

## Becoming Bird: Notes on Colonial Memory

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**Abstract:** The following essay seeks to think of the notion of creative act as an interruption in colonial epistemology, through the analysis of the Guatemalan saint-god Maximón. This colonial entity is proposed as a rare cultural object, which challenges any notion of a fixed ethnic identity, in the context of the historical racialization of Guatemalan society. The essay therefore proposes, by going beyond an orthodox anthropological approach, that the saint-god be understood as living material memory, which can become political only in the performativity of its complex movement and time.

**Key words:** Deterritorialization, identity, *mestizaje*, coloniality, colonial memory, colonial aesthetics, creative act, Maximón, ethnicity, racialization, biopolitics, indigenous spirituality

In a previous essay, titled "When Day becomes Night"<sup>[1]</sup> I proposed the notion of conversation and translation, in order to think about a space-time that could entangle, philosophically, politically and aesthetically, different sides of the world. I did so through the metaphor of a conversation between day and night.

To think about this relation between day and night, I worked on an epistolary exchange between the leader of the EZLN (i.e. the Zapatista Army of National Liberation), namely Subcomandante Marcos, and the art theoretician and British painter John Berger <sup>2</sup>. This dialogue, as I noted at that time, came about in an unusual way, for two reasons: firstly, they had not yet met in person, and secondly, they pertained to very different spaces, in terms of their experience regarding the space-time, of course.

While the former was a military leader of an indigenous revolutionary movement, living in the Zapatista Autonomous communities of the highlands of South Mexico, the latter lived in the French countryside, and although Berger was linked to certain Marxist militancy, he mostly worked as a thinker and a painter. This conversation therefore reproduced, in an interesting way, an intensity based on this particular and inevitable relation between day and night, to which I am referring.

To understand this epistolary exchange, I consider of particular importance the Deleuzian notion of *Deterritorialization* <sup>3</sup>, as it allows me to think beyond two subjects who talk to each other as fixed entities. Instead of this, I proposed thinking about a Becoming that happens at the exact time of the conversation, and that allows for a folding of space, suggesting a non-linear perspective of time. This conversation did not happened in a single space, or at one single time, but on one *line of flight*.

Perhaps deterritorialization is best understood as a movement that brings about change. Insofar as it operates as a line of flight, deterritorialization manifests its creative potential. So, to deterritorialize is to free up the fixed relations that a body contains, while exposing it to new organizations (Parr, 2005, p. 69).

One of the extracts of that conversation that most captivated me is when they are asking about the relation between thinking and sensing within different geographical locations, as this catches the spirit of what I mentioned above; I mean, this is not just about two subjects and their places, but about the intention of using that conversation to make something else happen, a movement of deterritorialization, that momentarily interrupts the flow of colonial epistemology.

Berger writes: "A reader may wonder 'what is the relationship that the writer has with the place and the people he writes about?', to which Marcos replies 'I agree, but they can also wonder: what is the relationship between a letter written from the jungle in Chiapas, Mexico, and the reply that it receives from the French countryside? Or, even better, what is the relationship of the slow beating of the heron's wings with the eagle hovering over a serpent?'" (M&B, 1995).

These places of enunciation represent a becoming. The fact that it is possible for Marcos and Berger to have a conversation in two distinct parts of the planet, at two different times - a planetary connection - allows contemporaneity to emerge. They create a conversation that breaks with chronological time, while day and night coexist, not looking for the opposite, but rather looking for the dawn.

The epistolary exchange between Marcos and Berger is one particular example that shows how different events interrupt the linguistic flow of dichotomies, from where western rationality and therefore coloniality are organized and (re)produced. This *Becoming* happened at very distant geographical points, where epistolary exchange was, in this case, the bridge that permits a creative act.

My aim is to think about some specific cases where the western/non-western dichotomy is shattered, giving rise to a new becoming, that although it may resist a new categorization (identity), it may contribute some interesting elements to help think about the post-colonial project.

For this text, I would like to analyze a specific case of those interruptions, namely one particular cultural object: the saint-god in Guatemala called *Maximón*; a colonial entity that has endured and mutated over the centuries, and which has different material manifestations, depending on the geographical and ethnical discursiveness that constructs meaning around it.

*Maximón*, or *San Simon*, as he is known in the *Ladino-mestizo* culture, is a humanoid object, with a face carved in rustic wood and a body built up of many layers of indigenous fabrics; he wears several hats, smokes home-made cigars and performs miracles for all of his believers.

