

PEDAGOGY OF INTERCAMBIO: MOVEMENTS AT THE ENDS OF EMPIRE¹

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¹→ La traducción de este artículo al español está disponible para su descarga gratuita en www.lapes.org; a tradução deste artigo para o português está disponível gratuitamente para download em www.lapes.org.

We are strangers in our own land in the same way you are in yours. When Goldman Environmental Prize recipient Alexis Massol González welcomed a group of working-class high school students of color from San Diego, California to his hometown of Adjuntas, Puerto Rico, he began by listening. He asked each young person about their stories. The week that these students traveled to Puerto Rico to learn about resistance movements coincided with the week that President Trump had ordered immigration raids in their own hometown. Alexis and other community members from that small mountainside town in the central mid-west of Puerto Rico listened attentively as the students shared how their parents were at risk of deportation despite living in the U.S. for over 30 years, and how the students themselves faced uncertain futures with the impending expiration of DACA.²

Alexis then talked about Puerto Rico's colonial relationship to the United States. When students visited Puerto Rico, the island had not yet recovered from the devastation of Hurricane Maria in 2017, and subsequent organized dispossession by the U.S. federal government. President Trump's deliberately slow-moving relief efforts starved the island colony of basic shelter, water, and medicine while tightening the dependency of Puerto Ricans on the mainland and on their territorial government. Alexis also commented on *La Junta*, or the Fiscal Control Board, appointed by the U.S. Congress that effectively overruled all local authority, thus hindering the development of Puerto Rico's democracy. *Puerto Ricans live in a country that is not theirs, stated Alexis, just like you all live in a country that is not yours.*

When I think about the essence of *intercambio* – this particular kind of exchange that we grapple with in this article – I think of this specific conversation between Alexis and the student delegation that I led to Puerto Rico in June 2019. I think of the exchange of struggles, dreams, and ideas across geographies that inspires us to think about our interconnectedness and the possibility of a different world. Alexis also told the story of how his community managed to drive out transnational mining companies from Puerto Rico's mountain forests in the 1980s.

2 → Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, was a policy by the previous President, Barack Obama, that allowed for some people who had entered the U.S. as children to go to school, work, and not be subject to deportation.

He talked about the conservationist efforts of his organization, Casa Pueblo, and their current project for self-determination. His community of Adjuntas was relatively better off than many communities on the island due to Casa Pueblo's autonomous projects: the generation of renewable solar energy, sustainable agriculture, and a coffee cooperative, among others. Despite Casa Pueblo's significant advancement towards self-determination, the rest of the island continues to be debilitated by its colonial relationship to the U.S. Alexis concluded with a recognition of how we are experiencing the brunt of different policies, in different places, but emanating from the same seat of power; we are connected by the same aggressor. We just find ourselves at different ends of empire.

The Zapatistas, a movement carrying out its own project for autonomy and self-determination in southern Mexico, describe capitalism as a many-headed Hydra. They are referencing the Hydra of Lerna in Greek and Roman mythology, a serpentine water monster that would regenerate two new heads for every one that was chopped off.³ Capitalism continuously changes its face and reinvents itself for new modes of exploitation. It simultaneously attacks many communities throughout the world with its many heads that mutate and regrow. Weapons specialized to destroy each of us differently. The voracity of capital – the Hydra's stomach – and circulation of toxins from center to extremities – its veins and lymph – are the complex systems of neoliberal extraction and direct repression. We are connected by this giant beast. Yet we are also connected by our goals to free ourselves from its hunger. We are connected by the ends of empire in this second sense. We seek the end, or termination, of empire.

We understand a pedagogy of *intercambio* as existing within ephemeral exchanges across time and space, among people, social movements, or subjects found at the ends of empire. To be clear, *intercambio* does not mean charity trips or “alternative breaks” where the privileged offer their knowledge to people who they perceive to be in need of their help. Nor does *intercambio* mean educational trips where participants act as passive recipients of a new culture. *Intercambio* is

3 Sixth Commission of the EZLN, *Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist I* (Durham: Paperboat Press, 2016).

dialogical as described by Paulo Freire.⁴ It is learning that happens in dialogue with others, a process of reciprocal sharing. In that process, we create and recreate ourselves. On one occasion, during my participation in a U.S. people of color delegation to Zapatista territories, I recall being in a meeting with the Junta de Buen Gobierno, the leadership council of Caracol Morelia,⁵ one of the autonomous Zapatista regions. One of our delegates asked the Zapatistas about how we could best support their movement. *The best way you can help us, they responded, is by returning to your community and organizing.* Intercambio requires a return to one's own context and the work of translating the lessons learned during intercambio for one's own community.

This writing emerged out of an encuentro⁶ called Hacer Escuela, in Philadelphia in 2019. In many ways, Hacer Escuela was an intercambio: gathering, sharing, learning, and returning to our struggles at our respective ends of empire. Gathered were educator activists from the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, Black teacher union organizers in Philadelphia, university and community-based educators in the United States, and scholars of Black and Indigenous and Latin American studies. We, David and Wayne, presented on urban Zapatismo, drawing from our questions on how Zapatista teachings can be translated to our own conditions in San Diego, on Kumeyaay land. Here, David is currently a teacher-organizer and Wayne is a university professor. Although geographically close, there is great distance between the two places where we “do school.” David has been active for years with Colectivo Zapatista in San Diego. He has organized

4 → Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000).

5 → The actual name of the Caracol, or autonomous Zapatista region, is *Torbellino de nuestras palabras*, but most call it Morelia in reference to its previous name when Caracoles were formerly referred to as Aguascalientes.

6 → We intentionally use the word encuentro to disrupt the idea of a “conference” where certain individuals are positioned as holders of knowledge. The Zapatistas use encuentro to describe horizontal gatherings where individuals come together from different walks of life to exchange and share information with each other. In the preface to *Our Word is Our Weapon*, Juana Rodríguez writes, “Where we couldn’t find the appropriate values in the English choice of word, such as *meeting, gathering* or *encounter* for the word *encuentro* – the elements of surprise, of familiarity, of the meeting of the minds, the spiritual components implied in the Spanish were simply not found in one single word – we used the Spanish.” (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), xxxi.

exchanges between communities of organizers and youth in the cities where he taught, and self-determination movements in Chiapas, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Much of this work is based on the intercambios in which David has participated and led with his own students from urban communities in San Diego and San Francisco. We write sometimes as “I” and other times as “we”, to make clear our different contributions to this collaborative writing.

In this article we work through the *who* and the *what* of a pedagogy of intercambio. Who participates in intercambio? Whose relations are separated by imperial cartographies? We discuss our understandings of who should participate in intercambio. This helps us plan intercambios and helps us understand their purpose. What do we bring to intercambio? What do we bring back from intercambio? What do we share? What do we learn? These questions make us think about the translation, or the work of thinking about how to apply what is learned through intercambio in one's own community. Throughout this writing, we reference examples of intercambio from David's experiences, as well as learnings from the Zapatistas. These are questions that we are asking ourselves. We share them with you, who might be thinking about your own learnings in dialogue with your relatives at the ends of empire.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN INTERCAMBIO? NOS/OTRAS

We, nos/otras, are the participants of intercambio. We draw from Gloria Anzaldúa's respect for how difficult it is to become nosotras (“us”).⁷ For Anzaldúa, nos/otras reveals that how within every “we”, there are we who possess and we who are othered. There is always difference, diversity, and some marginalization even within social movements. And even within intercambio. The Zapatistas often say, “We are you.” For them, this simple statement reflects a nuanced worldview. They recognize that we do not suffer identically, we cannot organize homogeneously, and we carry different seeds of liberation on our unique paths.

7 → Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristóbal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the subway at 10pm, a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains.⁸

Subcomandante Marcos is speaking not of himself, but of the collective difference that refuses domination. For the Zapatistas, it is not our sameness but our differences that unite us. It is our respect for difference that teaches us.

For Anzaldúa, “nos/otras” also reveals the separations that empire and colonization invented and enforces. Participants in intercambio are not meant to visit with each other, not meant to exchange welcomes and stories and ceremony and strategies. Our relations are separated by colonization. We are your distant relations meant to be forgotten at the ends of empire.⁹ We are meant to greet each other as enemies, as enlistees into our colonizers’ armies. So most importantly for Anzaldúa, the forward slash in “nos/otras” is also a bridge, a regeneration of our relations. Participants in intercambio cross those militarized, sexualized, and racialized borders. Once, we were made strangers, but “This time, we greet each other as relatives.”¹⁰

8 → Subcomandante Marcos in Žiga Vodovnik (ed.), *Ya basta: Ten years of the Zapatista uprising* (Oakland: AK Press, 2004), 16.

9 → Our understanding of nos/otras draws from Native feminist understandings of “self recognition.” That is, instead of merely relying on federal governments or nation-states to recognize Indigenous nations, Indigenous peoples already recognize oneselves and one another as deeply diverse and interconnected. See Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Indigenous resurgence and co-resistance,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2016): 19-34, and Angela Teresa Morrill, “Toward a Native Feminist Reading Methodology” (PhD dissertation, UC San Diego, 2016).

10 → When Fania Davis and Alayna Eagle Shield spoke about the complications between Black and Indigenous histories, such as how Black Buffalo Soldiers were conscripted into the Indian Wars, Alayna Eagle Shield said that the current moment is different in that, “this time, we greet each other as relatives.” Alayna Eagle Shield, Django Paris, Rae Paris, and Timothy San Pedro (eds.), *Education in Movement Spaces: Standing Rock to Chicago Freedom Square* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1.

That said, not all who travel are nos/otras. We do not mean to be exclusive when offering guidelines in regards to the participants of intercambio. But we also do not mean for intercambio to be reduced to a vacation, an “alternative break,” or a volunteer mission that any person with financial resources can access. As Ivan Illich famously declared to a group of North American college students eager to volunteer in Mexico, “Come to study. But do not come to help.”¹¹ To participate in intercambio, we have to question our intentions. Questions of intention are not simply personal, not simply identitarian, they are collective. What are we here to do? Who is organizing our intercambio? Who is inviting us? Who is telling us not to come?

Participants of intercambio are often the Others in the societies they come from, “all the exploited, marginalised, oppressed minorities resisting and saying ‘Enough!’”¹² Sometimes the participants of intercambio are high school students who are beginning to disconnect from the Matrix – the capitalist illusion that everyone seems to accept as reality¹³ – and to think critically about what led to the conditions around them. Sometimes they are Indigenous Zapatista women in the southeastern mountains of Mexico sharing their autonomy in an international women’s gathering. Sometimes they are university workers – a subversive glitch in the system. Sometimes they are tenants fighting against the gentrification of their neighborhood, or campesinos fighting for the right to their lands.

The 1994 uprising of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico inspired many sympathizers across the globe with its proposal of a horizontal movement from below, centered around Indigenous ways of being and understanding the world. Many people with privilege flocked to the southern Mexican state of Chiapas with the idealist intention of participating in this neo-revolution that was heard throughout the globe due to the Internet boom of the 1990s. In August of 1997, the

11 → Ivan Illich, “To Hell with Good Intentions,” remarks delivered at the 1968 *Conference on Inter-American Student Projects in Cuernavaca*, Mexico. Retrieved from http://www.swaraj.org/illich_hell.htm.

12 → Marcos in *Ya basta!*, 16.

13 → Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski, Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, and Carrie-Anne Moss, *The Matrix* (Burbank: Warner Home Video, 1999).

