Masking Revolution: Subcomandante Marcos and the Contemporary Zapatista Movement

In his 2006 interview with Subcomandante Marcos, Jesús Quintero, Spanish journalist and host of the highly-esteemel interview show El loco de la Colina, described the rebel as “un guerrillero de hoy, un nuevo Che Guevara […] [el] líder del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional.” Yet the post-Cold War context in which Marcos and the EZLN emerge differs greatly from the years following the Cuban Revolution. The 60s were a time in which the radical Latin American left believed that an armed struggle, headed off by charismatic rebel leaders, and the subsequent adoption of a Marxist-leninist agenda were the people’s best defense against the US-backed Latin American dictatorships and political tyranny that plagued the continent.

Decades later when Marcos and the Zapatistas come onto the scene, the group uses words as weapons, weapons as symbols of political action and masks to cover their faces in an attempt to simultaneously erase differences in name, rank, gender, ethnicity, and age and to expose the corrupt face of the Mexican government. Also, if class antagonism defined the revolutionary package of the past, the vocabulary that shapes the Zapatista movement reflects questions common to a postcolonial discourse and tradition – indigenous rights, autonomy, and recognition – and strives for both a national and global “democratic” awareness.

Just as the armed revolutionary campaigns that sought a clean break from the current state of affairs seemed “right” for the 60s, Marcos’s non-violent campaign for an inclusive (inter)national democracy is deliberate and fitting for the global technological era in which he and the Zapatistas emerge. Despite the group’s emphasis on the indigenous cause, Marcos – a self-described mestizo of middle-class upbringing – has been the protagonist of the movement since day one. To this end, Guillermo Gómez-Peña has called Marcos a “consummate performancer” who, I will argue, strategically appeared and (re)invented himself at a precise
moment in his country’s and the world’s economic and digital history – January 1, 1994 – to propose a new type of revolutionary campaign for the people of the new millennium (90). But, as we will see, Marcos vanished from the scene in a key moment as well. Exactly twenty years after waging a war on the State of Mexico, Marcos reappeared after a five-year absence from the Zapatista spotlight to declare his persona’s un-existence and to reinvent himself instead as one Subcomandante Galeano.

Along these lines, this essay examines Marcos’s tactical use of the mask to construct his persona and movement in relation to three distinct steps: his conscious moving away from previous views of revolution derived from international revolutionary “Che” Guevara, adoption of core characteristics of national heroes and movements such as the 1910 revolution, Emiliano Zapata, and the Student Movement of 1968, and movement beyond such leaders and practices in speeches and in writings to create a non-authoritative political persona and discourse. To conclude, I will discuss Marcos’s most recent (dis)appearance as his attempt to re-appropriate the Zapatista cause and to redirect the media’s attention to the indigenous roots of the movement.

Prior to his involvement with the EZLN, Marcos was a key figure in the National Forces of Liberation (FLN), a political-military group based in Chiapas in the 80s that sought to forcefully respond to the corrupt practices of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). At first, Marcos and the FLN adopted Guevara’s proactive foco theory as the practical and theoretical models for their class-driven guerrilla campaign: “[s]e planteaba una guerrilla en términos muy cercanos al foco guerrillero. En sus inicios es una guerrilla que con su accionar, con su propaganda armada, pretendía crear conciencia y jalar a otros grupos que optaran por la lucha armada, hasta culminar con una guerra popular” (Le Bot 135). But Marcos eventually
abandoned Che’s project for a socialist revolution in favor of a predominantly indigenous-centered and community-oriented democratic movement.

Marcos describes his transition from rebel leader to citizen-pupil living amongst the organized indigenous communities in Chiapas in the following way: “[s]ufrimos realmente un proceso de reeducación, de remodelación […] como si nos hubiesen desmontado todos los elementos que teníamos – marxismo, leninismo, socialismo, cultura urbana, poesía, literatura-, todo lo que formaba parte de nosotros […] nos desarmaron y nos volvieron a armar, pero de otra forma. (151). 2 Marcos’s amphibology – to disarm and to arm again in a different way – marks the seemingly forced reconstruction of his political identity from the FLN’s authoritative strategies to the EZLN’s necessary push for a collective process of indianization.

