Did You Listen? Zapatismo and Epistemic Decolonization

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> "En estos 20 años ha habido un relevo múltiple y complejo en el EZLN. Algunos han advertido sólo el evidente: el generacional. Ahora están haciendo la lucha y dirigiendo la resistencia quienes eran pequeños o no habían nacido al inicio del alzamiento. Pero algunos estudiosos no se han percatado de otros relevos: El de clase: del origen clase mediero ilustrado, al indígena campesino. El de raza: de la dirección mestiza a la dirección netamente indígena. Y el más importante: el relevo de pensamiento: del vanguardismo revolucionario al mandar obedeciendo; de la toma del Poder de Arriba a la creación del poder de abajo; de la política profesional a la política cotidiana; de los líderes, a los pueblos; de la marginación de género, a la participación directa de las mujeres; de la burla a lo otro, a la celebración de la diferencia."[1]
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> -Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano (formerly known as "Marcos") .

Abstract

This essay looks at the Zapatista struggle in Southeast Mexico from the perspective of epistemic decolonization. I follow Walter Mignolo's analysis of Zapatismo as a decolonial "theoretical revolution" and moreover build on it by articulating it in relation to other concepts in the decolonial theoretical toolkit, such as epistemic humility, pluriversality, and knowing how to listen. I conclude with an interpretation of recent events in the Zapatista communities that reinforce what Mariana Mora has called the Zapatista's "politics of listening," which also allude to the transformations that continue to make Zapatismo a global beacon of decolonial thinking and doing.

Keywords: Coloniality, ethics, pedagogy, transculturation, Indigeneity, liberation.

Introduction

On December 21, 2012, the same day the thirteenth baktun cycle in the Maya long count calendar came to its end, the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas (Chiapas, Mexico) witnessed the largest ever demonstration of Zapatista unity. On that symbolic day, close to fifty thousand Zapatista villagers marched in complete silence under the rain, only to raise their fists as they passed the City Hall building they had once occupied in the 1994 insurgency. After the procession, they returned to their autonomous communities in the mountains of the Lacandon Jungle, leaving behind a short communique:

> ¿ESCUCHARON?
>
> Es el sonido de su mundo derrumbándose.
>
> Es el del nuestro resurgiendo.
>
> El día que fue el día, era noche.

Y noche será el día que será el día.
¡DEMOCRACIA!
¡LIBERTAD!
¡JUSTICIA![2]

This demonstration broke one of the Zapatista's longest periods of non-engagement with the Mexican public sphere. Their message was clear: In case you still do not know how to listen; we are not gone; we are here stronger than ever before.

This essay looks at the Zapatista struggle from the perspective of epistemic decolonization. I follow the line of interpretation opened up in the work of Walter Mignolo, for whom the Zapatista struggle represents a paradigmatic example of decoloniality, or what he calls the decolonial "option" (Mignolo, *The Darker Side*). I hereby contextualize the development of Mignolo's work within the decolonial turn and explicate his analysis of Zapatismo (the philosophy of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN, for its initials in Spanish), as a decolonial "theoretical revolution." While an important contribution to the decolonial turn and scholarship on Zapatismo, Mignolo's analysis has been criticized for being superficial (Acosta). I therefore seek to build on Mignolo's account by further articulating it in relation to other concepts in the decolonial theoretical toolkit, such as epistemic humility, pluriversality, and knowing how to listen. These are concepts, that when deployed in conjunction, are better able to explain what is at stake in the Zapatista decolonial "theoretical revolution." The aim of this essay is thus also to add analytic clarity to the articulation of decolonial concepts via the concrete experience of the Zapatista struggle. I conclude by interpreting the 2012 public reemergence of the Zapatistas as an example of what Mariana Mora calls the Zapatista's "politics of listening" ("The Imagination"). This reappearance and subsequent post-2012 changes in the Zapatista communities, encapsulated by the retirement of Subcomandante Marcos, the renowned spokesperson of the EZLN, signal important transformations within Zapatismo that continue to make Zapatismo a global beacon of decolonial thinking and doing.[3]

Mignolo's Decolonial Option, Zapatismo, and Double Translation

The "decolonial turn" (Maldonado-Torres "Thinking through") has without a doubt advanced one of the most ambitious interrogations of knowledge production in the last few decades. Well documented in the first three issues of this journal, as well as in other venues and anthologies (Mignolo and Arturo Escobar), decolonial thought emerges from Latin America and the Caribbean in order to bring to epistemology the social and political project of decolonization advanced by anti-colonial movements in the Global South since the sixteenth century.[4] As an intellectual project, it is accordingly concerned

more with the "decolonization of knowledge" than with the decolonization of social, political, and economic affairs (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 53-54). This is not to say, however, that the decolonization of knowledge has superseded decolonization of the social, political, or economic arenas. Instead, decolonial thought recognizes that the need to liberate consciousness from epistemic colonization (the "coloniality of knowledge") is now an unavoidable imperative, or an option on the table to engage, for all scholars and activists around the world.

