

The gringo takes a job teaching *videoarte* in Chiapas, Mexico. It pays peanuts, but maybe it will lead to something.

The gringo lives at the top of a mountain with all the *extranjeros*. He watches *Zapaturistas* – those well-intentioned, gentrifying, wannabe radical cosmopolites – encounter, and avoid, hungry children. He suspects that he, too, is a *Zapaturista*.

The gringo meets the painter. The painter is from a distant village where people speak Zoque. He wants to make a movie there. He brings a script.

The gringo is impressed. Do you have a camera? he asks. A sound recorder? Microphone? No, no, no. No problem, says the gringo. We'll use mine. But you have a computer? Yes, replies the painter. But the screen is half broken.

The painter's film bombs. Amidst the wreckage are two little scenes, shining like diamonds. The gringo says: we've got something.

Back in the States, jobless, the gringo gets an email. The painter reports a break-in: someone stole the computer and camera you gave me.

The gringo blames himself. The gringo suspects the painter. The gringo feels loathsome for suspecting the painter. He gave the painter equipment (including a used laptop whose logo symbolizes our precipitous acquisition of knowledge and loss of innocence) which increased wealth and inequality in a Native community, so I'm to blame for yet another act of violence upon First Nations people. The gringo feels guilty. The painter suspects his cousin. The gringo resolves to document the struggles of this remote indigenous community as it encounters modernity. The gringo gets an email. It's a Guggenheim.

The gringo returns, giddy with anticipation. On day two, the rains begin. Tropical Storm Ernesto hits, tin roofs everywhere. All the gringo's clothes are soaked. There are no dryers, no hot water, and the din of a thousand drums is driving me crazy.

After six, eight days, the gringo can wait no longer. He jerry-rigs a camera poncho. The footage is strong, the rain incessant – it soaks, it penetrates. Suddenly, there is no working camera.

Weeks later the gringo returns for the festival of *el Gigante*, a figure of local mythology. Miraculously, the rains stop. Anticipating traditional music and folkloric dances, the gringo instead finds charismatic salesmen, mic'd like Madonna, hawking ripoffs of local handiwork made cheaply in China. Voices compete with voices and with their own musical backgrounds. From dawn to midnight the village sounds like a square wave: a hundred blown-out speakers all trying to sell something.

To get to the village in Chiapas from his village in Ohio, the gringo drives an hour then takes three flights and a harrowing, death-wish taxi up the mountain. He stays with a friend before cramming into a *colectivo* for a ride through the proudly Mayan, vehemently Capitalist, