings born from the same collective Mother. The ‘three sisters’ themselves are especially important crops for soil fertilization: even though the Tzotzil peoples did not know the reasons behind it, in the past, they empirically understood that the beans were useful for soil quality – since they are able to capture nitrogen to be then used by all the crops in the *milpa*. The corn plants are also important elements for the nutrient quantity in the field. Marcos told me that he uses the same fertilization methods as his grandfather would, in the past: “you leave the rests of the season on the field for one year; after that, you plough the land, incorporating the rests of the corn plants of last season. We called this ‘lok osil’ – literally meaning ‘to plough’. This practice, though, has some limitations, as “this is a very slow process. You must wait for the mineralization of the organic matter for one year to fertilize the soil. This is only made in small parcels. For bigger parcels, where there is no time to do the ‘lok osil’, we do the ‘sok’ [‘to reap’]. You let the rests

stay on the field for four months, after the harvest; these are the warmest and driest months, so it is enough for the decomposition and mineralization processes. One week before sowing, you do the ‘jas pak’emal’, which consists of removing all the rests from the field, that was already provided with the necessary nutrients!”. These procedures are to be prioritized in the agroecology project, once they allow the fertilization of the soil without using chemical compounds; it also avoids a traditional process that is used in other non-Zapatista indigenous communities, where the rests of the harvest are burnt, polluting the environment. However, the ‘lok osil’ and the ‘sok’ are not the only traditional methods for organic fertilization in Zapatista lands. Marcos told me that they “continue to have, in their communities, the ‘k’aepal’, which is the place where you put your organic waste – the compost. Usually, it is allocated in a small parcel, in front of the families’ houses. Sometimes we also mix this waste with manure; but this is not so usual, because we do not have easy access to it in the Highlands, where animal production is hard to be done. When we do it, we use ovine manure, but also from chickens and cows.” Apart from these traditional methods, the peoples of Oventik are also experimenting new forms of fertilization: the slurry, where they mix manure, rich in carbon, with green compost materials, such as legume’s leaves, rich in nitrogen. On top of that, Marcos has also been experimenting non-chemical fumigation: “You mix plantain peels, rich in potassium, with bean’s peels, rich in nitrogen, and you add manure from animals, as source of potassium and carbon.”

These practices are essential for enabling a good relationship between the humans who work the land and the land itself; however, caring for the soil is not enough for caring for Mother Earth. As I told you previously, in some indigenous communities, including Zapatista ones, people have been facing some problems that arouse by disrespectful practices towards Mother Earth, inspired by the hegemonic rationale around agriculture, which threatens the Tzotzil wisdom in relation to agriculture and Nature. One of these problems is illustrated by a story that Marcos would tell me during a language class, in which the protagonist is the corn itself:

“You know, I already told you that, since long time ago, in the communities, we are being manipulated or forced to try new varieties of corn. And some people of my family tried on their lands. In the first year, the corn grew a lot, and produced a lot. It was a very good year for production. But you cannot imagine what the next years looked like: each year, the corn grew less and less, produced less and less. The soils look sick, and the plants as well. These new plants and the products

that come with their planting, exhaust the soils that used to be more-or-less healthy. At least they used to guarantee a stable production over the years.

But this was some years ago when we were fooled by the government. Now, we realise that these plants are not good for the environment and for our soils, so we are putting back our old varieties. Of course, the production is not yet like it was before. But the corn grows bigger and produces more each year, and the soil does not look so sick as before. It already took ten years to cure itself. One day, we will reach the older state.”

In this story, even though the corn is the protagonist, it is not the main actor; it does not act, it is dragged by the decisions taken by the farmers – including the ones manipulated by the government and the hegemonic power/knowledge. Here, the corn is subjugated to the capitalist human being’s will and suffers the consequences of this external power. The corn, because of the soil, its sustenance, got sick, also gets abnormal in its cycle. And, for treating this sickness, farmers are pushed towards the welcoming of fertilizers, produced by the same guys that made the corn sick.

I remember one conversation I had with “Ramona”, Marcos’ daughter, who seems to share the same concerns as her father. She would tell me that:

“Fertilizers do not solve the soil issues. If you use them, the corn will grow more (or not), but next year the land will be the same.”

But not anymore. Even though the corn is not still allowed to grow by itself, and to decide its own life, the peoples are working towards the corn’s own autonomy. By promoting the soil’s regeneration and allowing the older varieties to reclaim the spaces colonized by North American-improved ones, through agroecological practices, the Zapatista communities are shaping the future of the corn, to be owned by the crop itself, later, hopefully. The agency of the crop and the soil seems already to be in the process of conquering: the crop, as well as the soil, are curing themselves. Even though it is a long process – “it has been already ten years” – it is one that respects Nature’s temporality and rhythm(s), which the communities are prioritizing. They could benefit from not waiting or waiting less; but their benefit is not more important than the benefit of the soil and the corn, they both have ‘ch’ulel’, so they are equal to human beings in this planet. This contrasts with the rhythm of the improved varieties and their cycle: they are fast to colonize the soil, to produce more, to feed more in less time. But they are also very fast in destroying the soil, the production, the livelihoods, and food sovereignty of the

communities who planted them, who trusted them, and the devil's subtle ways of killing Nature. Once the landscape is restored, the corn will grow as it was before the intensive human interventions, reclaiming its rights to be, to not be controlled by another species, and to offer, thankfully, to the humans who helped it reclaim its existence, a good production, for the resistance of the human beings themselves. It seems important, therefore, to highlight some of the agricultural practices that the Zapatistas adopt for the foods that are grown in the *milpa*, the ones that contribute for the peoples and Mother Earth resistance.

Encounter 5.5.: the seed diversity

In the Tzotzil *milpa* there are 23 identified different species of corn, and a study has found 95 different varieties in the region of the Highlands of Chiapas (Méndez *et al.*, 2018). Thus, it is important for the communities to preserve them since they have been able to promote their food autonomy since Mayan ancient times. The corn is not a unique case: the same study has found 105 different varieties of beans in the region of the Highlands of Chiapas, where the Botil (*Phaseolus coccineus*), a native variety of the region, is the most used. This variety grows – or used to grow, as Marcos would fearfully share with me – in Chiapas as a wild species, even though it has been domesticated. “Now, people are using other varieties, modified ones. People have found varieties with a diminished cycle, which is complete in only three months – very quick! But there are some problems with using these modified and commodified varieties. For example, now we are in the phase of the *elote* [young corn]. At this point, we bend the extremities of the corn plants so the sugars can move better towards the fruits; but especially, it helps the bean plants, which are entangled to the corn ones, to grow sideways, instead of upwards, so they can resist to the winds that can be very strong in this phase of the cycle. In the case of modified varieties, the bean plants are very tiny, so they cannot be entangled to the corn plants.” If that was not enough, Marcos points out another serious problem: “the seeds of these plants cannot be saved, so you must buy new ones every year”. But Marcos, as other people that have been trained by the agroecology promoters, know that preserving their native seeds and the genetic diversity of their crops is extremely important for their sovereignty, as well as for their resistance against the modernization and capitalization of agriculture. “Each family tries to save its seeds from the last harvest, so you can guarantee native seeds for the next year. We prefer to keep our diversity rather than a much shorter cycle and small plants, as it happens with people who adopted other seeds promoted by big corporations and State entities”. On top of saving their seeds, they

promote their seed diversity by trying with non-transgenic breeding methods. These are especially done with corn, since other crops, like beans, are not provided with crossed-pollination, and the Zapatista communities do not have access to laboratories. However, Marcos is extremely happy with what he has been trying with the corn varieties: “It is also a traditional practice, but we have been actualizing it over the years with new empirical knowledge through autonomous trials. We try to get new colours, as well as to develop varieties that are more resistant to extreme weather events, diseases, and plagues; we also try to increase productivity, since the corn is so important for our autonomy.” The story of the successful organic breeding practices, though, is not constructed alone with the interaction between the humans who farm the land, and the corn plants themselves; in this story, the protagonists come from a different kingdom than the plants but are born from the Mother Earth as well. The bees, necessary for the crossed pollination in the native corn varieties, then, will be the protagonist of my next story.

Encounter 5.6.: the bees



The first encounter I had with bees in the Oventik *Caracol* was through the story of “Ramona”, Marcos’ daughter. Ramona is a child, but not in her mind. At best, she is in metamorphosis. Sweet like a child, wise like if she had joined Zapatismo in the beginning – well, she is since her beginning because she was born fighting - and had belonged to the thousands of those people who took the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas (among others) on the 1st of January of 1994. She talks about Che Guevarra and the *Comandanta* Ramona, and how they are her heroes. She talks about capitalism as the greatest evil, that she is already fighting against in her own words – a Tzotzil speaker, as well. But also in her practices. She talks about her tomato plantations, how the different varieties provide such different tastes! But, with more passion, she talks about her loved bees, that she takes care of, since they are “providers of sweet honey” that she prefers over chocolate; but, above all, she speaks of how “they provide life, not just by giving us [human beings] energy in a sweet form but by spreading the seeds of what we eat.”

From this story, we understand the importance of bees: they allow us to be alive, to resist, through seed proliferation; therefore also, for the Zapatistas, it is important that the seeds spread are the native ones, so they can be maintained on the fields; otherwise, they would be covered by the threatening modified varieties.

Later, Marcos would also tell me stories about the same bees. Just to clarify, I did not ask him to share this story; instead, it emerged out of his question. During one of the classes, Marcos asked me if I wanted to know anything specific – as he asks me every time we are almost finishing the class, so we can exchange ideas and reflections. And, almost every time, I say “I have nothing in particular”, what is true; I know that I could take advantage to ask specific questions regarding my research; however, and as I mentioned previously, to gather information that I want(ed) for my work, I intended to do it like Nature does, flowing, letting the emotions and the relationship between me and Marcos lead the way towards what is appropriate or not, defined by what he (like other Zapatistas) wants to share with me. I decided long ago that my intention was to take the words and emotions attached to them to create the beautiful stories that, I guess, are getting some shape. But, as almost always, Marcos knows that my main interest - better: passion - lays on the themes of Nature and philosophy attached to agroecology and respectful agricultural practices. So he starts talking about his bees. These bees were already protagonists of (some short phrases of) the story told by the wise Ramona. They are the same bees, told in different stories, by different generations; and, if in the previous story, they were told as heroes, in the story that follows they get more proximate to gods, in my own view, as you will (maybe) understand.

“I think my daughter already told you that we also have bees where we live... we produce honey. When I am not here in the school, I am at my home helping to take care of them.” So, in my mind, obviously, they had to take care of them, because they are domesticated bees, so not so much a property of Nature, but already somehow belonging to the human beings who use them to produce honey. But, as Marcos would correct me later, “No one needs to take care of them in our [the family’s] absence. They know how to take care of themselves. They are so much smarter than people think! You know, that is actually their natural territory... it is us [humans] that go to disturb their home, and then we think they depend on us to survive... but they have lived there forever, they are adapted to the conditions, and they have amazing strategies to survive and live well. That is why they can sometimes bite you – because you entered their space, that they can manage alone.

On the contrary, if you see bees inside a car, they will not attack you, because they *know* that they are in a territory that does not belong to them.”

In this story, the bees are, undoubtedly and as I told you, the protagonists of the story told by Marcos since, if the story was told by them, we would not understand their language (we are not really used to try to understand other species, especially in contemporary times...). In this story, bees act, and they decide, and they have the capacity to know, to reflect on which space they are allowed to be the protagonists, contrary to those where human beings are on the lead; they know the line or the landscapes that separate respectful living and colonization of other species' spaces. They know, contrarily to human beings, that try to colonize bees' spaces, just as an example to literally every single species on this living planet. They know, and they rationalize, and they plan how to manage their own habitat and environment in the absence, and in the presence of humans. They know that they are serving Marcos' with one of their products, and sometimes they get angry at him, for invading their space; and Marcos is conscious about this colonization; but he needs the honey to survive. He lives in the Highlands of Chiapas, not so far from the *Caracol*; so the lands are poor, and the agriculture limited. Despite having few sheep, the family dedicates to the production of honey to be able to feed themselves. Marcos seems to try to compensate for this use of the bees as a resource for human living – he takes good care of bees when he is intervening in their natural system, participating on it in a respectful way. Because he knows that he does not know more than bees, that they are not inferior to human beings. Because they know, they rationalize, they plan, as human beings. And they fight for their territory and freedom like the Zapatistas. This is just a story that illustrates the holistic, horizontal, integrative view on Nature, derived from the Mayan cosmovision. It offers no room for hierarchical ruling from human beings, and actively defends ideas of equality of species, and even mountains and rocks, the landscapes as static expressions of the ethical encounters between different but equal beings.

Then, surely, these ideas about bees help Marcos and other people to integrate them as equals in the agricultural practices, as they have the capacity to preserve native seeds, and guarantee the reproduction and maintenance of the Mayan/Tzotzil landscapes and, thus, livelihoods. Bees are one of the sacred entities that control the food sovereignty of the communities, and help them to achieve their autonomy, to resist against the hegemonic knowledge about agriculture, and thus the corporative rationale, attached to

ideas of modernization, supported by the State interests, which have marginalized indigenous peoples – and bees.