Certain national and international occurrences also contributed to this seemingly radical shift in Marcos’s movement and persona. On a national level, the electoral fraud that brought Carlos Salinas de Gortari of the PRI to power in 1988, and his later revision of Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, which resulted in the privatization of ejidos, emphasized the Mexican government’s authoritarian view on democracy and disregard for the indigenous communities. 3 Also, the end of the ideological struggles of the Cold war and the coming into effect of NAFTA in 1994, an event that Paco Ignacio Taibo II has deemed the “final kick in the stomach to the indigenous communities” led the PRI state to emphasize international capital and affairs rather than to focus on the local communities’ rights and needs (“Zapatistas” 22). Such practices and events thrust the Zapatistas into an international context that required a new type of revolutionary movement and leader that would capitalize on the benefits of living in an electronic era while at the same time recognizing the diverse citizens, and not the leaders, as its base (Kampwirth 228).
In response to this new situation, Marcos aims to carry out revolution in a different way through the “Zapatista idea.” Such an approach combines the use of Internet and other mass media resources with the “public spectacle” as a means to quickly disseminate the Zapatistas’ political message and to gain national and international attention and support (Naomi Klein, “The Unknown Icon”). In this context, Marcos’s “public face” as masked spokesman promotes the illusion, but not necessarily the reality, of a unified force, strength and political action in a democratic reformist movement run purportedly for and by the people (Arendt 178-179).

Marcos’s discourse also replaces key utopian aims associated with past political struggles – the assumption of power to bring about socialism – with a nation-centered democratic rhetoric drawing on the achievements of former national heroes and questions of land, national identity, and the inclusion of “others” in a horizontal society constructed from the bottom up (Benjamin 60). Such a shift in focus prompts Marcos to follow a nation-centered model in the creation of his political persona and democratic leadership style as well.

Marcos’ emergence as a spokesman for the Zapatistas in the early 90s inevitably evoked images of Zapata and his former struggle. Enrique Rajchenberg and Catherine Héau-Lambert explain that in that moment for Mexico “[d]e la identidad individual de Marcos, oculta tras el pasamontañas, sólo quedaba la identidad simbólica de un héro guerrillero agrarista [y] […] defensor del pueblo campesino que murió por sus ideales.” In his “First Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle” (1994), Marcos strives to transform the symbolic link between Zapata’s and the Contemporary Zapatista’s fight into a real historical and political one by emphasizing the importance of respecting the changes outlined in the 1917 Constitution, the EZLN’s “Magna Carta.” The association between such causes reveals that though one of the Emiliano Zapata’s biggest triumphs during the 1910 Revolution was Agrarian reform and the subsequent public and
legal recognition of certain minority groups, the same fight persists over seventy years later, which Marcos interprets as a symbolic and real call for action.

If Marcos uses Zapata’s name to initiate a discussion on reform and recognition in a corrupt neoliberal State, he borrows nonviolent strategies from the leaders of the Student Movement of 1968 to unveil the undemocratic practices of then PRI President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, whose actions, according to Carlos Monsiváis, suggested that “reprimir es gobernar” (xi). Though the participants in the 68’ protests sought to establish a dialogue with government officials on democratic reform from within, the State responded with the massacre of more than 350 citizens and then silenced the truth for decades (Carey 221). On the 30th anniversary of this massacre, Marcos uses his word as a weapon of resistance against the government’s implicit breeching of a social (democratic) contract with citizens in a global age by calling out for the construction of a different form of democracy rooted in those that resist, those that continue, those that died and those that survived 68’ and now 98’: “el movimiento de 1968 marcó la historia de este país de manera definitiva. Entonces se enfrentaron dos países: el construido sobre la base del autoritarismo, la intolerancia, la represión y la explotación más brutales; y el que se quería y quiere construir sobre la democracia, la inclusión, la libertad y la justicia” (Nuestra arma 155). Marcos’s mask is symbolic of the ongoing fight between the two Mexicos that he suggests emerge as a result of the massacre: those who hide the truth and those who seek to expose it.

Marcos’s presentation of his masked self to the public in relation to these two national events is a political gesture he uses to link his persona and political campaign to a diverse, but explicit audience: the wide ranging sectors of citizens – peasants, indigenous, and students – that took part in such movements, suggesting that he hopes that the base of the contemporary
Zapatista movement will be equally as diverse. Such an approach is observed in his use of the metaphor of the bridge in his writings - “un puente múltiple, un pulpo caminante” (Nuestra arma 204) – to unite all sectors of Mexican society and other groups around the world fighting against injustices from their respective countries and in their difference and distinct battles in a Zapatista ideology: “a Zapatista is anyone anywhere fighting injustice” (Klein 116). However, many have argued that the spokesman’s universalist-aims leave out just as many groups as they include, especially after the initial buzz surrounding the movement began to die down in the late 90’s.

