

Irmgard Emmelhainz

# Fog or Smoke? Colonial Blindness and the Closure of Representation

01/10

e-flux journal #82 — may 2017 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
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Earlier this year, the Juan Rulfo Foundation withdrew from its plan to participate in the 9th annual Book and Rose Fair at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. The Foundation objected to Cristina Rivera Garza's scheduled presentation of her new book on Rulfo, *Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé que* (There was a lot of fog or smoke or I do not know), which it considered to be "defamatory."

Garza's book offers Juan Rulfo as an embodiment of modernity's double bind. Known primarily for *El Llano en Llamas* (The Plain in Flames) a short story collection from 1953 and his novel *Pedro Páramo* from 1955, Rulfo worked also for Goodrich-Euzkadi, a transnational company responsible for expanding the tourism industry in Mexico. He was also an advisor and researcher for the Papaloapan Commission, the state organization charged with extracting "natural resources" from Southern Mexico; most notably, the commission installed the Miguel Alemán Dam in Nuevo Soyaltepec in Oaxaca. Rulfo legitimized the emblematic projects of Mexican modernity in the mid-twentieth century even as he memorialized the very peoples that his work risked erasing in his writing and photography.<sup>1</sup> Rivera Garza compares Rulfo's vision to that of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History: a retrospective gaze that observes – even relishes – all the details of the disaster caused by the winds pulling it toward the future.

Modernization and memorization coincided in Rulfo's position as head of publishing at the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), a state institution created to look after the needs of all indigenous Mexicans. Founded in 1948 with the goal of integrating indigenous peoples into "national" culture by "acculturating them," and thus "elevating their condition," INI's policies were characterized by a homogenization of Mexico's "ethnic groups. This understanding of indigeneity as a problem to be solved is what links Goodrich-Euzkadi, the Papaloapan Commission, and the INI, which combined to threaten autonomous life and community work in the name of development and modernization. In the 1950s, the euphemism "*reacomodo*," which means "rearrangement" or "reshuffling," was coined to designate indigenous extermination while obscuring the colonial matrix.

That Rivera Garza's contradictory portrait of Rulfo would be considered defamatory is itself representative of modernity's colonial blind spot, which, like Freud's neurotic, cannot bear to hear its past openly or honestly discussed. An active agent of the Mexican state's modernization project and a passionate believer in progress, Rulfo's reports to the Papaloapan Commission amplified 1950s attitudes about Oaxaca as one of Mexico's "backwards" regions, whose natives



Rubén Gámez, *La fórmula secreta (Coca Cola en la sangre)*, 1965. 42", film. The movie's script is based on a text by Juan Rulfo.





Detail of collective drawing by Cráter Invertido as shown at the Arsenale, Venice Biennale, 2015.





Juan O'Gorman, *Mexico City*, 1949. Tempera on masonite.

were seen as primitive and thus nonexistent. Their territory was officially qualified as “virgin” (or empty). Describing the living conditions of Chinantecos and Mazatecos in the Soyaltepec Valley region, Rulfo took an active, first-hand role in their *reacomodo*, helping to justify the government’s efforts to displace and dispossess them. Nevertheless, Rivera Garza also portrays Rulfo as an advocate working in solidarity with indigenous communities, looking melancholically at their ruin and misery through his photographs that document the imminent loss of vital, indigenous material culture.

This tension is apparent in Rulfo’s other works as well, such as his short story “Talpa” (1953) and in the script for *La fórmula secreta* (*Coca Cola en la sangre*) (The secret formula: Coca-Cola in the blood, 1965), and *El despojo* (The plunder, 1976).<sup>2</sup> “Talpa” is a confessional monologue that describes the narrator’s travels with his brother, Tanilo, and his wife, Natalia, to see the legendary Virgin of Talpa in the hopes that she will heal Tanilo’s terminal illness. The narrator describes Tanilo’s mutilated body in detail as it disintegrates during the pilgrimage through arid, hot, and dusty land. The trip becomes an aimless voyage toward nothing but guilt: the narrator and Tanilo’s wife are in love, and both know that Tanilo will not survive the trip. Yet they press him onwards, secretly desiring to “finish him off” forever. Tanilo’s death march in search of the savior Virgin becomes an allegory for indigenous *reacomodo*. The displacement justified by the “progress” of modernity and the benefits of a nation-state is in fact an aimless, self-destructive trip towards annihilation.