Encounter 5.7.: the *cafetal*

The story of the *cafetal* enters here in every way but smoothly and long. As it should be. Instead, this story is abrupt and short. The coffee is not a crop that exists naturally in the Highlands of Chiapas. In fact, the *cafetal* that was *built* in the *Caracol II* of Oventik defies the naturality of the landscape, which is known by the production of the ‘three sisters’. I was not aware of the fact that there was no coffee produced in this place. Actually, getting to know its system of production was one of the things I intended to do during my story in Chiapas; I got into contact with Zapatista coffee in Europe, to where it is exported and then sold in alternative collectives, in relatively small quantities. And, in fact, there are more than one thousand producers that, through Zapatista coffee cooperatives, can export coffee to Europe and other destinations; however, all of it comes from the most productive lands, where the climate is more propitious for the crop, in the Lowlands of Chiapas.

The *cafetal* that I had the opportunity to work on in Oventik is an experimental field, where people are trying to grow the crop, due to the higher temperatures that have been felt lately in the region because of the climate change. In the Highlands, they are taking advantage of this for trying new crops, ones that were not usually adapted to the landscape conditions. In reality, it is important for them to grow as much as possible, as various as possible, since this means new tools for resistance and food sovereignty.

When I entered the coffee field, on a November morning, the soil was wet as I have never seen one. While I was getting stuck on the mud, I could see various coffee plants, in different stages of development. However, just one of them had visible (few) fruits.



Figure 5: Young coffee plant, Oventik

“We started to grow this field last year” – Moisés explained to me. “So, you cannot see the production yet. Maybe in two years we will be able to harvest coffee from here.” My curiosity made me ask the destination of the production: to the local communities, to the Zapatista market, or to export? Moisés told me that “it is still uncertain. But the most probable is that it will go for the local communities, for their own subsistence. We will not have enough production to sell it on the [Zapatista] market as surplus, neither to export it to Europe”. The aim of this field is not the commodification of the product; rather, it will hopefully serve as a new element of the diet basis of the Tzotziles, in the face of the new climate conditions they are facing. Again, it was proven to me that agriculture has a very different meaning for the Zapatistas, compared to the rest of the systems that I had contact with in Europe. This is a system for sovereignty and for autonomy. And all the hard work, in the field as in other matters, is worth the result: the resistance against the “system”, marked by a decoupling between humans and Mother Earth. This is the main theme I aim to explore in my next encounter, where the last encounters are pieced together.

Sixth encounter: where the encounters are pieced together

The territory, the right to land, has been the subject of the Zapatista fight, since the movement was funded, in 1983, until the present day. However, this fight is not one that comes within the dictionary. This is a fight *for* and *with* dignity, ‘pas k’op’, one that aims to change, to make the revolution possible, a revolution that is continuously carried out every day, in the Zapatistas’ lives. “Zapatismo is not like the other revolutions. It is born out of an indigenous, Mayan reality. The Mayan cosmovision inspires us that another world is possible”, Marcos would tell me during one of the last Tzotzil classes we participated together in. He added that “it is not the same as doing fight to create a problem, it is not the same as doing war. After 1994, we always tried to use the words instead of the weapons. Before, we used the weapons, as a last resource. We have always tried the dialogue, even before 1994.” Then, it is clear that this is a different project from the one of the military, paramilitary, and the government; that is referred to, by the Tzotziles, as ‘sa’ k’op’, which literally means ‘to search for fight’ or ‘to search for war’.

Later, I would understand that this concept of fight is much more complex than what I had understood by reading previous literature. To fight a system promoted by government institutions and large corporations that constitute the network of oppression in an increasingly capitalist and globalized society, one should also work within

themselves, apart from defying external threats. Esther once asked me “‘K’usi ja vaich” [what is your dream?]. I answered that I wanted to end with capitalism. That to have a good life, capitalism must disappear from our society. She said: “‘Sik’an taj lajes li kapitalismoe””: “The capitalism is not something that is external”; in reality, it is part of us. Esther confessed that “even us, that we are not capitalists, must live with capitalism. It is the dominant system, so it invades every place, out or inside us. We must end with the capitalist thinking. No one can end with the capitalism alone; it must be something collective.” She explained to me that, even though that defying capitalism is a very personal exercise – since each one of us must work in their minds to diminish the presence of capitalist thinking – the most important is that it is worked against in the collective thinking. Not with a destructive aim, but through a constructive rationale: to destroy capitalism through the construction of something good. Therefore, as I suspected, this fight appears to be not only a fight against to, but a creative one. I remember the words of Marcos: “‘Pas k’op’ can be done internally, directed to our *pueblos*, the fight within our *pueblos*, apart from the fight against the system”.

Since the Green Revolution period, which entered Mexico with the Mexican Agricultural Project (1940-1965), there have been proposals and attempts for agricultural development, which do not acknowledge the existence of indigenous agricultural knowledge and practices. During that period, three scholars from the universities of Minnesota, Cornell, and Harvard, were invited by Mexican governmental institutions to “study” the rural landscapes and to develop a rural development plan. This included the introduction of hybrid (transgenic) varieties of corn and beans; the development of a “better agronomic management” of the productive practices; the improvement of disease control; the improvement of animal production; and, ultimately, the training of Mexican scientists to implement the “ideal” production system, based on a modernization/globalization approach (Méndez *et al.*, 2018). Part of this project was the creation of several research institutes, universities, and experimental stations to favour the development of crops that would provide commodities for the Mexican and American states. The ultimate goal of this project was to control all of the agricultural production processes. This would be supported by the implementation of “knowledge extension programmes”, which denied the veracity of the existing agricultural knowledge. Thus, this programme, apart from promoting the disappearance of several native corn and other crops varieties, through the prioritization of more productive ones, threatens the traditional indigenous ways of doing agriculture. Indeed, the discourse around the

“American way” of production undermines the potentialities of traditional indigenous agricultural practices, by classifying them as “inefficient and of “low productivity”.

The Zapatistas, then, have tried to resist to the agricultural crisis generated by this and subsequent policies of agroindustrialization aimed at destroying indigenous agricultural systems. The creation of alternative modes of production, specifically through agroecology, has been the prioritized way for fighting against the State and corporations’ interests, that perpetuate the use of degrading technologies and agrochemicals. “Before ’94, the Green Revolution was very strong in Chiapas. When the agrochemicals and fertilizers came, the peoples got tricked by the State and big corporations. But then we [Zapatistas] realized the bad that it does to Nature. So, our way of doing agriculture has also been part of our fight”, Marcos told me once, proudly. This fight is one that is present, and that has grown in its fronts of action, in the light of the multiple contemporary problems that we face. Nevertheless, the agroecological methods implemented in the Zapatista agricultural system seem to be effective weapons against this complex fight. For example, the small-scale community farming is seen as an option to face the scarcity of fuels, which are one of the main inputs of industrial agriculture. In addition, the scarcity of accessible external agricultural inputs – such as chemical fertilizers – and the decreasing soil quality, are contradicted by the traditional, organic fertilizing methods that Marcos shared with me. Indeed, the use of organic local inputs for fertilization allows the Zapatistas to produce healthy food without depending on the (uncertain) provision of inputs from the State entities or big national and international corporations. In addition, these methods of fertilization also provide better harvest in quantity and quality, which promotes their food sovereignty. The preservation of native seeds, as it happens in the communities with the corn and bean varieties, is also deemed as essential. “40 years ago, we had a lot of wild plants. But this diversity has been destroyed by agrochemicals and the declining soil quality”, Marcos shared with me during a class. Thus, saving seeds mean saving their access to food, saving their autonomy in food production – but not only. The promotion of seed diversity – through preservation of seeds but also trials for organic breeding – is important for resisting to new plant pests and diseases, to climate change, to war, and to neoliberalism: “Before, we had never identified diseases in the corn and beans. Now, we have seen some diseases appearing in the corn. Climate change? Counterinsurgency? We do not know the cause. Maybe it is a mixture of causes. We can sense the destruction coming.”

The Zapatista fight, then, implies that people work collectively, united against the hegemonic rationale of industrial agriculture, through their reflections and actions, those that depart from a collective cosmivision, one that incorporates both Tzotzil-Zapatista views of the world – and Nature. Thus, it is not surprising that all the work that is done in the communities, municipalities, and *Caracoles*, is based on democracy, on decisions that are taken with the peoples organized in unity, just as the Nature itself is also structured. “The community cannot be divided, otherwise it becomes separate: their hands and feet, and then there is no more balance possible. This balance is only met by consensus”, Moisés told me once. He explained further that “the construction of a fight for dignity, like ours, is made based on observations: of Nature, especially. If you cut *her* hair, there is an imbalance, if you cut trees, there comes a huge imbalance! The same happens to humanity and in community life”.



After telling you the last stories – which implied for me to read them repeatedly – I realised that they have as much in common as human beings have with the other elements born from the same collective Mother, the Mother Earth, and with the land that sustains all of us. As the wise Elisa once told me, “El territorio tiene que ver con donde sembramos el maíz (...) donde están los bosques, los animales (...) son los pueblos” [“the territory has to do with where we sow the corn (...) where the woods, the animals are (...) it’s the peoples”].

Throughout the last stories, I introduced you to the most essential natural elements that illustrate the Zapatista-Tzotzil cosmivision in relation to Nature: the traditional crops, the land that supports them, the bees that allow for the perpetuation of diversity, the trees, and the human beings themselves. Throughout the last stories, I tried to depict the interconnectedness between these elements, as siblings that were conceived in the Mother Earth’s womb. From these stories – interconnected as the natural elements

themselves – one can better understand the Zapatista views and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, since they present clear examples of how the Tzotziles of the Highlands of Chiapas see Nature as part of themselves – and themselves as part of Nature. The corn is, at the same time, part of the human’s bodily constituency, and the crop that allows for their sustenance, their food sovereignty, thus autonomy. The land reminds them where they come from, their indigeneity, thus their own existence as peoples of continuous and revived resistance; but it also refreshes their minds with the Zapatista struggle for access to land and natural resources, the fight that has propelled their insurgence and, later, their project of autonomy. The bees represent an additional source of income, but they go beyond that: they are beings that inhabit among humans and have as much agency as the latter; bees represent hope in the continuity of the food diversity, in times where the rest of the world is engaging in technology for homogenizing the seed systems. The trees resemble the human condition, its fragility in a “system” where the efforts of States and big corporations are directed towards cutting their ties with the land that supports them, and with the pueblos that are spiritually connected with them; however, their condition is also one of strength, achieved both through the perception of the landscape as an essential part of the Tzotzil Zapatista identity, as well as through the sustainable practices that allow for the diversity of the same landscape.

These stories are real. And they are as real in the past as they are in the present times. The Tzotzil Zapatista cosmovision seems to be as alive as the new generation of fighters for dignity, since it is re-told and revived in the daily practices of the communities. The traditional, sustainable agricultural practices are still breathing, while new agroecological ones are flourishing from the creative fight of the ones who have seen their lands dispossessed, and their Mother Earth destroyed. And these stories are as real as dynamic, encompassing the rhythms of Nature, encompassing the Zapatista fight, that seems necessarily attached to the history and stories of the interconnectedness between human beings and Nature.

Chapter 4

Discussion

This discussion will shed light on the production of different epistemologies and ontologies in relation to Nature, that are possible both through distinct ways of thinking about and acting towards the natural environment.

For this reason, I will focus on the processes of subjectification, which recognize the importance of the struggles lived by the Zapatistas, as a collective identity, along with the creation of a collectivity that is united by specific values and interests, for the development of a unique ecological consciousness. I will argue that this process of subjectification was – and is - influenced by the structural issues lived commonly by the Zapatistas – the levers of Zapatismo. I will assert that the dominant discourse of the State and market entities, and its contrast to the Zapatista discourse, is also a feature that has shaped their collective subjectivities. In addition, I will discuss the shared Zapatista cosmovision (particularly in relation to Nature, natural resources, and the environment) as an essential characteristic for the existence of a collective identity – one that is marked also by the peoples' resistance and autonomy.

Therefore, I will start by discussing levers for Zapatismo, by describing how the Zapatista views and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the environment, have been informed by the damaging practices derived from neoliberal agricultural policies promoted by the Mexican and North American (from the USA and Canada), in strict collaboration with big corporations.

Furthermore, I will explain on how the discourse promoted by these entities was (and continues to be) a tool for marginalizing indigenous peoples in the rural context in Mexico. In addition, the discourse of the latter, which I will argue as a distinct, alternative one, influenced simultaneously by their Mayan descentance as well as by its resistance to the dominant one, is going to be discussed in relation to the latter. This will be important for arguing that the words one uses in their own discourse are essential for the creation of distinct realities, necessarily attached to different epistemologies and ontologies.

From here, I hope to show how the Zapatista-Tzotzil cosmovision, particularly in the ways they view Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, might be useful for re-defining the relationships between humans and non-humans, as

well as a tool for reconnecting to land, values that they have been promoting through a holistic thinking of Nature and its elements, rather than as metaphysical identities.

Moreover, I will focus on how this cosmovision is influenced by and promotes the rhythms of Nature, which is highly important for the Tzotzil Zapatistas in order to care for their natural environment – their home. From here, agricultural practices that follow these rhythms, implemented by their project of “The Other Production”, are going to be discussed in the light of literature about agroecology as a respectful and sustainable method for food production – and beyond.

This will be important not only for presenting practical agricultural alternatives that help them to produce food and to preserve the environment, but also for explaining the importance of the resilience and actualization of traditional, indigenous modes of production, that has served the Zapatista political fight. I will focus on their agroecological project as a both ecological and political project, which allows for their resistance against the hegemonic rationale and commodification of Nature, as well as for the autonomy of the social movement.

The levers for Zapatismo

The Zapatista movement is seen as an alternative one, developed in the face of a historical marginalization in Mexico, particularly in the State of Chiapas. Indeed, the indigenous peoples have suffered from land dispossession since pre-Hispanic times (Giraldo, 2019), when the first private lands were established, as corroborated by the *mestizo* teacher. In more recent times, this problem has not been solved; rather, it has increased, due to the implementation of neoliberal policies, promoted by the Mexican State together with North-American public and private interests. As the *mestizo* teacher explained, the fifties and the sixties represented a new wave of marginalization for the indigenous/rural peoples of Mexico, when the Green Revolution Project was implemented. This was a project that dreamt about modernizing the Mexican agriculture, with the “introduction of high-yield plant varieties, irrigation or controlled water supply, the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the massive use of agricultural machinery, as well as the “improvement” of genetics, nutrition, and animal health (Giraldo, 2019). This thesis helps to understand the particular practices that have been implemented in the context of Chiapas: the introduction of new corn and bean varieties, with the aim of achieving higher productivity – thus, for promoting the accumulation of capital -, as well

as the promotion of the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, were referred by the Tzotzil Zapatista peoples whenever the topic of the Green Revolution was touched.

Stories from both the *mestizo* teacher and the education promoters of Oventik reflect on this project as a threat to the corn varieties that have been cultivated since ancient times, adapted to their natural environment – and from which they have highly developed knowledge. They have also referred to the threats of this project to the quality of their soils, as well as to their existence as indigenous peoples. Indeed, the stories of Marcos refer the endangered state of the indigenous agricultural knowledge, particularly of the triad between corn, beans, and squash, as promoted by a production system based on the maximization of productivity and profit. From the times of colonization, until the period of the Green Revolution Project, the indigenous peoples of Mexico have seen their lands being dispossessed, both by the State and by private institutions. This not only meant that the indigenous peoples have lost their lands to powerful actors; they were obliged to see their lands being mistreated and manipulated in unrespectful ways towards Nature (Giraldo, 2019), in the name of productivity, capitalism, and progress - values that are not aligned with Mayan-derived indigenous peoples.

I shall point out that these values are not straightforwardly imported from the Mayan cosmovision of pre-Hispanic times. Indeed, the five hundred years of Spanish colonization have brought different struggles, especially in relation to land access and use, for the indigenous peoples in Chiapas; then, it is easy to understand that their cosmovision has not remained intact since Mayan times, but that has been actualized through these struggles, as well as through the ways of resistance that indigenous peoples have been created to fight them. Despite this cosmovision in relation to Nature, natural resources, and the environment being dynamic, the dialogue with the Zapatista Tzotzil people informed me that the Mayan values still weight immensely in their own cosmovision. Particularly, the interconnectedness between humans and non-humans as children of the Mother Earth, the holistic view on Nature, as well as the view of the land as something spiritual, more than physical, must be considered in the current Zapatista Tzotzil cosmovision.

Moreover, as the literature reviewed previously in the chapter 2 shows, the threat of the agriculture industrialization and modernization was accentuated with the NAFTA Agreement, which was perceived by the Zapatistas as a threat to their lands, their foods, and their own indigenous identities, attached to agriculture and land. Indeed, stories from Marcos speak the Zapatista views on this American project: despite promoting progress,

this project had destroyed traditional *milpas*, through the cultivation of modernized corn varieties, which sickened the soil and reduced the food availability.

Despite the latter event being considered the ultimate lever for the Zapatista uprising (Martel, 2019; Veltmeyer, 2000; Vergara-Camus, 2011), the education promoters tell a different story: it was rather the accumulation of years and years of land dispossession and overexploitation, from the times of Zapata until the late nineties, that created the political conjunction for the Zapatista movement. The stories do not distinguish between the Green Revolution Project or the more recent NAFTA Agreement; for those who would uprising in 1994, they were just two ingredients, without a hierarchical relationship, for the rebellion of some indigenous – and non-indigenous – peoples in Chiapas. Anyway, the first of January of 1994, when the Zapatistas decided to declare war against the army and its supreme, the president Carlos Salinas, represent a moment where the EZLN, those who have been preparing for the fight, since 1983 – or even before, with the mother organization, the FLN – screamed “enough!” – enough of marginalization, enough of a system that cares more about profit than the dignity of its peoples, enough of being forgotten.

The Zapatista identity appears to have been influenced by a collective disappointment with the agricultural policies, a general disagreement with the State’ projects; their political and ecological consciousness was born and shared from a historical struggle of indigenous peoples in Chiapas, who have seen their lands dispossessed, their waters and soils contaminated (Howard,1998; Martel, 2019), and their Mother Nature dying. For those, agriculture is not just an economic activity, as it has been thought as by the hegemonic rationale; for them, agriculture, and the land, represent their identity, their sovereignty, their dignity. Therefore, it appears that Nature can have extremely different (even opposite) meanings for different society actors, from States and corporations to indigenous and peasant communities, raised with their hands dirty by the soil and their minds connected to the land where they come from. From the stories shared before, especially regarding the different views of Nature, one can understand that the words used for relating to Nature matter, as they are an expression of the meanings people assign to it, creating specific realities; but also in the other direction: the meanings people assign to Nature, and the realities constructed through those, are influenced by different discourses around it, perpetuated by distinct actors (Giraldo, 2019).

Words matter

The Green Revolution Project, as well as the subsequent neoliberal policies that culminated in the signing of the NAFTA Agreement, were promoted in rural Mexico as the solution for the poverty in the country, since a modernized agriculture should allow for economic growth – thus development (Giraldo, 2019; Val & Rosset, 2022). It seems like this discourse has influenced the indigenous peoples of San Juan Chamula, as well as other indigenous and non-indigenous communities. At least since after the NAFTA Agreement was signed, they have been using modern varieties of corn and beans and have adopted technologies developed by big corporations and promoted by the North-American and Mexican States. Then, they were, at least to some extent, influenced by the dominant discourse and its promises of development, promoted by the developers that came to Mexico to industrialize the modes of production. In their minds, the State and the corporations cultivated the idea that this was the only valid way to achieve progress, and that progress was the only valid way of development. Giraldo (2019) explains the process by which the Americans promoted the dominant discourse within Mexico: they defined what was a “normal” production system, contrasting with the indigenous traditional agricultural systems, seen as an “abnormality”; then, the Americans would have their way free for controlling the “abnormal”. In this way, the dominant rationale becomes the one legitimate truth, the only scientific approach, contrasting with indigenous, “archaic” forms of knowledge. The Green Revolution Project as explained in the findings of this thesis corroborates this: part of the project was to colonize the space of knowledge, through the implementation of a knowledge system that was developed in North American Universities, and to extend it to rural spaces in Mexico, where the peoples had been preserving their traditional/indigenous knowledge for centuries. This project seems to have worked in the context of San Juan Chamula, where people have adapted modernized ways of agriculture, which are based on knowledge created by American academic institutions, but that are highly influenced by Western interests. In the end, they just wanted to pursue the American way of living, in which their so-called “inefficient” and of “low productivity” food systems do not fit (Giraldo, 2019; Val & Rosset, 2022).

Hence, the promotion of the dominant discourse – or others – is not innocuous: instead, it is highly political, attached to unequal power relations (Robbins, 2012), and can have implications on the legitimization of different knowledges, thus realities. This is easily recognized in the context of Chiapas, where the dominant discourse has entered

the mind of some indigenous peoples that have resisted to previous, different forms of colonization. The Chamulas, even though they have resisted to the Spanish Christian colonization, through the preservation of their Mayan rituals and spiritual celebrations, have been weaker in resisting to the new forms of colonialism, promoted by the neoliberal system. Now, they are (at least, in what can be perceived as an outsider) slaves of the PRI, that has held its headquarters next to the church; suddenly, the identity of the Chamulas is no longer that of the resisting Mayan-descendants, but that of those indigenous that trust in the State. This promotion of the dominant discourse would not be so harmful if it did not impose a “regime of truth”, if it did not colonize all the existent space for legitimate knowledge. However, it is so powerful that it excludes “all discourses and practices that are counterproductive to the regime of the truth of agricultural development” (Giraldo, 2019).

The different discourses are allowed by a specific language which, in turn, has the power to create and shape different realities, of creating different worlds (Giraldo, 2019). For example, the dominant discourse has created the concept of “natural resources”, which had no space within Mayan-derived cosmovisions. However, it is highly assumed as part of the present world, which has transformed agriculture into a business, the elements of Nature into commodities for profit generation. On that account, it does not seem rare that the term “natural resources” is not supported by the Zapatista Tzotzil communities: it does not fit into their reality, into their world, to whom the natural elements are not commodities, but equal entities with rights as the human beings.

The same is true for Nature: for the Tzotzil Zapatista communities, Nature is something holistic, something that connects all the elements that were born out of the same collective mother, and that are bound by a non-hierarchical relationship. This has, obviously, high influence on how the reality of Nature is constructed by those: it is something material, but it surpasses its physicality; it should be respected, since its elements are allowed by the Mother Earth, with a spiritual – and even sacred – significance. On the contrary, the reality produced by the hegemonic rationale is one where Nature is synonym of the environment that surrounds us, the external existence of physical elements. These, since are not connected with us by more than a physical, spatial relationship, are available for ownership, for exploitation by the human beings.

On the same line of thought, the reality of the land contrasts between what is called the dominant discourse and the Zapatista-Tzotzil discourse. On the one hand, for the landowners, who prioritize a modernized and industrialized agricultural approach, the

land means property, so it must be accumulated, and its use maximized; this is the view that they promote using their language, in which terms such as property, profit, owner, worker, and even slave, stand out. Then, the land fits into that reality of commodification and capitalization. On the other hand, the land in the Zapatista-Tzotzil discourse is attached to words such as home, life, subsistence, and people; the reality in the indigenous cosmovision is one where the land is the space that allows for a *pueblo* to exist, in community, but also the physical element that serves the ground for the various elements of Nature to stand together, to resist.

This relationship between humans and Nature as expressed by the indigenous peoples I had the pleasure to learn with are, then, formed through the Tzotzil cosmovision, expressed through the Tzotzil language. Indeed, when I was learning the language, I was able to understand their perspective on Nature, since their words are a tool for expressing their Tzotzil – and Zapatista – identity, and to describe the world as they see it. Indeed, Wittgenstein (1998), cited in Giraldo (2019), defends that “we are predisposed to think, perceive, and even to feel in a particular way, according to inherited imaginaries by belonging to a specific language community”. Giraldo (2019) adds that the language creates a bridge between the physical world we inhabit and the ways we tell it in our minds and to others. Thus, language allows one to share the reality(ies) it creates, attached to different cosmovisions. Marcos has told the story of the language as a mode of resistance, since it is the expression of their cosmovision, also in relation to Nature. Language is part of their identity, thus promoting its usage, in the face of the tentative of the State to erase it, is to resist to the State and its hegemonic rationale, to dignify themselves as indigenous communities. To save the Tzotzil language, is to save a cosmovision of the human and non-human deeply interconnected through the holism of Nature. Therefore, I argue that learning and embracing the Zapatista Tzotzil cosmovision can be a great tool for rethinking relationship between humans and Nature, and thus promote the preservation of the environment, by realizing that there are more possibilities to the world than the destructive system that the dominant discourse has been perpetuating.

Interconnectedness between humans and non-humans

The Green Revolution neoliberalist approach is an anthropocentric one, dominated by the Western epistemologies, colonized by the academic elite, together with

corporations and the North American and Mexican States (Giraldo, 2019). The author defends that the proliferation of this particular knowledge was a tool for controlling both human and non-human beings, especially regarding other natural elements. Indeed, the dominant rationale posits the human and the non-human in opposite poles: the first, as the rational, as the ones with the means to appropriate Nature for their own benefit; and the latter as objects to be appropriated and commodified, with the simple role of serving the first (Trujillo & Ramírez, 2010). Since the dominance of the Western approach on Nature and the environment follows the rules of progress, the owners of the knowledge try to proliferate it to its maximum extent; therefore, the (physical and mental) space belonging to the Zapatista-Tzotzil communities was no exception. Marcos helps us to understand the tentative of the capitalists to colonize also their cosmovision, when he refers that the “capitalism [...] arrives very strong in the communities”, threatening their cosmovision, thus their existence as beings with their own knowledge – and reality. However, as some authors (Giraldo, 2019; Giraldo, 2022, Trujillo & Ramírez, 2010) refer, the Mayan cosmovision is very powerful, as confirmed by the Tzotzil resistance to this intrusive discourse, at least in the Zapatista communities. This power is the one that enables the perpetuation of the Zapatista-Tzotzil cosmovision in the minds of those who, despite having migrated to the United States of America with the hope for finding a better life, they returned home, to the lands that raised them.