Alongside the work of the philosopher Enrique Dussel and the sociologist Aníbal Quijano, the work of the cultural critic Walter Mignolo comprises what could be called the theoretical core of the decolonial turn. With a background in semiotics and discourse analysis, Mignolo's line of decolonial thinking has characterized itself through its attention to the role of language and culture in the unfolding of the Western "modern/colonial" project—such coupling of "modernity" and "coloniality" as co-constitutive elements being perhaps the chief premise of decolonial thought. His first major intervention, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, published in 1995, examined the use of language as an imperialist tool in the colonization of the Americas. Between this first intervention and his second major project, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, published in 2000, key debates took place among Mignolo, Dussel, Quijano, and other members associated with the "modernity/coloniality research program" (Escobar 180), which would soon solidify as the decolonial turn. Consequently, in *Local Histories/Global Designs,* the concept of coloniality and the programmatic character of the decolonial project first emerge with depth and force in Mignolo's work. This foremost example of decolonial scholarship made clear for decolonial scholars that the task at hand requires more than an erudite analysis of how colonization has been a vital constitutive part of Western modernity. Most importantly, Mignolo showed that the decolonial project demands one to also elaborate alternative pathways of exit out of epistemic and ontological colonization, whether these are already existing in our midst or are yet to be brought into existence. Thus, within Mignolo's contributions to the decolonial turn, *Local Histories/Global Designs* outlines such attempts to find other (marginalized or subaltern) ways of thinking beyond those sanctioned by modernity. Following the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa, Mignolo calls this elaboration of alternative pathways "border thinking," a term that speaks to the positively ambiguous and uncharted character of such activity.

In Mignolo's third major contribution to the decolonial turn, *The Darker Side of Modernity* (2011), one finds a defense of the decolonial project *vis-à-vis* other contemporary scholarly and political projects. A mature expression of Mignolo's work, the monograph offers decoloniality as an "option" clearly demarcated from alternative theoretical and political recourses. Some of these alternatives are, on the one hand, the project of rewesternization, which agglomerates an elite coalition of conservative

North American and European enterprises; and on the other hand, the project of dewesternization, which is led by a comparable elite coalition of East Asian and Middle Eastern geopolitical forces. In many ways, *The Darker Side of Modernity* culminates the search inaugurated by Mignolo's two prior major interventions, doing so moreover, in a way that distances itself from the work of other members associated with the modernity/coloniality research program. Most markedly, conceiving of decoloniality as an "option" implies that it cannot be considered an imperative (Hernández), much less a project to be implemented by force. Indeed, for Mignolo, such a project of decoloniality would be tantamount to repeating some of the worst mistakes in modern thinking, whether in religious missionary version or in the secular counterpart.[5]

Mignolo's paradigm of decoloniality is clearly exemplified by his analysis of Zapatismo. Bursting into the Mexican public sphere on January 1, 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) is a guerrilla organization based in the Southeast Mexican state of Chiapas, whose majority is composed of Indigenous peasants of Maya ancestry. Since its public appearance, the EZLN has stood for the self-determination of Indigenous peoples within the Mexican nation, a struggle whose demands include economic and social justice for a population that has been severely exploited and marginalized since the colonization of the Americas. After an initial violent armed confrontation with the federal army, the Zapatista struggle moved to the realm of political and cultural discourse. By the early 2000s, a lengthy legal process full of irregularities on the side of the state resulted in the withdrawal of the Zapatistas from the negotiating table (Muñoz Ramírez). While credited as a key player in the democratization of the Mexican political spectrum, since 2006 the Zapatista struggle has been primarily out of the national spotlight, only to be active at the local level in their occupied rebel territories. The Zapatista struggle, however, remains a referent for autonomous and anti-capitalist social movements around the world.

There is a sizable compendium of scholarship regarding the social, historical, and political importance of the Zapatista struggle. Scholars across the social sciences and the humanities have paid attention to how the Zapatistas have carefully incorporated elements from nationalist and Indigenist discourses, all while positioning themselves against globalization and neoliberalism, but in a way that made a pioneering use of new media such as the internet. What has gone less noticed, however, is the conceptual element in the Zapatista struggle, the development of a distinct way of thinking and doing encapsulated by the name of Zapatismo.[6] The scholarly foregrounding of the Zapatistas as objects of analysis, and backgrounding the Zapatistas as producers of knowledge and conceptual elements has created a gap in the scholarship on the Zapatistas. Decolonial theorists have sought to fill this gap, in solidarity with the Zapatistas, since the start of their insurgency (Dussel "Ethical Sense"; Grosfoguel).