In a sequence from *La fórmula secreta*, we see indigenous people in three distinct contexts: first as peasants; then in the baroque Santa María Tonanzintla church in San Andrés Cholula, Mexico (alluding to the hybridity of pre-Hispanic and Spanish culture in the country); and then wearing modern clothes and suspended from a ceiling. The sequence poses a question: How will originary peoples be figured or represented by the modernizing process? How will they be figured, that is, once they have “Coca-Cola in the blood”? What place or role will modern Mexico offer them? The film ends with a long list of transnational companies that were besieging Mexico in the 1960s. Although animated by a belief in a modern future for all, Rulfo’s literary and cinematic work depicts the suffering and abjection of indigenous peoples’ social and cultural deaths.

The double bind of modernity officially conceals the colonial carnage necessary for modern progress even as it strategically reveals this same carnage for the purpose of accruing

cultural capital. The modern *worlding of the world* – which includes the production of objective reality by experimental science, knowledge, and design – coincides with the ruthless elimination and instrumentalization of certain creatures by others. This blind spot is the “habit” of coloniality. Habit, according to Elaine Scarry, either closes down sensation entirely or builds up perception as its own interior. Habit creates sentience either by opening or closing the world.<sup>3</sup> The habit of coloniality is ingrained in the Western unconscious, predicating universality, progress, betterment, and growth on the eradication of alterity. This is the condition of modernity itself, even as it furnishes the resources for a critique of such systemic destruction. As Rolando Vázquez argues, “The narrative of salvation of modernity was built on the denial of the genocidal violence of colonialism.” The first mass colonial genocide was the early expression of a system geared towards the consumption of human and nonhuman life – that is, the consumption of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

In Mexico and Latin America, the ordeals of indigenous peoples are known as “environmental conflicts.” Their source is the neoliberal strategy of expropriating “natural resources,” or rather, “the commons.” This strategy has been implemented through the introduction of industrialized agriculture, a system that excludes small producers and destroys sustainability. Such extraction and exploitation of the commons is evident, for example, in mining concessions and in the construction of infrastructure projects like highways, ports, tourist enclaves, trash dumps, and dams designed to centralize energy in big cities and to connect territories rich in “resources” and “cheap labor” to the flows of global exchange. In the past fifteen years alone, the Mexican government has granted twenty-four thousand concessions for open-pit mining. Under agreements such as NAFTA, transnational corporations are entitled to file lawsuits against local governments who fail to stop local interference with their “resource”-extraction efforts.<sup>5</sup> To block these neoliberal processes of capital accumulation, new forms of resistance are emerging. These seek access to and control of the means of subsistence (like land and seeds), and are accompanied by new forms of communal recomposition. Mina Lorena Navarro explains these efforts to defend territory across Latin America as a new sensibility of peoples and their environment, and as the actualization of “non-predatory” lifeworlds against capitalist and extractivist relationships.<sup>6</sup>

These forms of political subjectivation stand in direct opposition to capitalism. Still,