“Encuentro Cultural Chican@ Indígena Por La Humanidad Y Contra El Neoliberalismo” took place in Oventic – one of the autonomous Zapatista regions in Chiapas, Mexico. This was one of the first gatherings that brought people of color from the U.S. to Zapatista territories. From the gathering, the Estación Libre collective was born with the objective of “[assisting] both the indigenous struggles in Mexico and the struggle of communities of color in the United States by facilitating a fruitful interchange of experiences between these struggles.”¹⁴ Estación Libre was among the first organizations to coordinate people of color delegations to Zapatista communities at a time when a majority of the international presence and solidarity work was white dominated. Years later, other organizations like the Arte en Rebeldía y Movimientos Autónomos (ARMA) collective also led people of color delegations to Chiapas with the same understanding that it was imperative for people of color to dialogue and engage in intercambio with the Zapatistas. These organizations understood the struggles of the Zapatistas in southeastern Mexico as intrinsically tied to the struggles of people of color in the U.S.

In addition to being a person of color in the U.S., ARMA also required that delegates be engaged in community organizing efforts in their respective contexts. The participants of ARMA's first delegation were engaged in immigrants' rights work, anti-militarization and counter-recruitment work, and in implementing autonomous projects in urban settings throughout Southern California, Arizona, and Texas. The rationale behind this decision was that the Zapatista movement would serve as an inspiring example for current organizing efforts, but also that this exchange would facilitate movement building by bringing people of color activists throughout the U.S. together.

The Zapatistas themselves have been very intentional about who gets to take part in intercambio that they host in their territories. The participants of delegations coordinated by organizations like Estación Libre and ARMA were always vetted and the exchanges were only possible due to prior existing relationships among Zapatista leadership and delegation coordinators. When it comes to welcoming participants

¹⁴ → Estación Libre's mission, according its website: <http://www.angelfire.com/biz/BackToTheBlanket/Estacion.html>.

to gatherings that they have hosted, the Zapatistas have been very strategic about only inviting allies who adhere to their principles and vision for Mexico and the world. One key example of intercambio led by the Zapatistas is the Escuelita Zapatista, a transient school hosted and imparted by Zapatista communities throughout Chiapas. The objective of Escuelita Zapatista was to share the lessons that the Zapatistas have learned throughout the years in their project for autonomy with their international allies. In 2013, thousands of invitations were sent to their international network of adherents; only those with invitations participated in their intercambio.

The strategies that Estación Libre, ARMA, and movements like the Zapatistas have employed to decide who gets to participate in intercambio serve multiple purposes. For one, it is a security measure – it prevents the infiltration of their movement by the empire. It also prevents the participation of tourists or spectators that are not engaged in dismantling systems of oppression.

My participation in ARMA delegations, Escuelita Zapatista, and other intercambios across the ends of empire have inspired my own work with working class students of color. Intercambio is the most transformative pedagogy that I have employed with students in my career as a public-school teacher. The first student delegation that I led was while teaching high school Spanish in San Francisco, California. I remember inviting the volunteer group Ángeles del Desierto to my classroom and having them present on their work, along the U.S.-Mexico border, searching for lost migrants in desert areas. My students, many of them immigrants or children of immigrants, proposed the idea of a trip to the border region to assist with this humanitarian work. Their proposal was not only a response to the country's xenophobic political climate but, as one student put it, *a way of honoring the sacrifices our migrant parents made for us*. In the following weeks, a group of students came together and developed a plan for intercambio with border communities in Southern California. The idea was to learn from individuals and organizations like Ángeles del Desierto and bring back the knowledge to their own communities in San Francisco. The realization of this bold proposal, despite the confines of public schools

and our financial limitations, set a precedent for future intercambio. My students have participated in delegations to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and have even hosted intercambio by welcoming representatives from different social movements throughout Mexico.¹⁵

In most cases, these experiences are the first time that students leave their community, board a plane, travel across imperial cartographies and borders. The delegations are structured in three different phases. The first phase entails the preparation for the exchange. Students engage in an in-depth study of the social movements that we will dialogue with, and the history of the places where we will spend time. We also engage in grassroots fundraising within our communities in order to cover the complete cost of the delegation. This is particularly important because it fosters a sense of responsibility to our own communities; we have a responsibility to return to them with the knowledge and translation of the lessons learned in intercambio. The second phase is the actual intercambio: students travel and engage in an interchange of stories, struggles, reflections, and imaginations with individuals and social movements across geographies. The third phase is the return to our own context. It is the translation and application of lessons learned in intercambio.