Giraldo (2019) highlights the “symbol of Mother Earth” as essential for this resistance, since it allows for a deep connection between humans and their natural environment. This is not a single feature of their cosmovision: it is the relationship that rules their lives, as peoples of the land, as indigenous peoples – and peasants. Following the work of Spinoza (2011), cited in Giraldo (2019), this is a rationale which is based on the fact that humanity and Nature are not separate, exclusive entities, but they are all part of the same body, named as Mother Earth by the Zapatista Tzotzil people.

Over the present work, the resistant cosmovision constitutes the body and the spirit of the stories told, transcribed, and translated. As this thesis shows, all the stories are stories of a vision of Nature as holistic, where humans and non-humans are interconnected. For example, from my experience in learning the Tzotzil language, I was able to understand that all the elements of Nature, because they were born out of the same collective Mother as the human beings, share the same characteristics – both physical (as illustrated by the sharing of the same body parts between humans and trees), and mental and spiritual (particularly the ‘o’on’ and the ‘ch’ulel’). For example, the trees and bees

are deemed as emotional and rational beings, gifted with the power of decision-making and self-reflection; they think and act like human beings, because they are no less than them. We also learn by the story of the corn, that it is powerful enough to determine which colours exist in the world, and to give existence to the first human being on Earth. Stories from both the education promoters and the *mestizo* teacher corroborate the importance of corn for the Mayan (Tzotzil) identity, as a sacred element of their life (Damián & Alberto, 2010; Obregón, 2003; Ruiz, 2016;), not as a commodity, as the dominant discourse tries to argue (Giraldo, 2019; Giraldo, 2022).

Then, it does not make sense to build a hierarchy between them: they are all life givers, then should be treated as such. The Tzotzil cosmovision believes that humans and other children of Mother Earth are deeply connected; they all belong to Mother Earth, not to humans; thus, they should not be property of any human being. Their cosmovision is one of respect for everything, one of democracy, ‘*ich’ ta muk’*’; one in which every all elements of Nature have their roles, which complement each other in order to assure a harmonic and holistic Nature.

This is, I believe, an argument that disables the discourse around land and the natural elements as objects, as simple “natural resources” out there, waiting to be exploited. As the education promoters teach, we are not supposed to exploit the Mother Earth, the same way we do not exploit our individual mother. I shall highlight the fact that this does not mean that the Zapatista peoples do not take resources from the Mother Earth; in fact, by the stories, we understand that the Earth is Mother because *she* cares for the human beings, by providing us with food and other resources. But this word, this idea of “resources” is substantially different from the term used in Western societies, where people try to extract the resources to their maximum, leading to the destruction of the planet. This can be read in the story of Marcos about his bees: they are used for his family’s subsistence, not to generate money; in exchange, he cares for the bees, because he acknowledges that their relationship must be reciprocal, based on mutual understanding and respect. This vision helps one to avoid exploitation of other beings, since humans and others enter a space where both benefit from the presence of each other, almost in a perfect symbiosis. In the view of the Zapatistas, people take what is necessary for their survival, so they do not destroy the Mother Earth. In their minds, relating to *her* in this careful, caring way, is the minimum they can do to thank their collective Mother for everything *she* provides them.

This thesis shows that the exploration of alternative cosmovisions in relation to Nature, natural resources, and the environment, can be useful for understanding the existence and the potential of different ways of looking at the relationship between humans and Nature – and the world itself. In addition, I believe that, in practice, embracing these alternative views and practices can help humans to think of Nature as something beyond a commodity, an ‘a’mtel’ that, despite seeming hard to succeed in places where the dominant discourse rules, is worth trying.

(Re-) connecting to the land

Another feature that distinguishes the Zapatista-Tzotzil discourse/cosmovision from the dominant rationale has to do with the land. For the latter, as mentioned before, land is a physical existence that has the potential to become a property, thus to enter the capitalist system. With the capitalization of land, comes what Giraldo (2019) denominates as “affective deterritorialization”. By practicing agriculture for the capitalist system, i.e., by using the land for producing commodities, the land is no longer thought as a place to where peoples belong, but as a physical entity that allows for profit generation. Then, the affective relationship that (particularly rural) people, in the past, used to have with their lands, becomes meaningless; land is no longer people’s home, also because most territories have become properties of “outsiders”, being private investors or the State, as happened during the recent Mexican agricultural history. I argue that this reality created by the promotion of the dominant rationale is quite dangerous for both land and its peoples, since it allows for Nature – and peoples - exploitation. Indeed, seeing land as something to grow commodities has led to a prioritization of productivity and profit accumulation, through the use of modified varieties, over the care for the land as a place that indigenous peoples consider home. In fact, by expanding the dominant rationale, the neoliberal agricultural policies adopted in Mexico disconnected indigenous peoples from their land. In the communities of San Juan Chamula, people generally no longer have an emotional attachment to their lands, since they entered the capitalist market, by moving to the tourism sector. As Elisa shared in one of the collective classes, people controlled by the Western way of thinking become “alienated” from their lands, since the hierarchical, capitalist thinking is powerful enough to break a relationship that has resisted for centuries (Giraldo, 2019); at least if the *pueblos* are not united enough, not politically and ecologically conscious enough, I believe.

My time in Oventik and the stories shared in this thesis seem to show that the consciousness in the political and the ecological spheres are essential in the Zapatista case, a social movement in which the peoples were able to keep their meaningful connection with their lands. The Zapatista's ontology teaches us that the land is not a physical entity separated from the peoples that inhabit there; indeed, the definition of 'balumil' includes both the space and its peoples, as well as their connection over history and the stories that they create together. Then, the land is part of their identity as peasants, as descendants of previous peasants that took care of the land, respectfully, so it could serve home – and collective identity – for the present and future generations. In this way, for the Zapatista Tzotziles, the land acquires a deep significance in their life: they are emotionally attached to their place, since the land provides them with their existence and dignity, in harmony with the Mother Earth. Through their sustainable and caring agricultural practices, the peoples are able to maintain their “affective and affecting relationship” with the land, “in which both the agricultural producer transforms the ecosystem and the producer is transformed by the land on which he/she toils” (Giraldo, 2019). This topic will be developed further in the discussion, where the thematic of agroecology is developed.

Additionally, the land becomes political (Giraldo, 2022): it enables their work *in* the communities and *for* the communities. The land serves the physical space for the cultivation of the traditional crops that allow for their subsistence, food sovereignty, and autonomy. However, this physical existence does not discard its sacred significance; the land was created by the Mother Earth to serve as support for *her* children, which are spiritually connected. Therefore, this view of the land helps to preserve the Zapatista-Tzotzil reality created through their cosmovision, which is an essential part of their identity.

That being the case, it appears that the rescue of a vision of the land as a more than physical entity, with which the human beings establish an emotional, spiritual, and political relationship with, and that, then, accounts for their existence, helps one to reconnect to the land. This thesis shows that this exercise could solve many issues regarding disrespectful and unsustainable agricultural practices that damage the land quality and diminish the overall Nature's health. Indeed, if one thinks of the land as something that is part of ourselves – and the us part of the land – it should be easier to understand that the land must be cared as part of the holistic Nature, and not as an entity that has the aim

of serving human beings - as if it was a separate non-spiritual identity, as the dominant metaphysical discourse wants (and forces) us to believe (Giraldo, 2019; Giraldo, 2022).

Beyond the metaphysical thinking

As one story of Elisa tells us, the Zapatista Tzotzil cosmovision is inspired by a rationale that believes in Nature as an entity that is holistic, thus its physical and spiritual properties cannot be separated into distinct categories, since they are deeply entangled. For the Zapatista communities, it is important to preserve this reality of Nature, since it allows for a more caring and respectful way of thinking and acting towards the Mother Earth and its elements – which are as physical as spiritual. Thus, for them, it is important to refer the metaphysical thinking not to focus on its potentialities, but to explain that it does not fit into their cosmovision around Nature, that this hard distinction between what is physical and what is beyond physical (the metaphysical) simply does not align with their views.

Just to be clear, I am not opposing the philosophy of metaphysics, of the study of being and its significance, developed by Plato before the Christian Era. Indeed, I have been using the concepts of ontology – the study of being, of existence, synonym of metaphysics - and epistemology – the study of knowledge(s) and their generation - over the discussion chapter, to refer to their role in defining different truths and realities. These have been useful for my work, on the analysis of different discourses and the possibility of “alternative worlds”, as the one created by the Zapatista-Tzotzil cosmovision.

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that has its necessity of existence for its distinguishing from the “physics”. Indeed, metaphysics studies the qualities and properties of the physical things, that are the object of the study of natural sciences, such as biology or mathematics. Thus, it assumes that a thing does not singly exist with any feature attached to it but is *thought to be* or *is* through its property(ies) (Silverman, 2003). In its pure, philosophical sense then, metaphysics does not seem to be harmful. Yet, the same appears to not be true when the metaphysical thinking is applied (Giraldo, 2019; Giraldo, 2022), including in the question of Nature.

When we use metaphysics to study the “things out there”, we are already assuming and creating a separation between us – human beings – and the rest of the world, as if the environment was a completely external, independent entity that allows for the existence of all the other things that we try to understand (Giraldo, 2019; Giraldo, 2022). Giraldo (2019) defends that “the meanings in which modern humans apprehend things are [...]

firmly rooted in the metaphysical understanding of the world”, which means that also Nature is understood, in the dominant rationale, as something exterior and disconnected from the human existence. This is a philosophy that has been strictly followed by the institutions who are invested in capitalizing the natural elements, since it legitimates their “planning, control, manipulation, and domination” over Nature, as it happened during the period of the Green Revolution in Mexico (Giraldo, 2019). When this is done, it seems quite understandable to defend a commodification of land, agriculture, “natural resources”, and the peasants’ work itself. Indeed, during that time, the corn started to be promoted as a commodity (contrary to the vision of this food as part of the Mayan and Mayan-descendant identities), which provided enough justification for the implementation of new modified varieties in Mexico.

The dominant system is responsible for creating a system of thinking that creates a dualism between the material and the spiritual features of Nature and prioritizes the first, creating the conditions for neglecting the latter – the metaphysical thinking. Giraldo (2019) adds to this by stating that “the valorization of capital rests on [...] a rupture that decouples a certain affective relationship that ties rural producers to one another and also ties them to the land”, so Nature can be capitalized, and the farmers introduced into a system of competition in between themselves. Indeed, if one disregards the spiritual significance of Nature – and Mother Earth – there is no room for emotional connection between indigenous peoples, which identity used to be tied to the land, as well as between those and the land, that became just another material, detached existence.

However, the Zapatistas can move beyond the metaphysical thinking of Nature, since they have evolved from the “cracks” of the system (Holloway, 2002) that oppressed them; indeed, they were able to resist to this hegemonic rationale because they have been creative in their fight, in moving away from the ways of living that the dominant system tried to impose them. Indeed, from those cracks, they have created an autonomous system that allows for the preservation of their holistic view on Nature, which otherwise would be surpassed by the power of the dominant, metaphysical thinking. As the Zapatista Tzotziles remember us in some of these stories, the material and the spiritual are not perceived as separate entities. For them, the Mother Earth is material, with *her* body and the ones of her children; however, as every element of Nature is sacred and spiritual, as the human beings themselves, so it is their collective Mother, who entangles them. This vision helps one to avoid the oblivion of the spirituality of Nature, which is essential for understanding *her* as an entity of mutual respect and care. As Heidegger (1994), cited in

Omar (2019), states, “There are no humans and space”, but they share a holistic existence, which depends on their interconnectedness.

As the Zapatistas themselves, I argue that it is easy to think about a world where Nature is not perceived as an external entity to be controlled by human beings, rationale that has led to an increasing environmental – after epistemological and ontological – destruction. In the end, the hegemonic rationale and the metaphysical approach is just one “particular way of looking to the future” (Giraldo, 2019), thus opening the possibility of other cosmovisions and ways of living, especially based on more caring ways of relating to Nature.

To achieve this sustainable relationship, one must respect Nature in its totality, without trying to manipulate its rhythms and temporalities, as the industrial agriculture as tried to do by altering the cycles of crops’ production. Because this is of major importance and has been referred in the stories presented in this thesis, this topic will be discussed below.

Reclaiming the rhythms of Nature

Through the stories presented in this work, one is able to understand that following the temporalities and the rhythms of Nature is part of the Zapatista Tzotzil cosmovision. Both Elisa and Marcos have referred the importance of respecting the times imposed by Nature for preserving it: it allows for the maintenance of their food systems and contributes to their food sovereignty, since the use of traditional crops with natural cycles adapted to their own environmental context – and the lands in the Highlands of Chiapas – almost guarantees the safety of the year’s production. In addition, because the Moon helps to decide the timeline of the agricultural practices in the *milpa*, using varieties that follow the will of the Mother Earth helps them to know when it is the best time for sowing and harvesting. Marcos refers another advantage of following Nature’s temporalities: it helps one to avoid the use of chemical fertilizers, as well as pesticides, since the plants are kept in harmony with the soil, which health is maintained, and with the pests that could damage the crops if their natural cycle was to be disrupted. This will be discussed further in this chapter when the topic of agroecology is introduced.