05/10

e-flux journal #82 — may 2017 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Fog or Smoke? Colonial Blindness and the Closure of Representation

they remain *other*, either because the habit of coloniality perceives them as non-modern, as stubborn remnants of a residual world, or – in what is the opposite valence of the same judgement – because they are romanticized and identified with the “noble savage” by way of this same projection of “prior-ness.” From the romantic point of view, indigenous struggles are regarded as “a road to the future” because, in fighting corporate-led environmental catastrophe, indigenous people are fighting on behalf of all of us.<sup>7</sup> But this picture of originary peoples helping to “save the future” and shape new forms of worldly cohabitation is highly problematic. Part of the problem is that “environmental justice” struggles remain localized and culturally specific. Connections among and between them are precarious. As a result, to the extent that environmental struggles are grounded in “environmental identities,” environmental injustice goes hand in hand with cultural loss. Because the prevailing counterhegemonic framework amalgamates cultural identities, ways of life, and self-perception into a metaphysical connection between given communities and their physical environment, environmental struggles remain unlinked to the responsibilities that privileged inhabitants of urban areas have as the main consumers of “resources” such as real estate, food, and fossil fuel.<sup>8</sup> The result is a revived pastoralism, where these same communities are used as prestige resources available for exploitation, and as a salve for colonial guilt. Perversely, the “enlightened” metropolitan subject uses those most victimized by the historical Enlightenment to reconfirm their commitment to those same values of freedom, justice, and equality.

However, what is at stake in indigenous peoples’ struggles is decidedly not freedom, equality, or justice, but rather the short-to-medium term survival of their communities and of humanity at large. This is what makes these struggles so difficult to represent outside of their own local specificities. When indigenous communities mobilize to defend their lands from narco-exploitation or from megaprojects like mining and hydroelectric plants, repression and killing are the rule. The state has beaten, tortured, imprisoned, and murdered many of those who have fought against pollution, land theft, deforestation, and the destruction of rivers.<sup>9</sup> As I write, there is a report in the news about state police in the municipality of Nahuatzen, Michoacán murdering five people in Arantepacua. In the territories of indigenous people – regarded by neoliberal common sense as “markets” – an apparatus of dispossession and a state of exception are imposed. Lorena

Navarro writes that this apparatus is built on institutional consensus and legitimacy, cooptation and capture, disciplining and normalization, and criminalization and counterinsurgency. The apparatus operates on a continuum of material and representational violence that crescendos as the state becomes the guarantor of the accumulation of capital.<sup>10</sup> The apparatus is accompanied by transnational legitimization tools like NAFTA, and US-led antidrug campaigns like “Plan Colombia” and “Plan Mérida,” which are really just forms of neocolonial war, genocide, and ethnocide.<sup>11</sup> The habit of coloniality lurks behind the symbolic and discursive efficacy of the apparatus of dispossession.<sup>12</sup>

### The A-representability of Originary Peoples’ Struggles

Climate change is generally understood as an unintended effect of modernity. Modernity is blind to its colonial habit, and this is one reason why most environmental struggles lack a framework that connects coloniality to the Anthropocene. For instance, members of the Mexico City–based collective Cooperativa Cráter Invertido have done counter-information work in solidarity with the community of Ostula, in the state of Michoacán. The inhabitants of Ostula are currently defending their sovereignty and way of life against narcos, the military, and illegal deforestation. Symptomatically, the young artists of Cooperativa Cráter Invertido have been unable to draw a link between their political activism in Ostula and political work in the city or a project of decolonization. And yet, the struggles in which the collective has engaged remain present in their fanzines, posters, and drawings. In 2015, a Community Congress took place at a university in Puebla, gathering academics from all over Latin America to discuss the links between decolonization, environmental struggles, and new forms of community organization. Somehow, the word “communality” was substituted for “socialism” as the new politically correct ideology to which progressive researchers must now subscribe. The obvious question – how to translate “communality” into urban contexts – was absent from the discussion.