The students that have participated in these exchanges are targets of the many-headed Hydra. They are victims of the neoliberal policies carried out in their families' countries of origin and of the anti-immigrant legislation in the U.S. Students in San Francisco are the most affected by a rapidly gentrifying city where six-figure salaries qualify as low income. Students in San Diego are preyed on by military recruiters and live in constant fear that their parents might be deported. The students that participate in intercambio cannot afford the traditional senior trip to Europe, nor do they want to partake in such a trip. Instead

15 → In November 2016, students at June Jordan School for Equity hosted the Caravan Against Repression in Mexico. The caravan was composed by representatives of students from Ayotzinapa, parents of the 43 missing students from Ayotzinapa, National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE); San Quintin farm workers; May our Daughters Return Home group ("Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa") from Ciudad Juarez denouncing femicide; victims of the attack to the people of Nochixtlan, Oaxaca; and Xochicuautla, an Otomi community fighting mega-projects/land-grabbing in Indigenous communities.

they seek the ends of empire, devising ways in which to dismantle oppressive conditions in their communities.

Unlike the capitalist idea of a "flat earth" where privileged people can travel quickly across the globe or reach out virtually to transact easily with others, intercambios are created by and for people unable or unauthorized to travel. People without profits to trade, or excess capacities to consume – people connecting in defiance of separations generated by imperial cartographies. Rather than claim total proximity (again in the flat-earth model), intercambios recognize the difficulty to ever see one another again.

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM INTERCAMBIO? TRANSLATION

When nos/otras speak and listen and learn, translation is our reality. In the case of Hacer Escuela, volunteers as well as participants themselves provided translation between English and Portuguese and Spanish. These are the colonizer's languages, but we speak them with decolonial accents. The accents are place-based. Likewise, we listen from our places. The space of translation is that in-between place, between your hands and my eyes, your voice and my ear, your writing and my reading. In that translation space of intercambio, we misunderstand the colonizer's dictionaries. We forget the grammars that we learned in the colonizer's schools. We also misunderstand one another, and that is good. Our understanding is reshaped by our location from where we view the world.

We believe translation is a place-based pedagogy. How do we translate the strategies that we learned in intercambio to our own places? Translation acknowledges that our contexts are different. That the Hydra wears different faces and chooses different venoms. That we find different tools to resist. Some strategies learned in intercambio are easily translated. Others require much more effort and imagination. Indeed, some strategies are untranslatable. In this part of our writing, we describe some of our places of translation, and some of the questions we have asked in order to help make our translations.

We also know that Zapatismo looks different in every context. It even looks different among the distinct and diverse Zapatista communities throughout Chiapas. While there are parallels, contexts across empire look very different. Translating the lessons from the Zapatistas that we have learned through Escuelita Zapatista, ARMA, Estación Libre, and the many other intercambios that they have hosted, may be some of the most difficult parts of this pedagogy that I have experienced.

Below, we share some of the questions that we ask to help us make these translations. We offer our questions not as absolute techniques that should be copied, but to share how we have been thinking about translation as part of the pedagogy of intercambio.

Material conditions:

- What are the material conditions facing Indigenous peoples in Chiapas?
- How are the material conditions in your context(s) different?
- Consider: access to land, indigenous land rights, rights to sovereignty/self-determination/autonomy, education, organizing capacities

We ask these questions to refuse metaphors. In his critiques of capitalism, Karl Marx used “slave” and “prostitute” as metaphors for the working class. According to Roderick Ferguson, these metaphors further erase the humanity of the enslaved and of the sex worker, implying that workers’ freedom is achieved in the distance from these Others at the bottom-left of capitalism.¹⁶ Marx’s writings also foreclose the “slave” and the “prostitute” as agents of social change. Yet, we know from our own communities that some of the most transformative justice projects are being carried out by the formerly enslaved, by the criminalized sex worker. Or, perhaps Marx’s metaphors make it seem that “worker”, “slave” and “prostitute” are equivalent social positions. We do not see this false equivalency as solidarity. False solidarity misses real differences within nos/otras. By contrast, the Zapatistas encourage