Marcos is not the first rebel to dramatize revolution by incorporating such theatrical concepts as the persona and the mask into the formation of his political identity and movement. Participants in the French Revolution, for instance, often used the mask as a metaphor to describe the revolutionary process as a power struggle between the “unspoiled, honest face” of the people and the “mask of hypocrisy” of the ruling class” (Arendt 102). Mexican authors Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes have previously linked the mask to a silencing of an intellectual and political consciousness or the shame associated with an unstable national identity in a state of a perpetual failed Revolution, respectively. For Marcos, though, similar to the French revolutionaries, the mask represents the paradox of the movement: in covering their faces, the Zapatistas simultaneously reveal themselves in their unity, diversity, and dignity to the government and expose the true (corrupt) face of democracy in Mexico.

But, as Carlos Monsiváis is quick to point out, Marcos’s mask also implies the erasure of the dominant “I” that was so common to past revolutionary movements, and brings to the fore instead the collective personality of Marcos, best noted in the Zapatista slogan – “todos somos Marcos” (qtd. in Jacobo 67). This is perhaps best exemplified in the Zapatista’s video-morphing of one of Marcos’s televised speeches to the people from the remote location of La
Realidad, Chiapas (2006) into a music video of sorts starring the multiple faces of Zapatismo.\textsuperscript{11} In this public media spectacle, Marcos projects his mirror image onto the people (which is that of the people) and then grasps the attention of all – especially the media – when he promises to remove his mask, thus revealing his true identity to the world (emphasis mine). The suspense rises as Marcos begins to remove his revolutionary paraphernalia – headphones, pipe, bullet cartridges, and cap – in the form of a pseudo-strip-tease accompanied by one of the well-known Zapatista anthems, Manu Chao’s “EZLN.” Yet, just as he is about to remove his back ski-mask, in a scene reminiscent of Michael Jackson’s “Black and White” video, Marcos morphs into someone else, and that person into someone else, and so on, suggesting that this symbolic leader is what Ernesto Laclau calls an “empty signifier,” a figurative space that anyone and everyone fighting against injustices around the world can occupy at any given time (5).

Apart from alluding to his “pop-star” status, something that Marcos himself has been highly critical of in the media but has taken full advantage of for the sake of the cause, through his mask and slogan, he seems to suggest– but not enforce – the possibility of a new international “imagined community” that erases the differences among citizens –through their difference: “los tan iguales en la diferencia” (\textit{Nuestra arma} 204). Such a process is akin to what Diana Taylor describes as “the performativity of nation-ness.” In projecting himself as the people, this self-described \textit{mestizo} spokesman, allows for “very different people [to] imagine they share commonalities and […] to identify as part of a group” (92). But the mask not only prompts distinct groups to “perform” under same collective identity; it provides them with the opportunity to rewrite the “naturalizing [patriarchal] narrative” of the past, which defines them as a passive subalteren mass, by acting in the present as conscious agents working toward a common political and democratic goal (Butler 146-147).\textsuperscript{12}
Marcos’s aim to achieve the “leveling of all social differences” by uniting all sectors of society in spite of and in their difference under the banner of universalism (but not socialism) does not come without consequences (Zizek 165). His push to cover up what we should interpret as the anxieties of a post-Marxist (and post-utopian) era results in what theorist Slavoj Zizek calls a “politics of the particular (ethnic, sexual, etc.) […] in which every particular group is ‘accounted for’ (208). Marcos not only “accounts for” previously silenced voices in his public appearances and texts, as we will see below, but he places them at the center of his democratic project and as the driving force for change from within the system and around the world. Such an action suggests that Marcos is not only “politically correct,” but he is anti-machista, pro-women’s, homosexual, children’s, and indigenous rights – he is anything and everything anyone fighting injustice anywhere around the world: “[u]n hombre o una mujer cualquiera, de cualquier color y en una lengua cualquiera, dice y se dice “¡Ya basta!” (122). This “imaginary world” that Marcos appropriately from the isolated Zapatista territory (La Realidad, Chipas), is necessary to “ensure the success of the [Zapatista] operation” (Baudrillard 12). It is only in imagining themselves as part of a national fight against neoliberalism on a global stage that the Zapatista identity and idea come to life.