In such a context, Mignolo himself conceives of Zapatismo as a "theoretical revolution" that offers a project of epistemic decolonization where one delinks from modern/colonial ways of thinking, while simultaneously embracing marginalized knowledges: in this case, the epistemologies or cosmologies of Indigenous peoples ("The Zapatistas's Theoretical" 245). The outcome of this project is an epistemic innovation that surpasses the intentions of both Marxist thought (the ruling doctrine of the urban Leftists that co-founded the EZLN) and Indigenous traditions of thought. The fact that intellectuals have habitually ignored the Indigenous contributions to Zapatismo, by conceiving of it solely in the terms of Marxist-Leninism (Henck), is indicative of the coloniality of knowledge that decolonial thought seeks to challenge.

A key component in Mignolo's analysis of the emergence of Zapatismo is the concept of "double translation" ("The Zapatistas's Theoretical" 247). Put simply, for Mignolo, double translation is an example of decolonial border delinking. While indebted to the horizon of Mignolo's scholarly training in the study of language (semiotics and discourse analysis), the concept of double translation nevertheless exceeds the domain of linguistic translation. Double translation names the intersubjective process that takes place when two distinct subjective positions come into dialogue under conditions of ethical equality, with a shared purpose in mind. For such a dialogue, an initial process of translation must take place through which each subject first attempts to comprehend what the other says. It is only then that an additional secondary process is necessary in which one must now *rework* one's previous positions in light of what has been uttered by the other. Concretely, the notion of double translation refers to this second moment.

In an essay published shortly after the first formulation of Mignolo's interpretation of Zapatismo (but before the subsequent revision found in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*), Mignolo and Freya Schiwy further elaborate on the notion of double translation as a theory of transculturation from the perspective of colonial difference (13). The theory of transculturation refers to the work of the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, who developed the concept to overcome the "acculturation" model of cultural change that was too linear and unidirectional (Ortiz). Double translation as a theory of transculturation, a theory that is critical of coloniality, thus addresses how new *decolonizing* ideas and practices can be generated in the context of modernity/coloniality, in a way that do not remain exclusively trapped by the conceptual and structural framings of modernity/coloniality. Double translation can thus be understood as radically contrasting with the colonialist mode of translation deployed by Christian missionaries in the Americas (and the rest of the colonized world), which was "always uni-directional" in its theological delivery of the Gospel to Indigenous populations, and in its anthropological extraction of Indigenous beliefs and cultural

practices (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 219). The "double" aspect of double translation is here a direct challenge to the unidirectionality of translation and cultural change in general.

In Mignolo's account, Zapatismo is then the result of the transcultural double translation between the urban Marxist-Leninist intellectuals who went to Chiapas to politicize Indigenous peasants, and the Indigenous subjects who had plans other than to be given orders by outsiders. This account is not a controversial one, as Mignolo relies directly on the account given by Subcomandante Marcos in 1997, then the public spokesperson for the EZLN. Marcos explains that the EZLN finds its moment of transformation, not when the urban Marxist intellectuals make it to Chiapas in the early 1980's, but when these intellectuals realize by the mid to late 1980's that they do not have the answers to the problems posed by the local reality (Le Bot 149-51; Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 222). At this crucial moment, after years of clandestine work in the jungle, the urban intellectuals come to the realization that Marxism cannot deal with the specific context of oppression in which they had been immersed. This conundrum left the intellectuals with two choices: either to stubbornly continue to espouse Leninist postulates and likely fizzle into historical irrelevance, or to engage in a process of double translation in which they (the former teachers) would now become students. When the cadre of the EZLN takes the latter choice to follow the lead of the Indigenous peasants, Zapatismo was born in its full originality. In this sense, Zapatismo is understood as something other than either side of the intercultural exchange, as more than Marxism or an Indigenist agenda. As Marcos himself put it in the 1997 interview, quoted and translated by Mignolo:

> Zapatismo is not fundamentalist or millenarist indigenous thinking; and it is not indigenous resistance either. It is a mixture of all of that materialized in the EZLN . . . This is also why the true creators of Zapatismo are the translators such as Mayor Mario, Mayor Moises, Mayor Ana María, and all of those who also had to be translated from dialects [Marcos is referring here to indigenous languages: *WM*] such as Tacho, David, Zevedeo. They are indeed the Zapatistas theoretician … they built, they are building a new way for looking at the world. (Le Bot 99, 338-39; Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 223-24)

Zapatismo is here, not a prefabricated agenda originating from one side of the exchange, but a result of the back and forth dialogue between all the participants involved. While departing from a linguistic position, the dialectical aspect of double translation quickly departs from the realm of language to enter the arena of intercultural knowledge production.[7]