¹⁶ → Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

us to think about who is not exactly in the same position as ourselves. They say to think about the person who is *abajo y a la izquierda*.¹⁷ Theirs is an intersectional method – who is “below and to the left” of us is classed, raced, sexed, gendered, and can change based on power and context. They say the heart is below and to the left. Organize from this perspective.

By asking questions about material conditions, we ask ourselves to translate beyond the attractive symbols and ideas of the Zapatistas. In my experience, the students I work with come from urban settings in the United States. These are settler colonial contexts where many of us are not Indigenous, where we depend on landlords for housing, on municipalities for water, on agribusiness for food. We ask ourselves to think about Indigenous land, about Indigenous sovereignty, about our own complicity as participants in empire and capitalism. In asking, we often find ourselves in the space of the untranslatable. Rather than feel frustrated, we begin to see our limits and dream new possibilities.

Community questions:

- What are your civil societies?
- What does (counter)hegemony look like?
- What does good government look like?

The Zapatistas play with the term “civil society.” They wrote numerous witty messages, sometimes called “urgent telegrams” to “National and International Civil Society,”¹⁸ keeping it deliberately ambiguous whether they are writing to people in Mexico, in Europe, in other Indigenous nations. It is not always clear if there is one single civil society or many. Indeed, the Zapatistas have written about four different layers of Mexican society: Penthouse, Middle, Lower, and Basement Mexico.¹⁹ It is clear that they believe all parts of society have a role to

¹⁷ → The Zapatistas explain the concept of “abajo y a la izquierda” in a communiqué titled “Abajo a la izquierda” published on February 28, 2005. <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2005/02/28/abajo-a-la-izquierda/>.

¹⁸ → EZLN, in *Ya Basta!*, 240.

¹⁹ → EZLN, in *Ya Basta!*, 55-61.

play in the struggle for liberation, and that different civil societies have different tools and opportunities. The writings of Gustavo Esteva and Carlos Perez shed some light on this.²⁰ They talk about multiple layers of civil society – from the immediate community that one organizes in, to wider layers of society – almost like concentric circles, and include the international civil society. The international layer, the Zapatistas playfully call “the intergalactic civil society.” Maybe the intergalactic is where intercambio takes place.

As organizers, we might benefit to think about our strategies of influencing each layer of civil society. Students have come back from intercambio and have organized public forums in their communities to share their lessons learned. They have done this at their school sites and at local community spaces. They have also become advocates of the communities that they interchanged with – the colonialism in Puerto Rico, for example, is often neglected by public school curriculum and discussions in our community. Reporting on Cuba tends to be highly biased – there is a lot of mystery that surrounds the island and the legacy of the Cuban Revolution. Students help to demystify those international communities among their own contexts. It is movement building. It is personal connections across imperial barriers, across the ends of empire. They are changing the common sense and influencing their own civil societies. They are building their counterhegemony.

Counterhegemony is our reading of Antonio Gramsci, who writes about how the powerful come to lead our very thoughts through culture and ideas. Dominant societies come to a consensus about what is possible and what is not, often without even knowing that the process of giving away our consent is happening. Gramsci calls “hegemony” this process of dominating the “common sense.” Counterhegemony is when social movements come to influence civil societies, spreading the news of decolonization, of liberation, of what is possible. Counterhegemony changes the common sense.²¹

20 → Gustavo Esteva and Carlos Perez, “The meaning and scope of the struggle for autonomy,” *Latin American Perspectives* 28, no. 2 (2001): 120-148.