Another example of the blind spot inherent to the double bind of modernity is the celebratory conversation taking place around Norman Foster’s Mexico City airport project. The airport is being built in Atenco, an expropriated *ejido* (plot of communal land) where local resistance has been taking place since president Vicente Fox announced the project in 2006. That year, resistance was followed by massive repression, including the pervasive use of

06/10

e-flux journal #82 — may 2017 | Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Fog or Smoke? Colonial Blindness and the Closure of Representation





Documentation of protests against the "Highway of Death" in Texcoco-Teotihuacán, Mexico. "Highway of Death" is a term coined by indigenous struggles or struggles opposing megaprojects or resource extraction corporations because often it literally means death to these populations. The "Highway of Death" connecting the City to the airport means displacement of hundreds of families and the destruction of their lands.

gendered violence. The group Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra (FPDT) gained international visibility for its fight against the Atenco airport, but the struggle and its repression have since been forgotten. The creative class is lobbying Foster to consult FPDT as he develops his plan for the airport, and the privileged sector of the population rejoices at how the airport will make life easier for everyone in the city. But the airport will inflict heavy human and environmental “collateral damage” – especially on indigenous groups – and this is conveniently forgotten in the rush to praise the project. In its neoliberal manifestation, coloniality embodies a new cycle of dispossession in Latin America, based on the belief that the lands where indigenous peoples live are more valuable than the labor their inhabitants can provide.

For Eyal Weizman, climate change has never been an unintended side effect of colonization, but rather its declared goal. In his important recent book *Erasure: The Conflict Shoreline*, he develops a hypothesis that connects colonialism to environmental changes. Weizman’s chief case study is the “battle for the Negev,” in which the Israeli state has sought to uproot Bedouins from the Negev desert in order to plant forests and expand the forestation line. Weizman studies the Negev’s movable frontier as it advances and recedes in response to colonization, displacement, urbanization, agricultural trends, and climate change, all phenomena intrinsically tied to dispossession. In the Negev, “making the desert bloom” is, in effect, changing the climate.<sup>13</sup> In Mexico, Lake Chalco exemplifies a similar historical link between displacement and global warming. In the nineteenth century, under the regime of Porfirio Díaz, Spanish entrepreneur Iñigo Noriega Lasso sought to expand arable land by draining Xico, the lake adjacent to Chalco and Xochimilco on the outskirts of Mexico City. Similar to Israel’s displacement of the nomadic Bedouins, Noriega Lasso forced the lake’s originary peoples to work as peasants in his hacienda. In the Negev, as in Chalco and Atenco, climate change and the displacement of originary populations go hand in hand.

In 2003, Juan Rulfo’s Instituto Nacional Indigenista became the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples), or CDI, premised on the idea that indigenous groups have the right to preserve their ethnic identity and should participate in the planning of development projects. Although CDI’s task is to recognize indigenous cultures and the plurality of Mexico (correcting for INI’s homogenization of Mexico’s ethnic groups), the organization only undermines the cultures and

bodies of indigenous peoples, insofar as it reinforces their status as beings apart. In the eyes of CDI, indigenous peoples “have things of their own” – like traditional customs, religious beliefs, and medical remedies – that need not only to be recorded and admired, but mined for corporate patents. Difference is relativized and continues to justify a relationship of inequality. Having been made vulnerable by neoliberal international agreements, how can indigenous peoples protect themselves, their lands, and their knowledges?<sup>14</sup>

If modernity figured indigenous peoples and their lands as the foundational (re)source of nation-states, neoliberal common sense has turned them into maquiladora laborers, *sicarios*, kidnappers, and “illegals” deported from the US. In this schema, the local bourgeoisie functions as the broker between transnational corporations and the natives as resources to be exploited. Here equality means inclusion as debtors and consumers, and those who remain outside circuits of consumption and debt – the “other” of *homo economicus* – are systematically criminalized. New versions of the 1950s *reacomodo* have emerged in the form of efforts to displace indigenous peoples to “sustainable rural cities.”

From literature and philosophy to politics and the arts, discourses about Mexico’s native populations are still dominated by a mentality of colonization, slavery, and dispossession. This means that indigenous populations continue to appear as other, as spectacle, as subjects of anthropology and ethnography, and more recently, as markets to be exploited.<sup>15</sup> With the rise of neoliberal globalization, indigenous peoples have passed from being a “problem” that must be dealt with through modernization and civilization, to redundant populations that must be managed through repression, displacement, and genocide. They are still targeted for elimination, but less through physical death (although this is still tragically common) than through exclusion, confinement, and resource extraction. The war against “underdevelopment” is a war against the redundant populations of twenty-first-century capitalism.