Marcos’s “omnipresent” mask and unification of all Zapatistas under such a slogan also serves an aesthetic purpose (Stevens 54). In his speeches and writings, he actively strives to sanitize his political persona of any traces of an aspiration to power by speaking from the position of a “correct” dialectic non-authoritative “I.” Such an aim would explain his self-identification as Subcomandante Marcos and not Comandante Marcos – a relegation he claims he earned due to his impatience with the international press (Yo, Marcos 92). It also elucidates his decision to mask his “I” with the first person plural “nosotros” or “we” that dominates his
discourse. In relation to this collective “we,” in his writings, Marcos uses heteronyms or characters specific to indigenous and Hispanic oral, literary and cultural traditions. Such an approach allows him to break with past visions of the authoritative rebel leader by dispersing his dominant “I,” and disseminating his views on race, age, social class, gender, and sexual orientation without ever having to assume a position of real or textual authority. 13 Marcos sums up such goals in his 2001 interview with Carlos Monsiváis: “[l]o fundamental de nuestra lucha es la demanda de los derechos y la cultura indígenas, porque eso somos. En torno a esto se da el reconocimiento a la diferencia. De allí nuestra liga con el movimiento homosexual y de lesbianas, y también con otros movimientos marginados” (“Entrevista” 38).

Two characters Marcos uses to disseminate his message at home and abroad are Viejo Antonio (“Old Antonio”) a respected elder of the Mayan indigenous community in Chiapas who served as Marcos’s mentor during his time with the FLN on the mountain, and the beetle knight errant, “Don Durito de la Selva Lacandona” (McCaughan 73). Marcos’s combination of indigenous Mayan and Hispanic traditions through such voices suggests that though he writes primarily to promote the political cause of the less privileged sectors of Mexican society, he does not surrender his mestizo identity nor does he forget that Mexico, in the end, is a mestizo nation.

The relationship between Old Antonio and Marcos is rooted in the oral didactic indigenous tradition first established by Rosario Castellanos in Balún Canán (1957) and most recently expressed in Francisco Garza Quevedo’s film El Violín (2005) that “the indigenous people decide, while the mestizos […] learn from them” (Vanden Berghe and Maddens 128). In “La historia de las preguntas,” the exchanges between the esteemed indigenous elder and his young and naïve pupil (Marcos, pre-1994), serve to situate Emiliano Zapata’s historical,
political, and personal achievements within a mythical Mayan indigenous framework rather than a heroic western one.

In the opening of the story, when Old Antonio asks Marcos who he is and what he is fighting for, the young rebel responds with a list of what he interprets as definitive characteristics of Revolution in Mexico: “Zapata y Villa y la revolución y la tierra y la injusticia y el hambre y la ignorancia y la enfermedad y la represión y todo […] el Plan de Ayala, la campaña militar, la organización de los pueblos, la traición de Chinameca” (Nuestra arma 436). Yet Old Antonio sets out to correct Marcos’s view of Revolution and of Zapata by explaining the “rebel of the south’s” unknown link to mythical figures Ik’al and Votán Zapata, two Mayan gods that learned to walk as one by asking each other questions, continuously moving forward, and working together towards a common goal: “[y] entonces así aprendieron los hombres y mujeres verdaderos que las preguntas sirven para caminar, no para quedarse parados así nomás […] Nunca se están quietos” (438). But after Old Antonio concludes Zapata’s real story through that of Ik’al, Votán and their journey “entre la luz y la sombra,” Marcos misses the point and asks “¿Y Zapata?” Old Antonio responds: “Ya aprendiste que para saber y para caminar hay que preguntar” (438).

In closing, Old Antonio passes on to Marcos an old black and white photograph of Zapata taken in 1910. The image contains symbols Marcos and his group associate with successful armed revolutions: a clenched fist, rifle, bullets, and Zapata’s signature sombrero. But what he fails to notice until Old Antonio reveals Zapata’s mythical-indigenous bloodline is that Zapata is not alone; he is situated in between two staircases – one dark, with many other Zapatistas “de rostros oscuros” in the background – and another illuminated by a light leading to an unknown but promising future that only his steps are capable of leading to (438).
Through his relationship with Old Antonio, an esteemed elder and source of the often forgotten socio-cultural and political knowledge related to the Mayan communities, Marcos presents himself modestly as an inexperienced revolutionary who takes at face value conventional representations of revolution and of Zapata as a leader and national hero. Yet at the same time, Marcos’s interactions with his mentor allow him to tailor Zapata and Zapatista discourse, both common to a pre-EZLN time, to an age of globalization and new technologies. In this vein, we should interpret Old Antonio’s oral history, presence on the mountain, and two-dimensional photograph of Zapata, which he keeps to himself until meeting Marcos, as products of the revolution in a previous era. On the other hand, Marcos, with his revolutionary paraphernalia, use of the Internet and mass media, and diverse national and international following and support point toward the future of the revolution in a Latin American context.