The rhythms of Nature are, then, cyclical ones, which follow the different seasons (in the Highlands of Chiapas, the *cha-ukutik*’ and the *k’inabalkutik*) in which the crops develop through their natural cycle, without being externally manipulated by humans. Giraldo (2019) has also written about the Nature’s rhythms: they are cyclical and

harmoniously paced. These rhythms that highly contrasts with the ones promoted by the dominant rationale: linear and fleeting– the rhythms of progress. Then, the focus of the producers or other people involved in neoliberal agriculture systems, shifts from the entire timeframe of the crops to their final objective: the production. By capitalizing agriculture, the relationship between humans and their production is no longer holistic and harmonic, but selfish; humans and Nature are no longer bound by emotional connection, but by a materialistic one, where Nature has the objective to serve capital accumulation (Giraldo, 2019; Giraldo, 2022).

Trujillo & Ramírez (2010) wisely write that “the cycles of Nature’s reproduction are not as fast as the cycle of the capital rotation”. Therefore, it is easy to understand that Nature and capitalism are not naturally compatible; to function together, Nature has been altered to follow the rhythms and the temporalities of progress. Even though the technology in agriculture has been advancing extremely rapidly, it is never as suitable for the natural environment as the traditional practices, which follow the Nature’s rhythms and temporalities. In the light of this fact, the concerns of Elisa and Marcos, as well as the other members of the Zapatista communities, are understandable: defying Nature’s will can pose threats to its sustainability, thus, to our own sustainability as part of Nature. Giraldo (2019) adds that “through [...] empirical – learning, these peoples [indigenous peoples and peasants from Latin America] have understood that if natural cycles are transgressed, or if intervention is inappropriate at the wrong time, a decoupling of human activity and biological processes will ensue, preventing the material reproduction of [...] community”. Indeed, following Nature’s rhythms and temporalities has enabled not only the food autonomy of the Zapatista *pueblos*, but also their autonomy in general, thus their political fight.

This thesis shows that the Zapatista collective identity is highly marked by a holistic vision of Nature, where all its elements – human and non-human are interconnected. For them, care and respect are core values for this relationship, which can be achieved by respecting the roles of each complementary natural element, as well as by following the Nature’s rhythms. Then, I argue that the Zapatistas’ identity in relation to Nature is marked by these instinct ways of looking at Nature, that were inspired both by the visible, negative impacts of the hegemonic rationale, as well as by their indigenous cosmovision.

The stories of the Zapatistas and their way of thinking about the world – and Nature – facilitate our understanding of the possibility of alternative views in relation to

the ones that are being promoted by the major world institutions, whether they are public – such as the States – or private – corporations and, especially, universities. However, these lessons go beyond the acknowledgment of the existence of different, valid epistemologies; this thesis show us that, by using different processes of knowing the world (and Nature), we can also act in distinct ways from the ones that have been destroying our living environment. This is going to be discussed below, with the introduction of the topic of agroecology.

Towards emancipatory agroecologies

Val & Rosset (2022) defend that agroecology should be necessarily “indigenous, autonomous, transformative, emancipatory and revolutionary”, based on indigenous/peasant knowledge and practices. The agroecological project promoted by the Zapatistas fits into this description, since its aims to achieve a true revolution, that allows “the reconstruction of a social tissue” (Val & Rosset, 2022), where the indigenous peoples reclaim the power of their production systems. These must culminate in the promotion of their food sovereignty and autonomy, in harmony with the sustainability of Nature – and respect for the Mother Earth.

This type of emancipatory agroecology is substantially different from the one that has been promoted, in recent years, by public institutions – such as the States, especially those belonging to the European Union and North America, as well as corporations and academic contexts that, in collaboration, have been discussing the benefits of this mode of production. Giraldo (2019) refers to the later agroecology as the “new phase of the Green Revolution”, since it has been framed into the neoliberal rationale, as an alternative method for capitalizing on agriculture. This type of agroecology is not intended to defy the current state of the agricultural system, as the emancipatory agroecologies; rather, it aims for the agroecological production to be included in an industrialized sector, disregarding the politics of agroecology, historically attached to a social movement of emancipation and autonomy of peasant and indigenous communities all around the world. Therefore, instead of leveraging the emancipation of rural peoples, this dominant approach to agroecology keeps them trapped into the dominant system, by trying to engulf them in the (global) market dynamics (Giraldo, 2019).

Despite of the work cited has been recommended by the Zapatistas I have had the opportunity to dialogue with, for the present discussion it is more important to focus on the alternative project created by the Zapatistas, based on their epistemologies and

ontologies, which has the intention to build resilient systems of food sovereignty and autonomy for those indigenous peoples of Chiapas, rather than in its comparison with the one promoted by the dominant discourse around agroecology.

“The Other Production” as an emancipatory agroecology

Val & Rosset (2022) defend that emancipatory agroecologies offer us a “new ecological paradigm”, where indigenous knowledge is saved from falling into forgetfulness, as it has been happening since the Green Revolution period. In the case of the Zapatistas communities, “The Other Production” is this new, different project, based their own “Agrarian Development Plan”: the indigenous knowledge is being transmitted through the creation of the agroecological schools, in which agroecological promoters share their insights to all the other Zapatistas who participate in collective workshops. In this way, people are enabled to produce their own organic food, in respectful ways towards Nature, detaching themselves to destructive agricultural systems – and markets.

The case presented on this thesis matches the requirements that Giraldo (2019; 2022) and Val & Rosset (2022) defend for an emancipatory type of agroecology.

Firstly, it is an indigenous-based agricultural system, which relies on the implementation of polyculture. Indeed, the fields of the Highlands of Chiapas are characterized by the cultivation of the “three sisters” – corn, beans, and squash – in a harmonic symbiosis, in the same land parcel, opposing to the threats that the “import of agricultural monoculture and the extensive grazing” have brought to their lands (Damián & Alberto, 2010). This is a system that draws back to pre-Hispanic – and colonization – times, when the pillar crops were the same. Back in those days, as well as in the present, the triad serves them food but also protection of the land, since the use of traditional varieties is adapted to the environmental and soil conditions of the Highlands of Chiapas.

This is another feature that composes the emancipatory agroecologies: that they respect the local natural environment where the foods are grown. For instance, despite the project of “The Other Production” being general for all the Zapatista communities, the food produced in each collective land serves the needs of local people, at the municipal level. The food produced varies from municipality to municipality, since the agricultural practised and the food grown depend on the soil and climate characteristics of each of them. In the case of the Highlands of Chiapas, the location where the fieldwork for this thesis was conducted, the triad is the main source of food, since the corn, beans, and squash are the crops most adapted to the colder climate and the poor-quality lands,

harder to cultivate. In contrast, the Lowlands of Chiapas, in which the climate is more temperate and the soils more fertile, other crops, such as coffee, are considered essential for their food sovereignty, because they are adapted to their natural conditions. Despite people have been trying to grow coffee in Oventik, it is just because the new climate conditions seem to be propitious for the crop, thus it does not undermine the statement that everything that is cultivated respects the conditions of each locality. The story of the moon, which has the capacity to define the times of sowing, pruning, and harvesting, also tells us that the traditional agricultural systems, are the only possible ones to be in harmony with the Mother Earth. Then, the Zapatistas teach us that the natural, what is adapted to the ecosystems of the Highlands of Chiapas, is what enables the perpetuation of a healthy environment, as well as a respectful and mutual relationship with Nature.

Secondly, despite being based on the rescue of traditional practices, the emancipatory agroecologies give space for creativity, always aligned with the peoples' cosmovisions. Thus, there is room for innovation, as long as it is in line with the temporalities and rhythms of Nature, so it does not disrespect it. Then, the incorporation of new practices, some of them recurring to (low) technology, deriving from collective experiments, is possible (Giraldo, 2019). For instance, the organic breeding promoted by Marcos in his plots, is allowed by crosses between traditional corn and bean varieties that his grandfather used to cultivate; thus, it makes use of traditional varieties, while experimenting new crossings for better quality and quantity of production. The proliferation of this knowledge is, afterwards, enabled through the workshops given by the agroecological promoters in every municipality bounded by each Zapatista *Caracol*, so its implementation is facilitated.

The incorporation of technology and innovations in agroecology must, however, be careful: it cannot follow the linear paths imposed by progress, materialized through the imposition of chemical fertilization and pesticides, as well as modified varieties' seeds, which do not self-pollinate. Indeed, these do not allow the perpetuation of a healthy natural environment and production system. Through the stories of Marcos, we understand that preserving the traditional seeds is essential for allowing the maintenance of diversity; in the case of the corn, these varieties are capable of self-pollination, thus promote their subsistence, as well as their independence in relation to external inputs – being fertilizers or seeds sold by big corporations. Apart from being creative in the promoting crops' diversity, Marcos' stories also tell us about the potentiality of innovation in organic fertilization methods. In addition to the 'lok osil', 'sok', and

'k'aepal', which have been used traditionally by Mayan and Mayan-descendant indigenous peoples, the Zapatistas have been trying with non-chemical fumigation, which promotes the soil's health without disrupting Nature's cyclical temporalities.

Actualizing indigenous practices, while keeping others intact, in the same production system, seems to help the Zapatistas to promote their food sovereignty. Indeed, preserving their traditional seeds and the genetic diversity of their crops is extremely important for their autonomy, as well as for their resistance against the modernization and capitalization of agriculture. Consequently, the project of "The Other Production", which fits into the concept of "emancipatory agroecologies", is more than a project of merely food production; it is a political project, where resistance and autonomy are encouraged by fostering diverse land plots, which promote the soil's and overall Nature's health, in a respectful relationship with the Mother Earth. More than allowing for the maintenance of traditional, indigenous knowledge, the agroecology practised among Zapatista communities enables more respectful views and practices towards Nature, as well as a more sustainable life in community. Like the wise Esther said, the Zapatistas put their heart in everything they do, as it is true also to produce food; more than creating a different agricultural project, the Zapatistas aim for creating a different world, through collective work, one that comes deep from their hearts.

These insights show that the ways in which Zapatistas produce their food are very unique in relation to the dominant agricultural system. Indeed, they have created their own agroecological project, that has in its core the indigenous cosmovision of caring for and respecting Nature. Then, these practices are also distinct because they aim to move forward the simple production of food; they can strengthen the connection of the peoples to their lands, as well as materialize the different epistemologies and ontologies that compose the Zapatista collective subject in relation to Nature; finally, "The Other Production" is meant to produce and maintain the Zapatista political fight, as much as it is meant to produce food.

The politics of agroecology: from resistance to autonomy

As mentioned before, the agroecology project of the Zapatista communities is important because it helps them to produce food without depending on a system that has colonized both Nature and the indigenous peoples that have a spiritual interconnectedness with the natural environment. In fact, this emancipatory type of agroecology is not only a passive response to the contrasting industrialized agriculture; it is a method that has

enabled the production against the State and corporations' interests, thus it is a method of resistance against the dominant system – and rationale (Giraldo, 2019; Giraldo, 2022). As defended by Val & Rosset (2022), agroecology goes beyond its productive feature: it is a “framing”, so inherently political, since it legitimates certain epistemologies; and it is also a way of being and living, since it produces specific ontologies.

Agroecology in the Zapatista context allows them to resist to the capitalization of what is called “natural resources”, as well as to the use of degrading technologies and polluting agrochemicals, by putting the respect for Mother Earth above the capital accumulation, the collective higher than the individual; this is the only way of acting towards Nature that makes sense to people who identify as Zapatistas. This is because agroecology, even if it was not referred to as such, has been practised by them for generations, so it has the power to promote “cultural resiliency as the capacity to preserve its identity from external perturbations”, this case those levered by corporate and statist interests, which have been marginalizing indigenous peoples in Mexico. This resistance, then, goes beyond the fight against the perturbation of Nature and the simply physical relationships humans established to it; practising agroecology allows the indigenous peoples to lead their own production systems, through their ways of perceiving and acting towards the world, independent from the Western hegemonic rational and neoliberalism (Leff, 2021). In the specific case of the Zapatistas, “The Other Production” is a project that enables their rights of existence and dignity as indigenous peoples from Chiapas, those that have been historically denied by the Mexican State. This resistance is also towards the “colonization of knowledge”, since their fight is promoted by an agroecology that has its roots in indigenous, traditional practices, creating a (more-than-physical) space where the dominant discourse has little meaning for the peoples. Indeed, Giraldo (2019) defends that, among these spaces, the hegemonic rationale “has not yet succeeded in standardizing and matching the various ways in which people understand and explain the reality”. However, it is worth noting that the Zapatistas themselves have acknowledged that capitalism resides inside them, that they cannot fully detach from the rest of the world; in the end, they live within the same dominant system. In any case, little by little, through their collective work, including in the food production, they appear to allow for the diversity of epistemologies and ontologies, matching the diversity of the agriculture practised; and, despite of differences among peoples and lands, all of them are united in the same project of resistance.

Nevertheless, this thesis shows that the Zapatistas and their political project cannot be only framed by means of resistance. The political project of Zapatismo goes beyond the antagonism between an alternative system and the dominant one (Giraldo, 2019; Giraldo, 2022; Val & Rosset, 2022); the resistance itself is creative, in the sense that it creates space for “auto affirmation” of the peoples as indigenous, Zapatistas, with their own ways of thinking and living (Trujillo & Ramírez, 2010), so opens space for their autonomy. The agroecological processes seem to enable the fight against the predominant capitalist, neoliberal logic of the Western societies by the strengthening of the Zapatista peoples’ collective thinking and living, through previous recovery of the lands to which they are attached to. The political history of the social movement sheds light on the importance of the shift in its political (and ecological) project: despite having begun as a group derived from a Marxist-oriented rationale, the Zapatistas evolved as a movement that does not aim to take the state power, but to build their dignity from below (Holloway, 2002; Oikonomakis, 2019). Their project is now one that believes in a true revolution from the indigenous, rural communities, one based on their project of autonomy (Giraldo, 2019), different from other political projects of Latin America, as well as from other indigenous ones. Even though they started by rising up in arms, their ultimate project is the one where arms are not necessary; it is one based on the indigenous, civil aims, to which the agroecological project accounts immensely, since it promotes their fight as an autonomous community. Then, I argue that the Zapatista political project enables their agroecological one, and vice-versa.