### Toward Relational, Decolonizing Representation?

It is telling that in their struggles against “projects of death” – i.e., extraction and infrastructure projects – indigenous peoples are figured as faceless. Recall the iconic balaclava of Subcomandante Marcos, who declared: “We are all behind the mask.” This facelessness makes clear that the disappeared indigenous body is only visible through capitalist colonialist relationships. We must remember that while the



original epoch of colonization is over, colonizing relationships persist. Government and corporate projects to transform indigenous territories into profitable markets bring indigenous groups into contact with NGOs, researchers, and development agencies that view these projects not only as emancipating oppressed communities from “underdevelopment,” but serving the greater good of humanity as a whole. This is why indigenous knowledges, cultures, and languages remain sites of anticapitalist struggle – albeit struggle that is culturally specific and territorially bound, and thus unable to build bridges to struggles elsewhere. For instance, the inhabitants of Cherán, Michoacán dismantled state political institutions complicit with the deforestation of their territories. A new precarious politicized subject emerged, but one that was still perceived as other, non-modern, foreign, and unrepresentable. This failure of representation is closely bound up with the habit of coloniality.

A recent version of the double bind of modernity has posited design and the arts as the means to reinvent life, defend autonomous zones, and protect the environment. In this framework, cultural transformation is thought to direct new forms of political organization and bridge the gap between grassroots action and government policy. As T. J. Demos has written recently: “Creative ecologies of collective resistance [can create] new combinations of images and stories, music and participation, solidarities and sacrifices ... [enabling] a ‘Great Transition.’”<sup>16</sup> The problem with this approach is that it remains confined to cultural representation (as opposed to political representation) and is thus prone to the fascist essentializing of culture. Moreover, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith has argued, if the West’s concept of culture remains the only legitimate form of emancipatory politics – easily universalized and not really “owned” by anyone – it will merely reaffirm the West as the center of all legitimate knowledge and action.<sup>17</sup> This idea of culture will lead to a new imposition of Western authority over all aspects of indigenous struggle.

In the face of the urgent need to neutralize the extractive model, block accumulation by dispossession, and end environmental degradation and the destruction of human beings, liberals still navigate the double bind of modernity in the melancholy style of Juan Rulfo; we are just as sad, just as beautiful, just as ineffective. We must break out of this trap and realize that modernity’s way of worlding the world is to annihilate worlds. A non-fascist, anticolonial form of aesthetico-political representation would encompass the counter-knowledges produced in indigenous struggles,

and would ultimately lead to the dissolution of representation in favor of relation. Following Rolando Vazquez, relationality is a mode of realization that recalls and foregrounds, that sustains and gives, that is before the before. It is a coming-into-presence grounded in precedence, as opposed to representation (which always has a blind spot). Non-colonial representation acknowledges the other of modernity and colonization, and challenges the tenets of modernity itself.<sup>18</sup> This is the aesthetic, political, and intellectual task at hand.

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*This text is indebted to Eric Cazdyn’s Blind Spot Machine, a film/project/lecture/performance that he presented at La Esmeralda in Mexico City in April 2017. Cazdyn’s piece addressed issues of representation and legibility, critically questioning how modern epistemology works in film and language. I am also grateful for the feedback I received from peers at “The Political Lives of 21st Century Culture,” a workshop held at the Center for US and Mexico Studies at the University of California, San Diego, especially Paloma Checa-Gismero and Tania Islas Weinstein, who organized the workshop.*

09/10

e-flux journal #82 — may 2017 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Fog or Smoke? Colonial Blindness and the Closure of Representation

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10/10

e-flux journal #82 — may 2017 Irmgard Emmelhainz  
Fog or Smoke? Colonial Blindness and the Closure of Representation

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