Another character Marcos speaks through in many of his writings is the quijotesque storyteller Don Durito de la Selva Lacandona, who always appears before the people with his loyal squire and scribe SupMarcos in his rewritings of age-old fairytales. In an attempt to simultaneously educate and entertain his public through the traditional teaching by contraries—a tradition that dates back to the Renaissance dialogue - Marcos attributes to Durito—the self-described ultimate (beetle) warrior that women dream of and men aspire to become – qualities associated with former rebel leaders that the media assigns to him (and, as we saw above, rightly so) in an attempt to insert him into the same revolutionary tradition: “Este pequeño escarabajo decide recorrer los caminos del mundo para […] aliviar al enfermo, apoyar al débil, enseñar al ignorante, humillar al poderoso, levantar al humilde […] millones de mujeres suspiran por él, miles de hombres lo nombran con respeto y cientos de miles de niños lo admitan” (Nuestra arma 311). Marcos’s parody of the image of the heroic guerrilla rebel through such statements and in
his presentation of himself to the public as SupMarcos, the “not quite Commander,” brings to light characteristics that he believes a rebel leader in a global era should not possess: modesty, diplomacy, and respect for differences. But, more importantly, his subordinate position also offers him the opportunity to indirectly criticize the neoliberal Mexican State and to educate and entertain the people through a literary perspective (Ponce de León xxvii-xxviii).

In “La historia del ratoncito y el gatito,” Don Durito retells the tale of the rivalry between the cat and the mouse. Durito’s version is a political allegory of the fight between the neoliberal State in Mexico (post-NAFTA) – the cat – and the Zapatistas – the mouse. Different from traditional interpretations of such a tale, in the end, the mouse wins when he consciously takes control of his destiny, screams, “Ya basta!” and eats the cat.

Durito opens his story by clearly outlining the roles he and his loyal squire will occupy in the narrative (330). While Durito acts as both SupMarcos’s superior and as the erudite educator of the masses, SupMarcos is a diplomat, a mediator that simply relays Durito’s messages in the form of communiqués to the citizens of Mexico. In this particular instance, while Durito tells the story, he orders SupMarcos to write to the people of Mexico to outline what his superior believes are the basic requirements needed to ensure that diplomatic relations exist among countries. Durito’s instructions for such an assignment include explicit orders to eliminate topics such as the forces of rapid intervention, economic programs, and the flight of capital, definitive practices of the Mexican government during Ernesto Zedillo’s presidency (1994-2000).

Implicit in the introductory and concluding words to Durito’s story is Marcos’s criticism of Zedillo’s neoliberal policies. When the State places more emphasis on a desire to attract foreign capital and to strengthen the relations abroad through the privatization of lands and the deregulation of the economy, and accordingly concerns itself less with the conditions at home,
the people and not the Mexican government pay the high political price. Such “democratic”
practices point to why Ernesto Laclau defines democracy – a form of politics that, is theoretically
formed of and by the people – as a hegemonic political system in which the continuous power
play between the universal (the democratic “head of state”) and the particular (the different
social groups represented by democracy) inevitably results in the oppression or exclusion of
certain groups: “[d]emocracy requires the constant recreation of the gap between the universal
and the particular, between the empty place of power and the transient forces occupying it – in
other words […] democracy can only flourish in a hegemonically constructed space” (13). But,
as I have tried to point out above, Marcos’s attempt to represent all sectors of society in his fight
against a neoliberal government is just as futile.