*Maximón* is a complex entity, as he represents a rare cultural object whose origins remain a mystery. Although there are many versions of his origin story, these narratives will depend on the place and the community in question. *Maximón* is a cultural manifestation with no stable or configured identity – instead, on the contrary, he lies within a difference that can only be understood by means of a radical form of *mestizaje*.

Clearly, what I want to address here, in the context of these elements, is an object-entity of the Guatemalan material culture that comes about in the grammar of colonial power relations; understanding this as a system for the creation of meanings, which constitutes mechanisms of power through its ideological and bio-disciplinary forms of distinction, with all their myths: phenotypes, skin monochromes, systems of values and so forth.

Colonial power depends on the illusion of identification for this matter, insomuch as it allows the social division of work to continue within the loop of capital. Societies like that of Guatemala are made up of a categorization of political meanings based on neoliberal citizenship and its cultural articulations, with Multiculturalism being a paradigmatic case.

In the case of Latin America, two main registers of racialization have worked as universal abstractions: the *Mestizo* and the *Indigenous* subject, with a considerable number of articulations and nuances, based on, for example, the migrations of African peoples to the continent in the 16th and 18th centuries, and the *mestizaje* processes which were the product of significant European migration to the continent in the 20th century.

This dichotomy creates a process by which one subject depends on the other in a kind of negative dialectic, a relation of hate and expropriation<sup>4</sup>, that at the same time enables the performativity of colonial history: *repetition as the same*<sup>5</sup>.

The second factor is to consider memory as an operation that shatters the teleology of history in favour of a multiple time. This means to think about memory as a double-bind operation: one which resists normative narratives about the past and escapes from the essentialization of indigenous cultures: restoring a place for darkness<sup>6</sup>.

Contemporaneity thus becomes a place where history is interrupted in favour of a time that happens in movement, in its deterritorialization. This means that the colonial racialization of subjects must be replaced by a non-disciplined notion, which could manifest itself in the signification of persons, bodies, objects, events, and species.

What is happening in all of these intensities is a conversation, which allows the act of creation to happen. But conversations tend to happen in many different ways: there are conversations between subjects; conversations from one object to another; between day and night; conversations between a bird and the territory over which it flies. What a conversation proposes is not a resolution, let alone a conclusion.

It is important to clarify that a conversation is not an agreement nor a celebration of diversity, but rather the opposite: it is the fear that we may not be able to communicate with each other, but let us not worry about this: it is not about communicating, but rather about coming together. A conversation happens based on differences that may be irreconcilable, while at the same time constructing common places. When a bird talks to the territory over which it flies, it is not because its intention is to land, but because that very territory is what allows the bird to fly.

## MAXIMÓN

When I first visited *Maximón*, I could not avoid a strange feeling of curiosity and mystery. Similar to that feeling when one enters a place of calmness, where one breathes a sort of solemnity. Everybody was gathered around the saint. After sitting there for a while, in that immense silence, an old man stands up and walks slowly towards the saint-god, while rummaging in his pockets. He takes out what appeared to be a few coins, and he places them in a small crystal cup..On the other side, there are several bottles which contained a homemade alcohol; he heads to the door and leaves.

There are different oral narratives about the origin of *Maximón*, and there are also several that claim to be the original. One of the most well-known narratives is the one that links him to an indigenous leader who, in the mid-18th century, led a rebellion against the Spanish colony, the result being that he was killed, as well as many of his supporters. After his death, members of the community found some of his remains, and they used the bones to construct the saint's body, as a multiple entity: on the one hand, he represents a Christian saint who, as with other saints, performs miracles in exchange for faith and offerings, but on the other hand, he (re)presents the historical anti-colonial resistance of the indigenous peoples, serving as political symbol that unifies and summons.

*Santiago de Atitlan* is a small town by the *Atitlan* lake where one of the most well-known *Maximones* resides. This saint plays an important role in communal and political organization. After the Peace Accords in 1996, and the arrival of several Pentecostal churches, *Maximón* loses presence in the town, as many people join the Church.

The Guatemalan cultural critic Mario Roberto Morales points out that:

Perhaps the indigenous deity that is most highly esteemed as a genuine case of cultural resistance was, not so long ago, *Maximón*. A saint-god of multiple identities which he negotiates at his convenience. Supposedly, he is also a transfiguration of *Kukulkán* (the feathered god-serpent) into his enemy, the Apostle Santiago. Maximón is, physically, a clay mask with a small body made of rags, blankets and shawls, a little over a metre in height. He always wears two or more hats, and his priests make sure he is smoking constantly, while his believers kneel before him, kiss the fabric on his body and talk or pray with him at length, all the while offering generous libations of liquor (Morales 2008, p. 330-331, translated).