For Mignolo, double translation is accordingly a crucial element of epistemic decolonization, because it is the process of transculturation that leads to a more complex synthesis of distinct epistemic

positions. What remains undertheorized in Mignolo's account, however, are some of the broader ethical and epistemic norms at work that facilitate the process of double translation and permit the fruitful and positive moment of creation. In the rest of this essay, I shall articulate some of these presuppositions by way of the Zapatista struggle and using conceptual tools found in the work of decolonial thinkers. For the purposes of this essay, I shall highlight only three: epistemic humility, pluriversality, and knowing how to listen. While the Zapatistas do not own the only way of advancing epistemic decolonization, their example remains one of the most radical, relevant, and yet understudied exercises in the world today.

Epistemic Humility, Pluriversality, and Knowing How to Listen

First, epistemic humility refers to the ability to embrace the fallibility of one's knowledge and, more broadly, one's ways of thinking (in) the world, in light of an encounter with difference. This is a concept that has been thoroughly formulated in the philosophy of science, but which has only recently made its explicit way into theorizations of decolonization in the work of feminist philosophers such as Linda Alcoff and Amy Allen. In the case of Allen, while emerging from the tradition of the Frankfurt School and also primarily addressing a Global North audience, her work has significantly contributed to the analytic profundity of epistemic decolonization by conceiving it in the terms of epistemic humility.[8] For Allen, epistemic humility is an essential posture, especially for those subjects that have been immersed in the thinking of modernity/coloniality, to engage in a truly open (decolonial) dialogue with interlocutors from traditions foreign to one's own, in a way that the terms of the conversation are not stacked on either side (75). Humility in this strict sense requires "an awareness of the limits and contingencies of the ways in which [one's normative and political] commitments are grounded," with the consequence that one's knowledge can no longer be maintained with the same level of confidence as prior to such a dialogue (Allen 76).

Returning to the example of the Zapatistas, it is indeed a certain kind of epistemic humility that allows the Marxist intellectuals, in the face of their Indigenous comrades, to sidestep their normative and political commitments, commitments that had initially led them to the jungle following what Mignolo calls a "rhetoric of salvation" (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 14). Such an epistemically humbling move demands a stance of modesty through which the assumed teacher now dares to become a student once again and welcomes the pedagogy of the other in a dialogue of equals. The colonialist rhetoric of salvation, even in its revolutionary version, then gives way to a more properly intersubjective process of openness to the contributions of the other, establishing the practice of double translation. At the same time, for the Maya subjects on the other side of the exchange, it takes

an overwhelming amount of epistemic humility to have confidence in the ultimate goals of the intellectuals and concede to share their own perspective and commitments, despite the long history of colonialist encroachment and abuse that they have suffered since the European invasion. As a fallibilistic approach that does not guarantee any truths, the attitude of epistemic humility delinks itself from the abstract universality of modernity/coloniality that in practice, presents itself as infallible and unchangeable, especially in encounters with the other. The significance of such epistemic humility is also the reason why, at least in Mignolo's formulation, decoloniality as a program needs to be conceived as one option on the table to be engaged among many other options (such as Eurocentric rewesternization or non-Western but state-capitalist dewesternization), and not as an imperative that must be advanced by any means necessary.[9]

In the model of double translation, each subject in the intersubjective dialogue is basically in the position of a mediator. When one abandons the "always uni-directional" modern/colonial model of translation, no one subject has the right to speak for others as if those others could not speak for themselves. They all have the capacity to take part in and to lead the conversation as ethical equals. If the colonialist missionaries once sought to study colonial difference with the goal of better imposing their predetermined theological truth, the translators now, delinking from coloniality, bear witness to each other, carefully listening to each other in their reconstruction of knowledge. Of course, the worry is always there, not only of the possibility of an error in translation (which, as we shall see below, is a process that is never a *fait accompli*), but even more dangerously, of the return of the old hierarchies in modern/colonial ways of thinking, such as egocentricity.

Such a concern is not without ground, for in the case of Zapatismo, the radicality of double translation is easily erased in the various common interpretations of Subcomandante Marcos as the sole creator of Zapatismo. Mignolo suggests that one can either interpret Marcos's role "within a philosophy of the modern subject (the hero) and the indigenous community as the silenced and unconscious victims," or one can interpret his role as a translator that mediates between the Indigenous struggle and the broader Mexican public sphere (*The Darker Side* 219, 24). As the last remaining non-Indigenous individual in a position of leadership within the EZLN by the time of the insurgency, and the most visible one ever after, Marcos has been at the center of the media and scholarly focus as a heroic leader in the flares of the rhetoric of salvation. Such a focus has very much overshadowed the labor of Indigenous self-determination that the Zapatistas have enacted in the last few decades. The permanence of the salvation narrative through the figure of Marcos, although inaccurate and against the goals of the Zapatistas, reflects the deep inability to understand the Zapatista model of dialogue that Mignolo captures with the notion of double translation, and the task of

epistemic decolonization broadly construed. This phenomenon calls for the need to "learn to unlearn" old habits of thought.[10] This is to say that the tensions and limitations in any ongoing process of decolonization must be dealt with accordingly, with the proper dosage of epistemic humility and with an ear that knows how to listen to the other, a point to which I will return momentarily.