21 → Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volumes 1, 2 and 3*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg with Antonio Callari (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

Good government on Indigenous land is one of the more challenging inspirations from the Zapatistas that migrant and communities of color in the United States think about. After failed attempts at dialogue and betrayal from the Mexican government, the Zapatistas changed their strategy from one of outright war with the bad governments of Mexico to creating their own forms of self-governance. They created “good governments” or *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* and determined that they would carry out their project for autonomy in their own terms. The Mexican government is no longer one from which they live by or are ruled by. They do not expect the solution to come from the government, nor do they aspire to take power from the top. When we apply this to our context, we then are compelled to look inwards and downwards, to our community, to see our starting place.

Some students come back and join political organizations in their community. They become activists and community advocates. They see the same issues in other parts of the world as the ones they experience in their communities. In Puerto Rico, students learned about gentrification in La Perla and related it to the gentrification in their own community. Sometimes they do not get answers or strategies, but more questions. Sometimes they just get reassured that they are not the only ones dealing with such issues – that they are not alone. These student delegations that I have led are relatively recent, and their impact is yet to be felt. We know that seeds have been planted. Some students have gone off to college, some have gone off to jobs. We know that such pedagogy of intercambio has changed their lives and we are excited to see what comes of it. One student, upon her arrival from Puerto Rico, shared: I know it changed my life. *I know it's there in my head, and I know one day, when the time is right, the seed is going to bloom.*

Institutional questions:

- What is your scyborg?
- What are its decolonizing powers?
- What tasks are your scyborg working on?

These last few questions engage the idea that many of us are part of the machinery of capitalism, of empire, of colonialism. We are cyborgs. If we have access to institutions, we have privileges. We might use those privileges to rewire these machines, to turn these systems into decolonizing tools. We are system, subversive, cyborgs - thus the extra 's'.²² We formulated these questions, out of recognition that we organize within contradictions. We are not only subjected by colonial institutions; we have access to them. We face a peculiar head of the Hydra because we also live in its belly.

So then, how does Zapatismo look like on Kumeyaay land? In San Diego? We live in the Matrix, in the belly of the beast, where there is so much temptation to uphold the capitalist neoliberal system. The many-headed Hydra can be seductive at times in these kinds of geographies that reap the benefits from the exploitation of Indigenous lands in places we are not meant to see or be. We might even benefit from capitalism and neoliberalism in ways we do not know or yet understand. We are not trying to minimize any hardship or adversity that people face here in the United States, or discount that it is difficult to live in our neighborhoods and in this context. However, sometimes we have access to resources and luxuries because of the imposition of neoliberalism around the world: wars for oil, free trade agreements, our passports, our access to all food across all seasons.

We understand that our context is one with regulations and protocols that are on queue to identify and terminate us if we are too radical. Our decolonial dreams and imaginations are haunted by our participation in institutions that make us feel compromised and contradicted. Some of us work in inherently oppressive institutions that uphold empire. Some of us seek to infiltrate and subvert these institutions. Some places, however, are too deep in the belly of the beast that they cannot be subverted or rewired: radical politicians end up selling out their communities, good cops become complicit in police brutality.

Once we understand our context and the restraints imposed on us, we can start to envision how a San Diego Zapatismo can look like, or even a University Zapatismo for that matter. In San Diego, we cannot

²² → For more about these ideas, see la paperson, *A Third University is Possible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

ignore that we live next to the U.S.-Mexico border, the busiest border crossing in the western hemisphere that also disrupts, displaces, and divides the Kumeyaay nation in half. We live in a city that houses all military branches, that is the drone hub of the U.S., that is mostly nationalistic and conservative, that is rapidly gentrifying.

Throughout the years, Colectivo Zapatista San Diego - the collective that I am a part of - has fallen into the many traps of the Hydra. At times we have woken up to find ourselves in a constant cycle of reacting and responding to oppressive conditions in our community. For example, we have engaged in an unsuccessful campaign to stop Walmart from moving into our community, we have organized marches and rallies in response to anti-immigrant policy, we have denounced the forced disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa. While this work is valuable, it cannot be the only work. The most important work comes from the decision to not give up power and this is done by ceasing to believe that power is concentrated at the top. One of the seven Zapatista principles is "to work from below and not seek to rise." The Zapatistas understand that power lies with those who are oppressed, and it is a creative power. For that reason, the most important work, in our view, is not reacting, but creating. For the Zapatistas, they create new schools, medical centers, cooperatives, and good governments from below, without dependency on state or corporate resources.