In this sense, the agroecology of “The Other Production” is emancipatory, a “political answer for creating autonomy”, since it promotes the share of indigenous knowledge, with the collective rescue of traditional seeds and organic fertilization processes (Giraldo, 2022), as well as the creativity to adapt them to the environment’s changing conditions (Giraldo, 2019). For example, their new organic breeding practices helps them to produce plants that are adapted to their context, while attending to threats such as diseases, climate change, fuels’ scarcity, war, and even neoliberalism. These practices, by enabling their autonomy, help the Zapatistas to prevent food scarcity in a world in which the food production and provision are threatened.

Moreover, “the agroecology is also a fight for recovering the independence from heteronormative instances, and from the political, industrial and economic systems” that are aliens to the indigenous communities (Giraldo, 2022); in the Zapatista case, the agroecology is a reflexion of their views on Nature, which respect their conditions of

existence as indigenous peoples. In this way, the value of Nature is “resignified” (Leff, 2021), because it gives inspiration for the political fight of the Zapatistas. Moisés talks about this relationship as a unidirectional inspiration – where Nature inspires the organization and fight within the Zapatista movement. However, the project of autonomy that the Zapatistas have been promoting for more than twenty years now, also seems to inspire the ways in which they interact with Nature, through their agricultural practices. For instance, the agroecology that is practised in Zapatista lands is highly inspired by the 7 principles that rule the democratic organization of the movement- the 7 Principles of “Mandar Obedeciendo” [“Governing by Obeying”] (Val & Rosset, 2022), which I learnt in Tztozil:

1. Yalel no'ox ma'uk sujel ta ch'unel [To propose and not to impose]
2. Melstsanel ma'uk jinesel/sokosel [To construct and not to destruct]
3. Yalel ma'uk muyel [To go down and not to go up]
4. (X)Ch'unel mantal ma'uk yak'el mantal [To obey and not to command]
5. Yich'el no'ox lo'il ma'uk sjelel lo'il [To represent and not to supplant]
6. Yak'el ta tunel/tunesel ma'uk ts tunestuk [To serve and not to be served]
7. Yalbe-el smelolal ma'uk yak'el ta ch'unel [To convince and not to win]

These (in green) resemble with the “basic principles of emancipatory agroecologies” (in yellow), adapted by Val & Rosset (2022) from Giraldo & Rosset (2021):

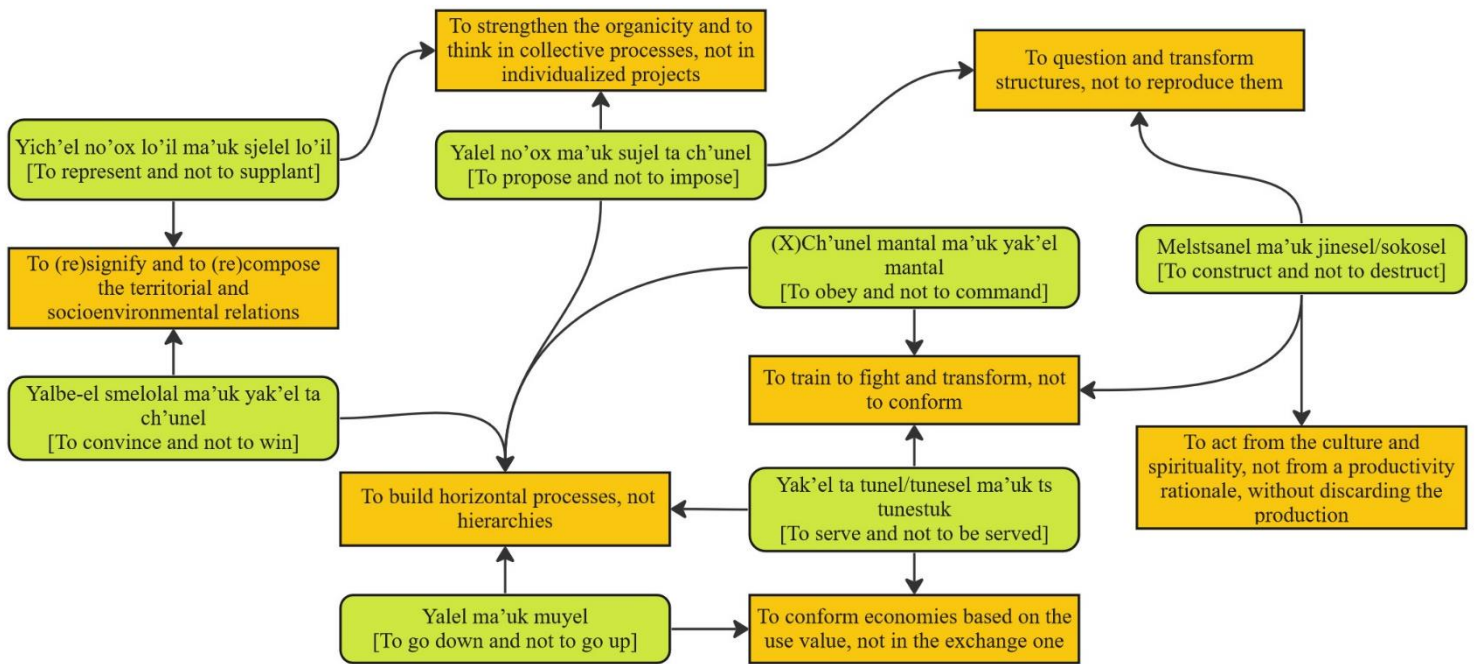


Figure 6: Schematic representation of the connections between the “7 Principles of Governing by Obeying” and the basic principles of emancipatory agroecologies” (Giraldo & Rosset, 2021)

Apart from the independence from external outputs, the promotion of autonomy through agroecological practices supports their resistance against the non-democratic, hegemonic knowledge and dominant views on Nature, which have boosted her destruction. Agroecology “rescues, resignifies and recovers the agriculture for the peoples as a way of production and living” (Val & Rosset, 2022). For the Zapatistas, this means to produce food collectively, in a balanced and sustainable relationship with the Mother Earth and all the beings that co-habit in our planet. Agroecology is then chosen as the system that perfectly promotes the harmony between different beings of Nature and within and between Zapatista communities, since it defies the existence of hierarchical relationships between the elements born from the Mother Earth. Agroecology helps them to detach from destructive rationales, to think differently, to act differently, to be differently.

This thesis shows that, for the Zapatista Tzotzil communities, practising an agriculture that is aligned with their Tzotzil cosmovision and Zapatista political project is a way of,

simultaneously, “reviving ancient identities” and creating a space where “new collective identities emerge” (Giraldo, 2019). The process of subjectification that allows for the creation of a new collective identity will be, thus, the next topic of discussion.

The subjectification of the Zapatistas

This thesis has shown that the Zapatistas, as peoples embedded in a particular social, political, and ecological context, have a set of features – particularly ideals, worldviews, ways of living and shared experiences (Della Porta & Diani, 2006) that unite them.

Truly, the stories present in this work show the cosmovisions of those who share the same physical space – in the *Caracol* of Oventik, in the poor lands of the Highlands of Chiapas – but also the same spiritual one – almost in perfect harmony with Nature, provided by a deep connection with the Mother Earth. The Zapatistas are bounded by the political aim of creating a world where many worlds fit, where different epistemologies and ontologies, as well as ways of living (Giraldo, 2019), if respectful and caring towards the Mother Earth, can co-exist. These are a group of people who share a particular reality, that is both different from other social and revolutionary movements, as well from other indigenous communities. But how has this reality developed?

Giraldo (2019) defends that, for a collective identity to be generated, two ingredients are necessary: “structural tensions” and the “emergence of a collective actor that defines itself and its adversaries on the basis of certain values/interests”. In the context of the present study, the tensions exist between the agricultural and land policies promoted by the Mexican State (aggravated with the Green Revolution and the NAFTA Agreement) and the more caring and respectful agricultural systems towards Nature and the peoples of the land – the indigenous peoples. Then, the Zapatistas appear as this collective actor that has emerged from those tensions, who have a shared cosmovision in relation to Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment. Indeed, the Zapatista Tzotziles appear to be defined by a caring agricultural system, contrarily to their adversaries – the public and private institutions which promote a neoliberal, dominant discourse -, who engage in a more exploitative agricultural system.

However, this is not enough; the two of them must interact, so one can be differentiated by their characteristics (Della Porta & Diani, 2006), including in their political and ecological rationale. This thesis has shown that the Zapatistas as they are

known nowadays are a product of this process of subjectification, which resonates with the realm of the political ecology (Leff, 2021).

On the one hand, the Zapatistas share common struggles that have accompanied them through the entire social movement's history. Indeed, since their formation until the present day, they have been facing threats posed by public and private institutions who have worked for capitalizing agriculture. From the dispossession of lands even after the Mexican Revolution in 1910, passing through the Green Revolution period, until the implementation of the most recent neoliberal policies (Byrsk, 2007; Martel, 2019; Veltmeyer, 2000; Vergara-Camus, 2011), the Zapatistas have been trying to fight these struggles, through first, an armed fight and, presently, the construction of their autonomy.

On the other hand, also as a consequence of the marginalizing events described above, the Zapatistas have been defined (by themselves and others) as very different actors from their adversaries. The Zapatistas are influenced by revolutionary figures such as Che Guevarra and Emiliano Zapata, thus have been inspired by them in what concerns their fight for their lands' rights and the reclaiming of their indigenous and peasant identities. On top of that, they are deeply influenced by their Mayan-descendance, since they have been able to preserve and revive their indigenous Tzotzil cosmovision, especially in topics related to Nature and their spiritual connection with the Mother Earth. From both these guides, the Zapatistas have been cultivating the values of reciprocity and respect towards Nature and the other members of the community, as well as the direct, radical democracy that allows them to have a sustainable life in community – and a sustainable environment where to live. These characteristics distinguish them from their adversaries, since these are far from being fully democratic, or even respectful towards peasants and indigenous peoples' existence; their only interest is to fit agriculture into the market dynamics, while the Zapatistas keep insisting in an agroecological project for their subsistence and fight. Leff (2021) argues that “political strategies confront one another in their valuation of Nature, shaping its meaning and guiding social action in the perspectives of a sustainable future”. For the Zapatistas, a sustainable future is one where human beings live in harmony with the other beings and non-beings of Nature, their siblings born out of the same collective mother.

The interaction between these two factors has made that the Zapatistas have become a collective actor which seeks for their own autonomy, based on the values of indigenous communities, as well as other revolutionary figures from the Left, which fought against the same struggles, marginalization, and oppression, in other times and geographies. By

looking at them, while keeping in their memories the marginalizing conditions in which they lived before their autonomy project was concretized, the Zapatistas have built a strong political (Holloway, 2002; Oikonomakis, 2019) and ecological consciousness, that inspires their political and agroecological projects – which highly overlap.

The subjectification, as I have indicated previously, is a process; thus, despite one can consider the Zapatistas as a movement with a particular collective identity, this does not mean that it is static; in fact, the process of subjectification is quite dynamic (Giraldo, 2019; Lundström, 2017), so as the Zapatista collective identity. Thus, the Zapatista case helps one to question the assumption that the “emancipatory agroecology has converted itself in a powerful tool for promoting the recovery of identities, including the indigenous ones” (Val & Rosset, 2022). If agroecology was straightforwardly connected to the recovery of traditional identities, their cosmovision and practices would have not changed, at least significantly, to distinguish between the Zapatista consciousness from that one of their indigenous ancestors. Rather, as the stories present in this thesis seem to prove, the Zapatista identity is the opposite from static; their views on Nature and their agroecological practices are highly dynamic and, despite being influenced by historical figures and Mayan cosmovisions, they were actualized. In a world that is far from static, if we account for the dynamic rhythms and temporalities of Nature, it would be misleading to see the Zapatistas as the indigenous communities from the past, or as the figures of the previous armed fight of the EZLN. If the political project of the Zapatistas has been actualized since 1983 until the present days, so it as their ecological project, since they are deeply connected. Therefore, I believe that the project of subjectification described above must account for more than what the political ecology has to say; it must include the creativity of those who are building their autonomy in Chiapas, highlighting the role of agency for the formation of new (collective) subjects, despite the struggles or the cosmovisions they share.

This creativity is essential for the continuity of the process of subjectification, enabled by their daily life activities. For example, the fact that the children receive an autonomous education, based on both indigenous and Zapatista values, helps them to learn about the past struggle, as well as about how they should pursue with their fight. In addition, the teaching primary languages are the indigenous ones (the Tzotzil, in the case of the autonomous school of Oventik), promoting the preservation of the language, as well as the cosmovision that it carries. The Tzotzil classes that I took in Oventik serve this purpose: Marcos was taking notes about the topics we were discussing during the

classes, based on what we were mutually learning; in the end, he had written what his parents passed him orally: the grammar, but also the meanings and nuances of the Tzotzil language, so that he can save and pass them to the next generations.