The second element in the process of epistemic decolonization embarked on by the Zapatistas that I wish to highlight is the affirmation of pluriversality. Initiated by the attitude of epistemic humility upon the encounter with the other, the notion of pluriversality challenges the univocal character of an abstract universality, as understood in Hegelian-Marxist formulations of difference. A brief genealogy of pluriversality is here useful. In the early 1970s, Dussel articulates the notion of "analogical universality" to denote how Latin American philosophy could be simultaneously universal and distinct, without regurgitating the abstract and concrete universalities of modern thought (*Método* 196). Such notion of "analogical universality" should be regarded as the theoretical steppingstone for contemporary deployments of pluriversality within the decolonial turn, made largely possibly by two parallel developments advanced by Mignolo in the 1980s and 1990s. First is the method of a "pluritopic hermeneutics," which fusions Dussel's analogical and analectic methods (more on the latter below) to the "diatopical hermeneutics" of Raimundo Panikkar (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 11-24). And second is the notion of "diversality," which Mignolo borrows from the works of Édouard Glissant and Franz Hinkelammert, a concept that subsumes the prior interventions and therefore morphs into the concept of pluriversality as articulated in this present essay (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 246). While all these theoretical interventions perform precise tasks at distinct levels of abstraction (and across different fields of inquiry), the notion of pluriversality is here devised as the overarching frame that directs these towards the project of epistemic decolonization.[11]

The problem with the univocal character of an abstract universality in the Hegelian-Marxist account is that it conceives of difference as a lack or deficiency to be subsumed, a conceptual move that is incapable of challenging the colonial project (Dussel, "Agenda" 18). It is then, against this narrative, that the pluriversal affirms "universality in difference and difference in universality," a framing that permits genuine openness and exchange in the transcultural dialogue beyond the condition of colonization (Dussel, "Philosophy of Liberation" 346). Similarly, Mignolo conceives of pluriversality as "a displacement of conceptual structures" and not the rejection of universal claims (*The Darker Side* 234), while Ramón Grosfoguel conceives of it as a type of "concrete universalism" that is "the result of a horizontal process of critical dialogue between peoples who relate to one another as equals" (96). While Allen does not make this move herself explicitly, I also see the pluriversal in

Allen's call for a "metanormative contextualism" (211) that can ground normative universality in a way that is more open to contingency and the alterity of other histories and cultures.

In Zapatismo, the framework of pluriversality is encapsulated by the distinct way of doing politics summed up with the notion of *mandar obedeciendo*.[12] Reflecting on the last two decades of Zapatista struggle, Subcomandante Galeano (formerly known as Subcomandante Marcos, more on this important change below) has recently called the development of *mandar obedeciendo* the "most important" transitional handoff in the history of the Zapatista struggle (Galeano).[13] The politics of *mandar obedeciendo* are deeply rooted in Maya cosmologies and could be conceived as the pluriversal counterpart to the universalist theory of revolutionary vanguardism: if, as Grosfoguel has analyzed, in revolutionary vanguardism those who command do not obey, and those who obey do not command, in *mandar obedeciendo*, "those who command obey, and those who obey command" (99). This is effectively a complete inversion of the top-down Western theory of sovereignty where the ruler commands the people. Instead, in *mandar obedeciendo*, the collectivity of the people rules, bottom up, which is why the rulers obey and they rule by obeying. As a pluriversal politics, *mandar obedeciendo* cannot be prescribed abstractly. Instead, it is constructed daily in the concrete actions that culminate in the vision of creating *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*.[14] Such a new world is slowly created with the coming together of "similar projects around the world emerging from the colonial difference" (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 235). For Dussel, this is the promise of a decolonial future beyond modernity/coloniality, a truly "pluriversal trans-modern age" where "each culture will be in dialogue with all others from the perspective of a common 'similarity,' enabling each to continuously recreate its own analogical 'distinction,' and to diffuse itself within a dialogical, reciprocally creative space" ("Agenda" 16-18).[15]