What's next? How can we start to move towards autonomy: learn new skills, not depend on corporations like Walmart, re-organize our cities and neighborhoods? How can we gain autonomy over our education, one that prepares students for a world that does not yet exist? How do we become internationalists and build with other movements?

INTERCAMBIOS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Pedagogies of intercambio have always existed across places of struggle, and across social movements. Right now as we write, protectors on Mauna Kea in Hawai'i defend against the encroachment of the Thirty Meter Telescope on the mountain that is both land and ancestor. Kānaka Maoli teachers created Puuhonua o Puuhuluhulu University at

the encampment to teach Hawaiʻian language, culture and worldviews. Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from around the globe have spent varying amounts of time with the protectors at Mauna Kea, including many Indigenous Kumeyaay peoples as well as diasporic Kānaka Maoli from San Diego on Kumeyaay land. Across the Pacific in San Diego, Kānaka Maoli shared ceremony with Kumeyaay knowledge holders, who made space for their day of teachings and workshops about Mauna Kea. At the Standing Rock encampment in 2016-2017, Indigenous teachers also created a school – Mní Wičhóni Nakíčiziŋ Owáyawa – the Defenders of the Water School. Among the many people who came to support Standing Rock, teacher-organizers from Chicago Freedom Square came to learn, to pray, to protect.²³ Chicago Freedom Square was yet another encampment at the end of empire. It was a “41-day overnight occupation, protest encampment, and block party opposing Homan Square.” Homan Square is a Chicago Police Department “‘black site’ where thousands of Chicagoans have been illegally detained and tortured.”²⁴ There are many more examples from history: the Black Panther Party’s many diplomatic exchanges around the Third World, such as with Algeria, China and Cuba; the letters between Black intellectual W.E.B. Dubois and the influential Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar. Intercambios are our time and space travel, our telepathy and empathy that transgress empire’s enclosures. They are synapses that inform our collective decolonial dreaming.

Intercambio is different from any meeting within a community of struggle. Even meetings across difference are not necessarily intercambios. Intercambio, for us, is a gathering of cousins from our own elsewhere. Intercambio has specific pedagogies. It is not didactic. There are no classrooms, no authoritarian relationships of teacher-student. Mimicry is impossible. Our contexts differ too much. Solidarities are also not immediate in time and space. The visitors do not stay to help. Intercambios stretch what solidarity can look like. We share our particularities, even though they might not apply. Translation is necessary. We host intercambio with what we can afford to share. We stay

23 → Eagle Shield et al., *Education in Movement Spaces*.

24 → “Imagining a World,” The #LetusBreatheCollective, #LetusBreatheCollective, Accessed July 30, 2020. <https://www.letusbreathethecollective.com/freedomsquare>.

with the learnings brought by our guests. We leave the intercambio only with what we wish to carry, and we refuse or leave the rest. We remember inspiration, we forget dogma. We are independent of one another. We are connected.

Intercambio is a pedagogy across social movements. It is much more than the literal meaning of the word “exchange” in English, which can also imply a transaction. Intercambio requires transformation, not transaction. We like how it can mean “inter-change”, which in addition to sharing between peoples, suggests an internal change of the self. You may have another word in your language that better expresses this truth.

“Hacer escuela” was an apt name for what we were doing in Philadelphia. It was problem-posing, especially when we shared the problematics of formal schooling from our different locations. It was active in the idea of “making” or “doing” school and social movements. It was messy work. Our translations were messy. Our politics were messy. A pedagogy of intercambio is messy. It is not pure or clean work. It is relational work. The difference is, that is it our work. We were making school in that space in between our ends of empire. We left this intercambio with new strategies to translate, new questions to ask.

Caminamos preguntando, we are asking as we walk. ■