Marcos’s emphasis on different sectors’ struggles for recognition appears in a unified
fashion in “La verdadera historia de Mary Read y Anne Bonny,” a tale of two female pirates who
fall in love despite the fact that they are of the same gender (358). Though Durito takes on the
central role as narrator of the story, SupMarcos has the first and last words, which key us in on
how to interpret the text. Upon Durito’s request and before his mentor even begins to relate his
story, SupMarcos points out several significant unknown details that the reader is not to
overlook: the author, public (even though the public is stated quite clearly as the lesbians,
homosexuals, transgender and transvestites of the world), gender of the protagonists and date of
publication. SupMarcos’s voice pops up again at the end to clarify the complex concept of
“double otherness” that Durito refers to in his concluding words: “Cuando luchamos por cambiar
las cosas, muchas veces, olvidamos que eso incluye cambiarnos a nosotros mismos,”
highlighting the importance of the relationship between the universal and the particular in a
Zapatista context (358).
This same message appears in another one of Marcos’s essays in reference to a different group of “doubly othered” and doubly dominated citizens: the Zapatista women. Not only do their husbands rule these women at home, but also they suffer from higher percentages of illiteracy, are paid lower wages and are marginalized by a system that fails to recognize equal rights between men and women (70). Precisely because of their double domination, the female participants in Zapatismo fight harder than the average citizen for rights and accordingly their political awakening is doubly noted or as Marcos explains, the double nightmare that is their life doubles their political awakening (70). The result of the pressure such women feel to change society through themselves is the birth of a keen awareness of humanity and human rights, which Marcos ties to a feminine consciousness: “La conciencia de humanidad pasa a conciencia de femininidad, el saberse seres humanos implica el saberse mujeres y luchar. No necesitan ya que nadie hable por ellas, su palabra sigue la doble ruta de la rebeldía con motor propio” (71).

In the abovementioned texts, Marcos evades a position of power by placing himself in the periphery of the text as SupMarcos while Durito takes center stage and openly proclaims his message to the people. Yet SupMarcos’s emphasis on mediation, guidance, interpretation, and inclusion – key concepts in the Zapatista’s interpretation of democracy– clearly highlight his push to create a new type of movement that situates often forgotten perspectives and identities at the core of his fight for recognition and inclusion (Nuestra arma 126).

At the base of Marcos’s proposal for an inclusive democracy sits the collective body of citizens that seem to rapidly move from a passive subaltern mass that the State has historically silenced and ignored to active participatory agents in a collective campaign against neoliberalism. Such a shift would convert the Zapatistas – at least on a superficial level – into
what Hardt and Negri describe as a faceless autonomous post-national “multitude” that is guided, educated, and moved to action, but not commanded by Marcos (100).

In spite of his purportedly humble intentions, Marcos’s democratic performance and aim to unite all sectors of society under the umbrella of one symbolic fight against neoliberalism, a political strategy evidenced most recently in the “Other Campaign” (2006) is as utopic as the revolutions of the 60s. Marcos’s approach to revolution in the 21st century suggests that “absolute democracy” – a political system that Baruch Spinoza defined once as a “new form of freedom” linked to a “people in the making” (158) is the new imagined community or utopia of the 21st century, at least in a Zapatista context (emphasis mine). We could interpret the “dissolution” of Marcos as person and persona along these same lines.

On January 1, 1994, “Marcos” as name, mask, real, and “social flesh” becomes the body through which Zapatistas act on and carry out their political desires (Hardt and Negri 100). Yet, twenty years later, on May 24, 2014, this same figure comes forth to claim his inexistence and subsequently re-name himself as one Comandante Galeano in remembrance of a fallen indigenous comrade. In a lengthy speech titled “Entre la luz y la sombra” – the same title Old Antonio gives to Zapata’s mythical origin – that is reminiscent of Che Guevara’s nostalgic 1965 “Farewell Letter to Fidel Castro,” Marcos highlights key moments of the Zapatista fight, refutes rumors of strategic and political failures, and even, amidst descriptions of indigenous dreams, improbable worlds, and an unclear future and direction for the movement, admits that the EZLN, not unlike previous rebel groups, has a hierarchical structural leadership: “[n]o escondemos que somos un ejército, con su estructura piramidal, su centro de mando, sus decisiones de arriba hacia abajo.” But, the central point of Marcos’s public discourse is another one: the history behind the strategic creation and public “death” of “Marcos.”
Before making their first public appearance, the Zapatistas created “Marcos” to facilitate dialogue between the EZLN, the Mexican government, and the media and to draw attention to the movement. The strategy worked. The masked spokesman grabbed the attention of the people and of the national and international lines of mass media and communication from the start. But this “imaginary world” created for and by the Zapatistas to ensure the ongoing success of an unarmed democratic reformist movement in a global era, similar to the fame of Freddy Alborta’s photograph of a somber, bearded Che Guevara post-1967, has been re-appropriated by the media (Baudrillard 12). Rather than gain political support and attention for the Zapatistas, Marcos has become what J. Baudrillard calls a “deterrence machine,” that both the media and the Zapatistas, we might argue, use to revive the Zapatista dilemma at key moments in the movement’s history. Such should be the interpretation of the 2006 “La otra campaña,” which Marcos recognizes as “la más audaz y la más Zapatista de las iniciativas que hemos lanzado hasta ahora.”