Grosfoguel's analysis of *mandar obedeciendo* keenly discerns a Zapatista method of "rearguardism" that, against the "vanguardism" which "preaches and convinces," moves forward "asking questions and listening" (99). I therefore identify the practice of listening as the third and last element in the Zapatista's practice of double translation that I wish to focus on in this essay. For *mandar obedeciendo* to have a genuinely open and symbiotic effect amongst those involved, one must know how to carefully listen to the words of the other. Indeed, more generally, knowing how to listen establishes the aforementioned position of epistemic humility, without which one is not able to question one's beliefs and positionality in the world.[16] For this reason, Dussel's early work devotes a considerable amount of effort to theorizing the importance of listening for the purposes of epistemic and socio-political liberation. More precisely, for Dussel, knowing how to listen is "the constitutive moment" of the method for a philosophy of liberation (*Método* 184). This is an element in Dussel's

work that has gone relatively unnoticed in its reception, which I hereby recuperate in the analysis of Zapatismo's contributions to epistemic decolonization.[17]

Dussel's focus on listening comes in the context of developing a method for a Latin American philosophy of liberation that can overcome the limitations of dialectics in their Hegelian-Marxist formulation. On this front, Dussel shares with Emmanuel Levinas the critique of dialectics as excluding the other, in so far as dialectics is the self-referential monologue of an enclosed totality *i.e.* the same. The other, at best, is dominated in the dialectical method through assimilationist incorporation (Levinas). Dussel consequently designates the name "analectics" to the method that breaks from the dialectical tendency to ignore or dominate the other, which in his case is the Latin American subject. In analectics, the other first questions and ultimately disrupts the enclosed totality *i.e.* Eurocentric modernity (*Método* 182). Because of this role ascribed to the other, knowing how to listen is "the constitutive moment" of analectics, for in knowing how to listen one begins to become a student of the other (183-84). This is a pedagogical inversion that requires a modest trust in the other, a dynamic that generates a new relationality between those involved, and that puts into question the reigning totality and opens the road towards a new order (192).

In Dussel's formulation, knowing how to listen assumes the posturing of epistemic humility articulated above, and moreover, is the antecedent to the enactment of pluriversality.[18] In the Zapatista case, without such willingness to question their beliefs, the urban guerillas would likely not have been able to properly open themselves to their Indigenous comrades in a way that would be beneficial for both parties. Zapatismo as such would have never emerged, and instead the urban guerrillas conceivably would have ended up being another frustrated entry in the long list of unsuccessful leftist revolutionary efforts. Dussel wrote in the early 1970s, in an eerily prophetic way: "El filósofo analéctico o ético debe descender de su oligarquía cultural académica y universitaria para *saber-oír* la voz que viene de más allá, desde lo alto (*aná-*), desde la exterioridad de la dominación" (184).[19] For our considerations in this essay, the beyond of which Dussel speaks is not a trans-ontological no-place. It is rather concretely the mountain ranges of the Lacandon Jungle.

To be sure, Dussel warns that one must not confuse the revealing word of the other with its expressive word. The expressive word is what is said and can be written; the revealing word, on the other hand, is neither of those two modalities, but is what is lived face-to-face (185, 90). With this framing, the bridge between face-to-face revelation and its expression in language is supported by a certain trust ("con-fianza") or faith in the other that comprises the heart of the human experience (191). This distinction can be extrapolated to illustrate for us the limits of the process of double translation. In essence, translation itself is not the basis of understanding that binds the participants

together in the transcultural back and forth exchange (Acosta). Instead, it is the face-to-face ethical encounter, based on trust and epistemic humility, that takes primacy *before* any translation takes place. In this sense, at least in so far as we are talking about this specific model of epistemic decolonization elaborated by Mignolo, there is never an expectation or presumption of complete translatability. For the face-to-face moment of revelation can never be fully captured in the expressive word. Such is the very nature of the human experience, however, which finds itself at the threshold between hearing the revelation of the other and interpreting its word (193). Collapsing revelation and expression here would reintroduce the errors of the univocal character of an abstract universality, which flattens difference in the name of itself (the same). This is why, as I argued above, knowing how to listen is the antecedent to the enactment of pluriversality.

Conclusion

I conclude this essay with a brief analysis of two recent events in the Zapatista struggle that give an insight into what Mariana Mora calls the Zapatistas' "politics of listening" ("The Imagination" 21). The first event frames the introduction of this essay and refers to the massive demonstrations that took place in several towns in Chiapas after a long period of Zapatista public non-engagement in 2012. Unlike the period of the early and mid-2000s, the years after the 2006 Other Campaign (the Zapatistas' national anti-systemic alternative to that year's federal elections) were characterized by a long Zapatista absence from the national spotlight. By the early 2010's, much of the Mexican media had effectively overlooked the Zapatistas, treating the subject as irrelevant at best. By the year 2012, both national and international media were more interested in the 2012 phenomenon that erroneously attributed a doomsday prophecy to the end of the thirteenth baktun cycle in the Maya long count calendar. In a show of tremendous strength and historical irony, the long-overlooked Maya resurged on the very day that the 13th baktun came to an end: December 21, 2012. The world was not ending, at least not as envisioned by the Western imaginary. That day, the Zapatistas performed the largest demonstration of Zapatista unity to ever take place in the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas and surrounding municipalities in Chiapas. News reports specified that close to fifty thousand villagers belonging to Zapatista communities marched in complete silence under the rain, only to raise their fists as they passed the town's City Hall building that had once been occupied by the EZLN during the 1994 insurgency. After the demonstration, the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena-Comandancia General del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional,[20] published a short communique:

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> Es el sonido de su mundo derrumbándose.