In addition, the Zapatistas are keeping track of the stories that have been passed orally, so the younger generations can learn about their ancestors and the present struggles; in this sense, the Zapatista subjects are dynamic and continuous, actualizing themselves through the learnings that arise in their own, or other geographies. This is illustrated by the story about the feminization of “Mother Earth”, in which Marcos shared that they have been collectively reflecting on the new struggles that they learn from Europe, regarding the issues of gendering Nature.

By working at the *milpa*, playing basketball in the break times, or by cooking together, the kids present in Oventik are also enacting the narratives of the Zapatista life (Giraldo, 2022), since they are constructing their autonomy in each of those activities.

This continuous subjectification is also supported by the physical spaces in Oventik. The figures of Che, Zapata, and the *Comandanta* Ramona, present in the beautiful and inspirational murals of the different auditoriums and *tiendas* [stores] help to inspire and to actualize the Zapatista fight, to perpetuate the creation of subjects that align themselves with the Zapatista ideals, influenced by the mentioned revolutionary figures. Because the murals also depict the history of agriculture and land, which accessibility and control has been their major struggle - and, now, their main hope for autonomy - the Zapatistas are able to keep their identity alive.

Marcos has explained better the continuous and dynamic Nature of the process of subjectification within the Zapatista movement: “like the rain, the movement can get cold, but also refreshed with new insights, new fights”.

Additionally, if we would simply take the general approach of political ecology on the realm of the research on the Zapatistas, much probably it will be hard to explain, as mentioned before, the unique Nature and continuity of the movement. The insightful text of Leff (2021) offers an explanation on traditional indigenous agriculture and its potentialities for alternative modes of sustainable management of Nature and resources; nevertheless, it does not explain the productive practices of the Zapatistas as a mean of an ongoing resistance – and autonomy. Although one cannot discard the indigenous influence on their views and practices towards Nature, it is important to explore their ecological consciousness uniquely developed. Moving beyond political ecology and giving more space to the agency of the peoples who engaged in the social movement,

finding new ways of fighting, cultivating their lands, and building their autonomy, is essential.

In any case, the Zapatistas seem to have born from a collective subjectification process: they have lived and continue to live common struggles and they share and actualize the same views and ways of living, including in relation to Nature, and both are interconnected. Indeed, they have been able to resist to the hegemonic rationale and the dominant approaches to agriculture, which is increasingly modernized and industrialized. Their cosmovision in relation to Nature – and, particularly, to the Mother Earth - has helped them to detach from discourses that aim to objectify and commodify Nature and its elements, since they prioritize values such as respect, care, and democracy, over profit accumulation and progress. “The Other Production” is a clear example of an alternative production method, that has an emancipatory role, while it enables the Zapatistas to sustain themselves in a way that does not harm the environment, Nature, and the Mother Earth. Therefore, I believe that this case is a great example of a movement that has born out in the margins, and that has chosen to live in the margins of the dominant system; indeed, the stories of the Zapatistas seem to help one to understand that many epistemologies and ontologies are possible, many worlds are possible; they are just not looked at, listened to, embraced, because they do not fit the values and interests of the Western contexts. However, that should never be an excuse for rejecting them, for claiming for a universal truth, especially one that has been destroying our planet.

Therefore, the Zapatistas tell us that there is potential to change dominant narratives and structures, not only in relation to agriculture and Nature, but in all the political, economic, social, and ecological spheres. Their alternative views on and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, then, appear to be an essential tool for building “a world where all worlds fit”, in a world that appears to be ending soon. Although Leff (2021) defends that “the local level is where cultural identities are forged and expressed through the social valuation of economic resources and as strategies for reappropriation of Nature”, and I agree, I also believe that this and other local ecological movements can be disseminated, thus inspire other geographies all around the world (Giraldo, 2022). Therefore, the Zapatistas give us hope in the possibility of being creative even in Western contexts, including in academia. In the latter space, I hope that these stories as well as others from distant places can encourage researchers to engage with the world that they study in a more affective, caring way, instead of simply submitting to the dominant knowledge, that avoids the spiritual

and the emotional through the prioritization of a simplistic metaphysical rationale. Finally, I believe that these alternative views and practices can help one to figure out solutions for an increasingly sick Nature, as well as human relationships. This is not a romanticizing approach to alternative social movements, since they are, and I hope these stories have taught you, extremely legitimate and inspirational.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis was aimed at understanding how the Zapatistas have developed, and continue developing new environmental subjects. For achieving this aim, I looked at: (1) the views of the Zapatistas towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, as well as (2) their practices in relation to these domains, which composed my two first sub-research questions. In addition, I tried to understand (3) the processes that led to the Zapatistas' sharing of those same views and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, correspondent to my third sub-research question. These sub-research questions are essential for answering the main one since, as I explained previously in the Chapter 2, a new (collective) ecological subject can be defined by a group of people – and most of the cases, a social movement - that think of and act towards Nature and the natural environment in a particular way, distinct from the dominant one. Then, the two first sub-research questions were important for guiding the search for the Zapatistas' specific cosmovision in relation to Nature, as well as to understand the agricultural practices that they prioritize. In addition, as referred as well in Chapter 2, and was developed in the last chapter of the discussion, the continuous subjectification of these new collectivities occurs through an interaction between struggles shared by the people bounded by this collective subject and the values and interests that distinguish them from their adversaries – the ones that have promoted the struggles; and this process is complemented with the active creativity of the (collective) subject. Then, the dynamic processes that led to the emergence of this different cosmovision were also analysed, through the third sub-research-question.

I travelled to the Highlands of Chiapas, where the Oventik Caracol – an autonomous Zapatista site – is located, to encounter in person the subjects of this thesis – the Tzotzil Zapatista communities. By doing ethnographic research, I was able to have access to the spaces where their cosmovision is dominant, and where it is materialized through their daily activities, particularly in the teaching and agricultural ones, as well as in their oral storytelling.

(1) What are the views of the Zapatistas towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment?

By taking classes of the Tzotzil language – the Mayan-derived indigenous language mostly spoken in the site of the research – I was able to understand how they relate to Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of environment, since the language is an extremely important tool for expressing the views that one has in relation to the world, attached to specific epistemologies and ontologies. In the Zapatista case, the concept of Nature is connected to the one of Mother Earth. The latter is seen as a collective Mother, that gives birth to all the natural entities – from human to non-human beings. For this reason, the Tzotzil Zapatistas believe in a deep interconnectedness between Nature and the natural elements born out from the same Mother. Indeed, through storytelling, I was able to understand that, in the Zapatista-Tzotzil cosmivision, every natural element shares the existence of a heart – ‘o’on’ – in their core, as well as a ‘ch’ulel’ – the property of life giving. Then, for them, all the elements present in Nature are complementary, since they all play an essential role in the holism of Nature: trees, the moon, and bees, are entities that are ascribed characteristics that resemble human ones: they are emotional, rational, and capable of decision-making. In the same reasoning, the corn is also seen as a sacred entity, since it is closely related to the emergence of the first human being and the colours of the world. For the Tzotzil Zapatistas, these instances make that all elements should be respected, in democratic ways, as entities gifted with spiritual and material meanings. Their cosmivision is one where human ownership over other beings and non-beings does not enter; rather, every children of the Mother Earth is meant to be cared, so humans receive *her* mutual respect.

Moreover, the Tzotzil language expresses the meaning of the land in these communities: more than a physical space where they grow their food, the land is their home; it is a space that is simultaneously physical and spiritual, where the Mother Earth operates for giving life to all their children, including the human beings themselves. The land helps the subsistence of the beings that share the physical space, and the latter is sustainably maintained through the harmonic and complementary work of the first. The concept of land is also attached to the one of the peoples, since the indigenous communities are people from the land. Their lives as Zapatista, Tzotzil, indigenous people are then also enabled by the land that they manage, helping them to counter the marginalization promoted by the Mexican State and other dominant institutions. From here, they understand that the land and, overall, Nature and the Mother Earth, are not meant to be exploited. For this reason, and even though the peoples make use of the resources provided by Nature and the land they share, they do so in a non-exploitative

way. The Zapatista Tzotziles refuse the view of the elements of Nature as mere commodities and objects to be exploited – the view attached to the dominant conceptualization of “natural resources” – since they share, with the human beings, the same sacredness provided by the Mother Earth.

Therefore, respect and care are core values in the Zapatista cosmivision; their life must follow the rhythms of Nature, and not the linear, progressive one promoted by the dominant discourse. Indeed, they believe that a system based on care is the only one possible to promote a healthy living environment, and that one based on the exploitation and commodification of natural resources will ultimately lead to the degradation of the environment. Moreover, living in harmony with Nature is important because it is the own Mother Earth that allows for their own existence – and dignity – as indigenous, Zapatista peoples.

Consequently, these views are embedded in an epistemology that prioritizes the local, indigenous knowledge about Nature, one that has been dynamically and collectively actualized by the education promoters in Oventik, as well as in other Zapatista *Caracoles*, through the active learning that is part of the Zapatista political project. Correspondently, their ontology in relation to Nature is one of mutual care, in which the natural elements are not objects but spiritual-physical elements, that are essential for their own lives as Zapatista Tzotzil communities.

It becomes clear that this cosmivision around Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, has been constructed collectively in the Tzotzil – as in other – Zapatista communities. Indeed, all of them share the view of a holistic Nature, where every being and non-being is interconnected through their rooted existence in the Mother Earth, that makes them create a specific world in their imaginaries – one of mutual recognition, care, and respect.

(2) What are the practices of the Zapatistas towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment?

The significance of those has to do with their capacity to provide food and resources for a collective and communal form of life. Being peoples of the land, the Zapatistas dedicate primarily to agriculture. As one could imagine, the latter is inspired by their own cosmivision; this means that their modes of food production must follow the caring and respect system that governs their minds and bodies – with which they work the land. This system is materialized through particular agroecological practices, which

are embedded in an innovative, unique project developed by the Zapatistas themselves: The Other Production. Traditional indigenous agricultural knowledge, as well as new, sustainable practices are disseminated through agroecological promoters, who teach each community in various municipalities how to grow food through a system that promotes their existence as indigenous people from the Highlands of Chiapas, while nurturing their food sovereignty – thus resistance and autonomy. Indeed, the agroecological project of the Zapatistas relies on the cultivation of traditional crops – such as the triad, a polyculture system including corn, bean, and squash plants, in the case of the Highlands of Chiapas – which have been providing food and autonomy for the indigenous peoples since pre-Hispanic times.

In addition, trials by the Zapatistas themselves are done to implement new, non-harmful technologies, which must not disrespect the environmental conditions of each community. In this way, the Tzotzil Zapatistas of Oventik mainly cultivate the *milpa*, adapted to the climate and soil conditions of the Highlands of Chiapas. They prioritize the use of traditional varieties of corn and beans, or new experimental and organic crosses of those, since this system allows for them to preserve their seed diversity. In the case of the corn, this is done by saving the traditional seeds, from which plants with the capacity to cross-pollinate will grow.

Moreover, the use of traditional varieties adapted to the environmental conditions of each locality, helps the Zapatistas to avoid relying on external inputs, whether they are the seeds themselves, or pesticides, which need of use would be increased if they relied on modified varieties, more susceptible to diseases and pests. Therefore, this type of agroecology can help the communities to detach from the State's and big corporations' will of colonizing their lands with modified varieties, which destroy their plant varietal heritage.

In addition, caring and respecting the natural environment means, for the Zapatistas, to promote different techniques – both traditional and renovated – of organic fertilization. For them, this is the only way the health of the soil is promoted, since they have seen it degrading when using chemical fertilizers. Protecting the soils is, as mentioned before, an essential part of being Zapatista and Tzotzil; the soil is the provider of their food, and the other elements born out of the same Mother Earth. Because they saw their lands being contaminated by alien plant varieties, as well as by pollutant pesticides and fertilizers, now that they have control over their community-managed

lands, the Zapatistas are trying to assure the sustainability of those and, consequently, of their lives as indigenous peoples.

Even though the main crops and some particular practices of those may vary from localities (for example, between the Highlands and the Lowlands of Chiapas, with different soil and climate conditions), they all follow the same agroecological principles, based on pillar values of care and respect for the land and the Mother Earth, contrasting with the dominant agricultural approach. Then, it becomes clear that the Zapatistas share the same practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment.

For these reasons, “The Other Production” is a collective project that goes beyond the mere providence of food products – it is part of the Zapatista collective identity. This thesis has shown that the agroecological project of the Zapatistas can be considered an emancipatory one, one that resonates with their identity, by rescuing and renovating their indigenous knowledge and practices, applied in the collective management of their own production system.

Thus, their practices allow for their resistance against unsustainable agricultural systems (based on a dominant rationale of Nature’s exploitation) as well as for their autonomy – and, ultimately, their politico-ecological fight.

(3) How did the Zapatistas come to share the same views and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment?