This deity, according to Morales, is an expression of the identitarian schizophrenia in Guatemala, insomuch as it represents a sort of dialectic between the colonized and the colonizer, or, to be more specific, between the indigenous and *mestizo* subject. This is manifested in the different faces that *Maximón* shows, as a saint-god who is simultaneously an indigenous-colonial-saint and a pre-colonial-god. The problem here is that Morales does not manage to take this debate to the place of *Becoming*. Morales's interpretation of a colonial deity is shaped by his own colonial prejudices as a mestizo subject; he is unable to shake off the identitarian dilemma in order to construct meaning and "critique".

He continues:

Before the counterinsurgency and the arrival of the first fundamentalist Protestant churches, Maximón was the main cultural factor of cohesion, legitimization and identity of the people of the Atitlan region. With the arrival of these churches, after the counterinsurgent massacres in the Santiago area, everything changed. The Brotherhood of *Maximón* and its parish decreased to a handful of people, due to its breaking up when most of the men in the town stopped drinking alcohol out of evangelical prohibition. Currently, the saint's day, a beautiful ritual called the "the bringing of the fruit" is still celebrated, thanks only to the tours of Japanese, German and North American people. (Morales 2008, p. 330-331, translated).

If the reconstruction of the facts that Morales proposes is correct, then what we would have is a sort of *hybrid* entity that enables a conversation between two colonial subjects: Indigenous and *Ladino* subjects, insomuch as it is one entity with multiple faces. But maybe this is exactly the point, to leave *Maximón* in a kind of silence, which reproduces the contradiction, and is removed from any stable notion of truth. The problem that Morales seems to have with *Maximón* is that he represents a "perverted essence", a deceiving identity, which "is not what he was". And if he is funded by tourists and permeated by an urban-*mestizo* culture, what is, exactly, the problem?

*Maximón's* dark side (as traitor), is reflected, in the following phrase:

*Maximón*, who is the father of prayers, lord of insanity and other things... is not an easy figure to analyze. I have called him "the traitor", bearing in mind his treachery to the indigenous people as well as to Alvarado, and his treachery to Christ like Judas... (Mendelson, 2002, p. 159-160. Quoted by Morales, 2008)

But, is it possible to hold a conversation, like the one that I am proposing here, and being a traitor at the same time? To be a traitor, you essentially need to remain faithful to someone or something, and for this to happen, you need a sense of identification. The concept of the traitor seems more like cold war jargon. What happens in this case, is that *Maximón* represents, in himself, an intensity where different voices resonate through time and memory; therefore, if we think of this memory as a virtual operation and a political fiction, what happens here is a creative act of deterritorialization: the saint-god is a moving image.

What Mendelson points out is more of an indefinición, a conversation that happens between an object and memory, the darkness and its complexity; this uncomfortable visibility is what keeps the Secret and Silence alive as an active configuration of discourse, the displacing of the Ladino-Indigenous dichotomy.

But, these transfigurations of the saint-god are indeed many, and they are crossed over by different cultural dynamics, even if the main characteristics remain similar. For the purposes of this text, I am just referring to the *Maximón* at Santiago de Atitlan, although it is still important to note that *Maximón* is an entity of multiple material manifestations which, in terms of the case at hand, emulate the Christian tradition of a saint who adapts to the cultural features of the place they occupy.

Therefore, *Maximón* (re)presents a sort of strategic identity - to borrow a term from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak - that, based on an operation of memory as a fictionalized reconstruction, renders the past as an act of creation and resistance in the present, which represents a completely different operation to the essentialisation of culture, from the representation of a subject bound to an ancestral illusion.

## Learning to Fly

Up to this point, I have tried to bring to the discussion some introductory lines in order to think, about what I understand as *Creative Acts of Deterritorialization*, which could help to break with fixed colonial identities. These creative acts are birds in flight that resist colonial linguistic discipline, insomuch as this discipline will always prefer bodies bound to the earth rather than birds in flight.

The saint-god *Maximón* is only possible if a certain part remains hidden, a certain silence, being maintained as a somewhat dark entity. In this case, the Indigenous-Ladino dialectic does not seek a possible synthesis, but rather a place where identification is impossible, and where the only possible reading is by means of an operation of memory and time, as a creative act that does not allow for ontological essentialisation.<sup>7</sup>

When Deleuze and Guattari thought about the movements of deterritorialization and territorialization, they associated this with birds and territory, based on the early twentieth-century "Bird Studies", yet but pushing it down a different path.