In this vein, Marcos’s announcement of the inexistence and “death” of “Marcos” and his defining characteristics – name, ski-mask, heteronyms (Old Antonio and Don Durito), and public appearances – is the Zapatista’s way of regaining control of the movement. In defining “Marcos” as a “simulacrum” or “substance […] without origin or reality” the former spokesman eliminates all possibilities for imitation, duplication, or false representation of the image and movement in the future, something that Che Guevara did not have the luxury of doing (1-2). By “retiring” his “Marcos” and his mask and subsequently re-naming himself, Marcos, like many rebels before him, succeeds in disappearing from the spotlight while at the same time maintaining the suspense surrounding and interest in the Zapatista movement and cause.
The movement of 68’ originated in the form of a peaceful protest that sought to take advantage of the growing national and international attention placed on Mexico, chiefly Mexico City, due to the 1968 Olympic Games to be hosted there that same year. The bibliography on this movement is vast, but some valuable resources include:

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VO3pRROqmDc
2. See Yvon Le Bot’s interview with Marcos, “Encuentro con las comunidades indígenas: el choque cultural,” in Subcomandante Marcos: El sueño zapatista (1997). Also see the following articles published in La Jornada: Luis Hernández Navarro’s “Sublevación en la Lacandona” (January 4, 1994), and Blanche Petrich and Elio Henríquez’s article “Ellos dijeron: la muerte es nuestra, ahora decidimos cómo tomarla” (February 6, 1994). See also Juan González Esponda and Elizabeth Pólito Barrios’s “Notas para comprender el origen de la rebelión zapatista” in Revista Chiapas 1 (1994).
3. While Kampwirth would argue, and I agree, that the continual dominance of the PRI in the political sphere in Mexico and this party’s incessant control over and disregard for the land and rights of the indigenous populations was one of the most determining factors in the EZLN’s decision to declare war on the State of Mexico on January 1, 1994, Salinas de Gortari’s and subsequent president’s neoliberal practices, revisions to the Constitution of 1917 and ensuing disrespect for the democratic spirit of such a document thrust the Zapatistas into action (235).
4. One of the first steps that Subcomandante Marcos took to gain international attention for the Zapatista movement was his 1994 interview with reporter Ed Bradley of 60 minutes. Marcos used this international stage to outline the reasons for the Zapatista uprising and goals of the movement and to gain the support of the North American people. The Zapatistas have also created an official website (www.ezln.org), which went live in 1994 and contains up-to-date information, photographs, studies, and opinions related to the movement. In addition, they formed Yahoo discussion groups and launched Radio Insurgente, a Zapatista radio network that is broadcast live from Chiapas (http://www.radioinsurgente.org/). Finally, as recently as 2006, the Zapatistas created a blog (http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/) that provides information regarding the cross-country march nicknamed Zapatour and campaign titled “The Other Campaign” launched by the Zapatistas that same year in an effort to unite distinct resistance groups across Mexico in their difference and in their fight to survive in a (non)democratic Mexico.
5. See http://www.revistachiapas.org/No2/ch2heau-rajch.html. Also, in Marcos, la genial impostura (2005), Maite Rico Beltrand de la Grange explains: “[e]sta foto de Marcos (con su caballo) hace pensar inevitablemente en Emiliano Zapata, el general incorruptible de la Revolución de 1910)” (32). Similarly, in Zapata Lives!: Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico (2002), Lynn Stephen argues that from the onset, the Zapatistas’ “Name, methods, and message clearly invoked the spirit of the Mexican Revolution, advancing a simple platform of work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice, and peace in the names of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa” (144).
6. Marcos states: “La dictadura porfirista nos negó la aplicación justa de leyes de Reforma y el pueblo se rebeló formando sus propios líderes, surgieron Villa y Zapata, hombres pobres como nosotros a los que se nos ha negado la preparación más elemental para así poder utilizarnos como carne de cañón y saquear las riquezas de nuestra patria sin importarles […] que no tengamos nada, absolutamente nada […] Pero nosotros HOY DECIMOS ¡BASTA!, somos los herederos de los verdaderos forjadores de nuestra nacionalidad, los desposeídos somos millones y llamamos a todos nuestros hermanos a que se sumen a este llamado como el único camino para no morir de hambre ante la ambición insaciable de una dictadura de más de 70 años encabezada por una camarilla de traidores que representan a los grupos más conservadores y vendepatrias” (Nuestra arma 13). With this, Marcos uses the government’s perception of the indigenous peoples as “carne de cañón” an “easy target” and the complete disregard for and inhumane treatment of such groups in Mexico as a means to gain the support of the women, children, elderly, and indigenous in an uprising against the oppressive Mexican government.
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9. The movement of 68’ originated in the form of a peaceful protest that sought to take advantage of the growing national and international attention placed on Mexico, chiefly Mexico City, due to the 1968 Olympic Games to be hosted there that same year. The bibliography on this movement is vast, but some valuable resources include:


9 In his 1963 article “La máscara de esta década,” Carlos Fuentes describes the mask in much the same way in its relation to Power. However, for Fuentes, the mask would not only represent the face of Power and the institutionalization of what he calls a (perpetual) failed Revolution in Mexico, but would also come to symbolize the silencing of a political, moral, and intellectual consciousness on the part of Mexican citizens (iii-iv).

10 This political proposal actually reverses the concept Corpus Misticum Politicum that has dominated political thought at least since Plato, if not before, according to José A. Maravall, and completely breaks with the colonial mandate and idea of a hierarchical power (191-214). The Zapatista slogan “Todos somos Marcos” suggests that all citizens form the body but the leader, who was historically the king, is not the head of the political body but a mere part and spokesperson of the collective body of Zapatistas.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGP8TNaG-f0

12 In “Los tan iguales en la diferencia,” Marcos affirms the following: “a]hora es claro que las demandas indígenas de EZLN […] [r]esponen a las aspiraciones de todos los pueblos indios de estas tierras y reflejan, con sus particularidades específicas, los anhelos de los indígenas de todo el continente americano” (Nuestra arma 205).

13 Marcos is not the first writer to incorporate heteronyms in his creative works in an attempt to disperse his own identity and to propose an alternative “I.” Two literary figures of the 20th century, Portuguese poet and literary critic Fernando Pessoa, and American poet Ezra Pound, also used this strategy to either fragment or unveil their own identities in their writing, as strategy that Marcos was well aware of. See The Book of Disquiet (1915) and Personae (1909) by Pessoa and Pound, respectively.

14 In Marcos’ relationship with his heteronyms, one sees traces of the literary tradition of the Renaissance dialogue. Such a tradition allowed authors to offer multiple perspectives in a forceless and pedagogic way on universal topics relevant to the period such as human dignity, and the rational competence of man (Friedlein 19).

15 For further analyses of the public persona of Subcomandante Marcos see the following articles included in The Zapatista Reader (2002): Octavio Paz’s “The Media Spectacle Comes to Mexico,” Alma Guillermoprieto’s “The Unmasking,” Andres Oppenheimer’s “Guerrillas in the Mist,” and Naomi Klein’s “The Unknown Icon.” Also see “Subcomandante Marcos Interview with Ed Bradley” (1994) and José Quintero’s Entrevista al Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos on El loco de la colina (2006).

16 Marcos highlights the demoralizing effects of Zedillo’s embrace of neoliberalism on the indigenous communities in Chiapas in two letters he writes to him in 1994 and in 2000 (Nuestra arma 72, 164). For Marcos’ further discussion of this concept and its consequences see also “Palabras en el Acto de Inicio del Primer Encuentro Intercontinental por la Humanidad y contra el Neoliberalismo” (112), “Mañana comienza hoy” (Nuestra arma 120), “Segunda Declaración de la Realidad por la Humanidad y contra el Neoliberalismo” (127), “La sociedad civil, el concepto incómodo y la realidad molesta” (131), “El caracol del fin y el principio” (136), “Los misterios de la Cueva del deseo” (319) and “Otra nube, otra botella y otra carta de Durito” (341).

17 “A fe mía que la indefinición entre masculino o femenino se explica por sí sola en la epístola. La fecha está emborronada […] [p]ero también me parece que igual pudo haber sido escrita hace siglos o hace semanas. Ya me entenderéis.”

19. “The multitude,” they explain, “is a diffuse set of singularities that produce a common life; it is a kind of social flesh that organizes itself into a new social body” (349).