Es el del nuestro resurgiendo.

El día que fue el día, era noche.

Y noche será el día que será el día.[21]

"Did you listen" to our silence, the Zapatistas asked. This is not the silence of absence or weakness, but the echo of another world. And for one to know how to listen to it, one must be willing to depart from this world, to let it crumble, and to move beyond into that world where many worlds fit.

Zapatista demonstration, December 21, 2012. Photo: Víctor Camacho, *La Jornada*

The second event took place almost two years after these demonstrations, in May of 2014. If above I implied that the early pragmatic protagonism of Marcos was a result of the Mexican public's not knowing how to listen, it would be in 2014 that "Marcos" announced his stepping down from the position of the spokesperson for the EZLN. His resignation was the result of the deep transformations that had been taking place at the core of Zapatista practice, which includes the greater participation of Indigenous leaders in organizational positions within the Zapatista communities, especially women (Klein). A middle-class male mestizo intellectual such as Marcos once needed to be the mediator between the Indigenous struggle and the Mexican social and political system—even as Zapatismo cannot be reduced to an Indigenist agenda whose primary interlocutor is the state. A couple of decades after, the process of transformation at the core of Zapatismo has now rendered such a dynamic defunct.

It is noteworthy to mention that there is a second symbolic element in this transition. The individual that used to go by Marcos nonetheless continues to be an important member of the Zapatista leadership, though now under the *nom de guerre* Subcomandante Insurgente "Galeano." The

name change comes in the context of honoring a fallen Zapatista teacher, José Luis Solís López, who was affectionately known in the Zapatista communities as Galeano, and who was brutally murdered in a 2014 paramilitary attack on Zapatista communities. This tragic episode brings to the fore the reality of the Zapatista struggle. Far from being a romantic utopia, it is a struggle that endures the daily antagonism of powerful local and national interests that are antithetical to everything that the Zapatistas stand for. The specific attack that resulted in the death of Galeano/Solís López unambiguously targeted two institutions that stand at the core of all Zapatista communities: the school and the health clinic–resulting in the destruction of both in the autonomous community of La Realidad, as well as the injuries of dozens of people. That the adversaries of the Zapatistas see education and healthcare as a threat to their interests speaks volumes in regard to what is at stake in this battle. It is in this context that I argue that Marcos's stepping down as the official spokesperson of the EZLN signals both, the opening of an epistemic space where new leadership across the ranks of Indigenous Zapatistas can now emerge, and the deepening of the "theoretical revolution" at the core of Zapatismo, as the old Marcos recedes from the public image to give life to the Zapatista teacher Galeano.

To summarize, I have traced the Zapatista struggle via the line of interpretation opened by Walter Mignolo, for whom the Zapatistas represent a model example of the decolonial "option." Seeking to strengthen Mignolo's analysis, I have articulated it in relation to other concepts in the decolonial theoretical toolkit, especially epistemic humility, pluriversality, and knowing how to listen. These three interrelated concepts add analytic clarity to what is at stake in the process of epistemic decolonization advocated by decolonial thinkers. Recent events in the Zapatista struggle indicate the ways in which Zapatismo continues to carry out radical processes of transformation. Far from being an irrelevant, isolated, and provincial social movement, the Zapatistas continue to advance one of the most powerful alternatives to the modern/colonial way of life all around the world. Their ethos and praxis are truly paradigmatic in taking the question of epistemic decolonization seriously, while at the same time not divorcing it from the socio-political and economic questions. This is the project of building *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*, a hopeful alternative to the ever-adapting system of modernity/coloniality and its racialized capitalism that currently grips the world around us.

Notes

[1] "In these 20 years, there has been a multiple and complex handoff, or change, within the EZLN. Some have only noticed the obvious: the generational. Today, those who were small or had not even been born at the beginning of the uprising are the ones carrying the struggle forward and directing the resistance. But some of the experts have not considered other changes: That of class: from the enlightened middle class to the Indigenous peasant. That of race: from mestizo leadership to a distinctly Indigenous leadership. And the most important: the change in thinking: from revolutionary vanguardism to "rule by obeying;" from taking Power Above to the creation of power below; from professional politics to everyday politics; from the leaders to the people; from the marginalization of gender to the direct participation of women; from the mocking of the other to the celebration of difference." Unless otherwise indicated, I have personally translated all Spanish references in this essay, and they are available as endnotes.