"Bernard Altum, Henry Eliot Howard and Konrad Lorenz all suggested male birds aggressively defend a particular territory as a way of socially organizing themselves. These studies of bird activity understood territoriality as a biological drive pitched towards the preservations of species. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari address territoriality from the position of what is produced by the biological function of mating, hunting and so forth, arguing that territoriality actually organizes the functions. The problem they have with Lorenz, for example, is that he makes "aggressiveness the basis of the territory" (Parr, 2005:70). There is an intrinsic relationship between deterritorialization and territorialization, and, as birds make us realise, the very exercise of territorialization, more than just an aggressive act of power, can be understood as a biological system of survival and, why not: pleasure.

These acts of territorialization do not emerge via an act of definition and statism; on the contrary, they emerge as an act of decoding normative language: an act of creation. Thus, "territory refers to a specific milieu that cannot be separated from the living thing occupying and creating the milieu, so that the meaning of a milieu is affected. This is important when we come to consider the supposed slippage between deterritorialization and territorialization... To decode, in the way the Deleuze and Guattari intend to, means to strike out of the selfsame codes that produce rigid meanings..." (Parr, 2005, p. 71)

These acts of creative resistance are undoubtedly becoming a matter of planetary urgency. In a world where neoliberal multicultural agendas are gaining territory, where the optimistic reductionism of indigenous cultures insists on folklore, and where white nationalism in the United States and Europe is recovering its brute force, the past is reproduced as an undesired future, and birds might be telling us something that we have not been able to hear.

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[1] This essay is part of a book published by *Reflektor* and presented for the 57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.. Plaza, I. (2017). Ghost Pavillon – A Publication for phantoms, stories and fading topographies in and beyond Latin America. Berlin: Reflektor.

[2] "Their conversations were first published in *Le Monde Diplomatique* on 12 May 1995, where Marcos addressed a letter that Berger had published before. Marcos came across this letter by accident while reading the Spanish translation of Berger's 1979 book *Pig Earth*. Years later in 2004, John Berger visited *Oventik*, a Zapatista community in the south of Mexico while attending San Cristobal Las Casas, an International Colloquium of Leftist movements." (Ramirez, 2016, p. 3).

[3] There are a variety of ways in which Deleuze and Guattari describe the process of deterritorialization. In *Anti-Oedipus* they speak of deterritorialization as a "coming undone" (D&G 1983:322). In *A Thousand Plateaus* deterritorialization constitutes the cutting edge of an assemblage (D&G 1987:88). In their book on the novelist Franz Kafka, they describe a Kafkaesque literary deterritorialization that mutates content, forcing enunciations and expressions to "desarticulate" (D&G 1986: 86). In their final collaboration-What is Philosophy? - Deleuze and Guattari posit that deterritorialization can be physical, mental or spiritual (D&G 1994:68)... In fact, in the way that Deleuze and Guattari describe and use the concept, deterritorialization inheres in a territory as its transformative vector; hence, it is tied to the very possibility of change immanent to a given territory. (Parr, 2005, p. 69).

[4] According to the anthropologist Guzman Bockler, the Indigenous-Ladino colonial dialectic is a conflictive relationship, based on need and hate. But the operation that Bockler carries out is from the side of the Indigenous, through a sort of negative dialectic, from where he allocates "Ladinity" or *Mestizaje* to use the known term. According to him, the "otherness" of the Ladino is the image of the indigenous, which is exactly the measure of the deficiencies of the Ladino. The paradox is that the Ladino hates what he needs, and in that sense, he builds its ontology through a relation of negation, a sort of "empty ontology" (Boeckler, 2002, p. 58-59).

[5] James Williams, referring to Deleuze and the concept of identity notes: "In Deleuze's work, identity is perhaps the most heavily criticized concept from the philosophical tradition. That criticism takes many forms, and depends on many different arguments and aesthetic expressions. However, these can be simplified through the claim that Deleuze's opposition to identity is directed at the falsifying power of identity in representation. Identity works against and covers deeper pure differences. It does so because of the dominance of the demand to represent in the history of philosophy... His critique of other philosophers often depends on showing how this image of thought is operating unconsciously and damagingly in their works. The damage is caused because reality is a process of becoming, which involves pure differences that cannot be represented" (Parr, 2005, p. 126) .

[6] I use the term "darken" as a visual operation, where this blurry place allows us to think beyond clear statements of a colonial ontology: to *become dark*.

[7] It is worth mentioning that global politics, especially after the the 1990's and the democratization process in Latin America, proposed multi-culturalism as a model for so-called "cultural diversity", as a machine of postcolonial reason: toward a history of the vanishing present. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press. For an interesting analysis of Neoliberal Multiculturalism, see: Zizek, S. (2012). En defensa de la intolerancia. Madrid: Sequitur.