One can attribute the creation and perpetuation of the shared views and practices of the Zapatistas described above, to their political and ecological history, and the consciousness(es) that they have developed from those. This thesis helps to identify three main domains that have shaped the process through which the Zapatistas came to share the same views and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment: their political and ecological struggles; their condition as indigenous peoples, descendant from the Mayans; and their dynamic creativity to build “a world where many worlds fit”.

The marginalization promoted by the dominant public institutions – such as the Mexican and the North-American States – and private ones – particularly big corporations – has been threatening the existence and dignity of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas since colonial times. This form of colonization, as well as more contemporary ones– such

as the implementation of the Green Revolution Project, followed by strategic neoliberal agricultural policies, which culminated with the signing of the NAFTA Agreement – have historically displaced the indigenous peoples from their lands, while promoting unsustainable and destructive practices towards the environment – and the indigenous peoples themselves. The people who later joined the EZLN, and that are now building their autonomy project, have shared these struggles, and have grown politically through them, through collective organization to create a different future – one that acknowledges their existence, their cosmovision, and their agricultural practices. Moreover, threats to food sovereignty, promoted by the desire to introduce modified varieties of pillar crops for Zapatista indigenous people, which contribute to the decline of the soil's health, have levered a collective aspiration for fighting for the community control over their territories, for living a life detached by statist and corporative interests, a life aligned with their values of care and respect (of Nature), which are reflected in their agroecological practices.

However, one cannot explain the collective subjectification of the Zapatistas by solely looking at the politico-ecological struggles that they share. For example, it would be hard to distinguish this from other social movements in Latin America, that have lived similar struggles in relation to land dispossession, but that opted for other revolutionary paths. In fact, it is impossible to talk about a Zapatista collective subject without acknowledging the importance of their indigeneity, their Mayan-cosmovision, in the configuration of their collective identity. Their views in relation to Nature or, more inclusively, the Mother Earth, have their roots in Mayan-descendant cosmovisions, such as the Tzotzil one. Even though they can vary in between different ethnic groups, they all look at the Mother Earth as a sacred being, as the other beings and non-beings born out from *her* womb, as I mentioned in Chapter 2. Traditionally, they believed in the interconnectedness between all the natural elements, and that they must follow Nature's temporalities and rhythms, as the only way to preserve this physical-spiritual relationship and, therefore, to preserve the environment. I must point out, though, that the Tzotzil cosmovision is being constantly actualized, to incorporate new knowledge and new insights that fit into the Zapatista's epistemologies and ontologies, without, obviously, detaching from the indigenous values.

Finally, the creativity of the Zapatista peoples also accounts for the continuous formation of their particular views and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment. Indeed, if one would only acknowledge the struggles

and the indigeneity as the only ingredients in the process of collective subjectification, it would be impossible to understand how the Zapatistas chose to declare war against the Mexican State and created their autonomy afterwards, contrarily to many other indigenous communities in Chiapas, such as the communities of San Juan Chamula. Indeed, even though the population of Chamula is also mainly indigenous (Tzotzil), and they appear to have lived the same struggles as the Zapatistas regarding marginalization, their cosmovision in relation to Nature seems to have changed drastically; they moved away from a life dedicated to land, which, in turn, detached them more from their connection to Mother Earth, a path that goes in the opposite direction of that of the Zapatistas.

Obviously, the aim for resisting by creating, the objective to be an autonomous community, and the own ways of living it provides, has shaped the Zapatistas as collective subjects. Living by their own values and imaginaries, managing their own lands, actualizes the history that led to the initial formation of the EZLN, while also creating new stories. These are stories that are performed in their work in the *milpa*, as well as in their teaching activities, and that remind them that their story of resistance and autonomy is as present as the rain in the Highlands of Chiapas. They allow for re-creating their identity as one of indigenous peoples fighting for their lands, their home, and life. These are stories that are told to the younger generations of Zapatistas, and to outsiders – like me and now, also you -, stories that reassert their continuous collective subjectification.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to not acknowledge the multiple movements that share similarities with the Zapatistas. For example, La Via Campesina is a Latin American grassroots movement that has been following the model of an emancipatory type of agroecology, that seeks to improve the autonomy of indigenous/peasant communities. Another case is the one of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (MST), which has been studied in comparison with the Zapatista movement (Lundström, 2017); among others (Giraldo, 2022). However, all these movements can be considered as “new environmental subjects” because, even though they are not entirely exclusive in their ways of thinking and acting towards the preservation of Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, they present alternatives to the hegemonic rationale, based on dominant discourses of the West, in their own geographies.

Therefore, I believe that the Zapatista case presented on this thesis can build up on the literature existent about alternative movements that have been able to build their

own world in the image of their cosmovisions, and open doors for many more studies in this field.

The Zapatistas show us that there are multiple ways of looking at and connecting to Nature and the natural elements it allows. These are inspired by correspondent discourses that, at the same time, enable the existence of different realities. The world that the Zapatistas are creating is one of immense interconnectedness between human beings and the surrounding natural environment, with all the beings and non-beings, that they see as their own siblings. Both the alternative discourses and realities that the Zapatistas present us are little to no considered in the dominant discourse, one that promotes the detachment of human beings from Nature; however, there is hope for change – for changing the unequal power relations created by the perpetuation of a hegemonic rationale that has tried to make us believe that there is one single truth, the one that follows the dominant discourse, and that has fed a capitalist system of exploitation of both Nature and human beings.

Truly, the stories of the Zapatista communities tell us that different epistemologies and ontologies are possible. By thinking of the relationship between human beings and Nature as something deeply spiritual and emotional, one is able to imagine a future where we do not view the natural elements as mere resources out there, waiting to be exploited, as mere commodities that enter the toxic market dynamics that sustain a capitalist and unsustainable system. Instead, the Zapatistas teach us that there is the possibility to create more meaningful relationships with our surroundings, inspired by the pillar values of care, respect, and true democracy.

As this thesis illustrates, this is an exercise that is essential for moving towards a healthier and more harmonious interconnection with all the beings and non-beings of this world, and with their – and our – mother: the Mother Earth. For concretizing the possibility of this alternative future, the Zapatistas enlighten us about the path we must take: it starts by acknowledging that the dominant discourse and system has been leveraging the destruction of this planet, so we must rescue and renew alternative forms of viewing and acting towards Nature. Firstly, we – and, especially, researcher - must move away from the belief that there is an absolute truth about the world – and everything it entails; this exercise shall open our eyes for the existence of various cosmovisions, many of them most suitable for the sustainability we are aiming for. After having expanded our

understanding about the multiple existent “truths”, it becomes easy to defy the binary of ancestry/modernity that was created by the dominant discourse for oppressing more spiritual connections with Nature and, thus, the indigenous peoples that carry immense knowledge. In this way, it becomes possible to dream of a world where many worlds fit, a world in which people re-connect to the land; a world in which we bend the curve of increasing human alienation from its roots; a world in which we become to value the more emotional interconnectedness with the natural environment. This seems to be the only existing way to promote a truly healthy and sustainable environment, and a future where value is not measured by capitalism, but by more-than-human connections.

Finally, but not less important, this case communicates the flaws of the academic context. By pointing out to the existence and importance of different epistemologies and ontologies, it breaks with the reliance on the dominant, colonizing, marginalizing, and oppressing knowledge as the absolute “truth”, as the single objective reality that must be taught to the next generations. Alternatively, acknowledging the multiplicity of knowledge, realities, and cosmovisions about Nature can open the doors for the welcoming of alternative, indigenous knowledge into the academic circles, to meaningful collaborations between academics, peasants, and indigenous peoples, as well as politicians and other societal stakeholders. Afterwards, I believe, we would be finally able to start creating non-harmful, respectful ways of doing research – and the necessary knowledge that embraces the diversity of the world and its peoples.

Recommendations

For a better understanding of the Zapatistas as new environmental subjects, further research about their views and practices towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, should be conducted in other Zapatista autonomous regions, since this work was focused on the Tzotzil communities which have their autonomous centre in Oventik.

Furthermore, looking at the views and practices in the same domains, as well as the processes that led and lead to the creation of new environmental subjects – especially regarding indigenous and peasant social movements – research in other sites of Latin America, as well as in other geographies, could enlighten the existence and possibility of different epistemologies and ontologies in relation to Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment. This research seems essential for creating a more inclusive academic space, which should welcome alternative knowledge systems,

currently marginalized in the light of the belief that the “truth” is provided by the dominant knowledge system.

Moreover, I believe that more research on different epistemologies and ontologies in relation to Nature could help one informing environmental and human (and more-than-human) rights policymaking and, consequently, to implement more caring and respectful approaches to Nature within and in between States, corporations, non-governmental and civil society organizations and, ultimately, the society in its whole.

Limitations

I must point out to the limitations of this thesis. I believe that they are mainly concerned with: (1) the location of the research, which impacted on (2) the subjects included in the research process; (3) the data selected to be included in this written piece; (4) questions regarding to the data analysis, such as the translation process; (5) and with the external validity of my findings.

- (1) As I mentioned before in Chapter 3, this ethnographic research was conducted mainly in one specific location – the Zapatista *Caracol* II of Oventik, due to its easy accessibility for “internationals” (i.e., people from outside the movement). For this reason, the agricultural practices presented and discussed in this thesis are dependent in those, thus the discussion of the general practices of the Zapatistas towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, might not have covered other agroecological and land management techniques that are important in other locations, thus also for the Zapatista movement.
- (2) The fact that I had only access to the Oventik *Caracol*, meant that my contact was established mainly within Tzotzil communities, the most prominent in the Highlands of Chiapas. Thus, the discussion of the views on Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, can be limited to the Zapatista-Tzotzil cosmovision, since it relied on the analysis of the Tzotzil language as a mean to express it. However, this might not constitute a significant problem, since all the Zapatista communities seem to share the same basic worldviews, beliefs, and core values.
- (3) I believe that the exploration of their agricultural project was limited, and thus also the way in which it is described in this thesis. The decisions taken about the data selection were influenced by three main reasons. The first has to do

with an agreement between me and the authorities of the Oventik *Caracol* – the members of the *Junta de Buen Gobierno*. During my first time there, I asked them permission to conduct the research that will be materialized through this written work. My initial plan was to ask people for stories about their relationship with Nature, shaped by their cosmovisions and their agricultural practices. However, I was refused to conduct any kind of interview, and I was only allowed to collect stories that somehow could emerge during the Tzotzil classes. In addition, I asked to visit some surrounding communities to see how their work their lands; once again, my proposal was refused, and we agreed that my findings about the practices of the Zapatistas towards Nature, natural resources, and the preservation of the environment, should be limited to the stories that the subjects choose to tell me and to the few agricultural works in the *milpa* and the *cafetal* that I did during the collective activities. Finally, I did a posterior selection of the stories I had previously collected, based on my own judgement of their level of importance for the present study, which might have left some interesting stories outside of this work.

- (4) As said before, a translation process inevitably changes the meaning of the stories told. The stories included in this thesis were mostly translated once, from Spanish to English language; however, I shall point out to the fact that, even though I am fluent in Spanish, it is not my native language, which can also bring some constraints in my own understanding of some concepts. Moreover, the explanation of the Tzotzil words is limited since, most of the times, there is no direct translation of those to Spanish – and from Spanish to English.
- (5) Finally, the external validity of this thesis might not be aligned with the expectations of the academic context. Indeed, this work is focused on the exploration of new subjectivities, on different ways of thinking about and living in the world. Thus, they are not aimed at being generalized, but to be acknowledged by their diversity. Despite of this fact, I believe that this case can be generalized as an example of multiple social movements that are working in similar ways to change the dominant discourse and system.

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Annexes

Data management

Roles

The data (stories) were be collected by me, the researcher, as well as by the people from the community that agreed to tell me some stories of them. However, the posterior analysis was done solely by me. I was also responsible for the translation of the stories collected in Spanish to English. However, some members of the community helped me translating concepts and stories that were previously written/spoken in Tzotzil language, into Spanish, that I ultimately translated into English language.

Data storage

Raw data

My dataset contains my own stories that I collect by journaling and taking notes during informal conversations with the community in the Oventik Caracol, especially those with the promoters of education in the School of Languages. In addition, indigenous stories written and selected by the community itself, were included in the dataset. Finally, some photographs of the murals, as well as drawings that serve for visual storytelling are also part of the raw data. The data was posteriorly transcribed into my personal laptop, which is protected by a security password, as the storage location. Though, I kept my personal journal as a back-up location.

Processed data

Initially, I intended for the data to be analysed through a qualitative program – Atlas-TI – for organizing the stories and its topics into thematic chapters for coherent narratives and overall storytelling. However, the program came to be useless for the data analysis. Indeed, the data collected resembles emotional stories that can only be fully understood through human, manual analysis, since they cannot be simply organized through different codes. When organizing story-form data, one can only make sense of it through an incredible detailed and careful analysis of the content of the stories collected, that are interconnected between each other in many ways.

File structure

In my personal laptop, all the data was stored in a folder indicating the research work (MSc thesis) and the year in which it is developed. The data files in this folder were organized by descriptive names, distinguishing “journaling and notes”, “indigenous stories”, and “visual data”.

Protection

The data was secured in my personal laptop, which is protected by a security password to which only I have access to. When handing in my data files for storage in my research data archives – they will be handled confidentially and will be only accessible by the ENP chair and the data management of the same group, as stated in the students’ guidelines for MSc Thesis Research at the ENP group.