[2] "Did you listen? / It is the sound of your world crumbling. / It is the sound of our world resurging. / The day that was day, was night. / And night shall be the day that will be day. / Democracy! / Liberty! /Justice!" (original translation by El Kilombo Intergaláctico). A full version of the communique can be found here https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2012/12/21/comunicado-del-comite-clandestino-revolucionario-indigena-comandancia-general-del-ejercito-zapatista-de-liberacion-nacional-del-21-de-diciembre-del-2012/

[3] In the summer of 2017, at the invitation of Suk-Kyun Woo, I presented an earlier version of this essay at the Latin American Studies Association of Korea Annual Conference, which allowed me to clarify some of the ideas presented here. I thank Jeong Eun Annabel We for discussions that sharpened my arguments and for substantial feedback on an earlier draft of this essay. Lastly, I thank the two anonymous reviewers of *Transmodernity*, for their helpful comments.

[4] For an articulation of the emergence of decolonial thought in relation to prior theorizations of colonization, see Maldonado-Torres's "Colonialism, Neocolonial, Internal Colonialism, the Postcolonial, Coloniality, and Decoloniality" (2016).

[5] In another place, I have addressed one specific problem that arises from separating the decolonial option from what Mignolo calls "the spiritual option" (Vizcaíno "Secular").

[6] Alternatively, in order to distinguish it from its historical antecessor in the figure of Emiliano Zapata and his own faction of the Mexican Revolution, the philosophy of the Zapatistas could perhaps more accurately be called "Neo-Zapatismo." However, out of vernacular reasons, I do not make this scholarly distinction in this essay.

[7] Following Mignolo's framework, Gustavo García Rojas has usefully explored what he calls the "contagion of cosmologies" between Marxism and indigenous culture in the EZLN, paying close attention to the history of Indigenous struggle in Chiapas and Maya mythology (García Rojas).

[8] For a brief overview and critical engagement with Allen's work, especially as it concerns advancing decolonization, see my brief review of her work (Vizcaino "Towards").

[9] To be sure, this is at the level of epistemology and not at the level of politics. The level of politics is a different conversation, if tangentially related to the epistemological one. For instance, on the political question, the Zapatistas first decided to follow the path of armed insurgency. After their violent confrontation with the Mexican federal army, they opened the political question again (internally) and subsequently adopted a position of armed self-defense.

[10] The formulation "learning to unlearn" was introduced to the modernity/coloniality program by Luis Macas and Jorge García at the Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos y Naciones Indígenas del Ecuador (Mignolo "Delinking" 485). It has since been developed further by Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo (2012).

[11] I thank Nelson Maldonado-Torres for a personal dialogue on the history of the concept of pluriversality.

[12] "Rule by obeying."

[13] See epigraph and note 1.

[14] "A world where many worlds fit."

[15] A succinct reconstruction of *mandar obedeciendo* as a political philosophy has been offered by Dussel in his *Twenty Theses on Politics* (2008 [2006]). In this work, modern theories of sovereignty are rethought from the standpoint of Maya thought and liberation philosophy, resulting in a new theory of power based on service and grounded on the imperative to listen. This brief book is itself only the outline to the larger three volume *Politics of Liberation* (2011 [2007], 2009). For an ethnographic account of Zapatista politics that focuses on *mandar obedeciendo*, see Mariana Mora's *Kuxlejal Politics* (2017).

[16] For instance, behind Allen's formulation of epistemic humility, one finds Dipesh Chakrabarty's claim that a genuine openness to the other requires "the capacity to hear that which one does not already understand" (Chakrabarty 33-34; Allen 75).

[17] See also my contribution to a collective project on decolonizing philosophy, where I conceive of this task as a "pedagogical transformation" of learning how to listen (Maldonado-Torres et al. 77-79).

[18] In Alcoff's analysis of Dussel, this question is posed in broader terms: it is not an epistemic humility but a *hermeneutic* humility that grounds the imperative to listen to the other so as to "consider alternative approaches different than those I myself have produced" (63). It is beyond the scope of this essay to entertain the relation between epistemology and hermeneutics in the contect of decolonization. I do, however, aim to address this juncture in future work.

[19] "The analectic or ethical philosopher must descend from his academic and university cultural oligarchy in order to *know-how-to-hear* the voice that comes from beyond, from above (*aná-*), from the exteriority of domination."
[20] Revolutionary Indigenous Clandestine Committee – General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.
[21] See note 2.

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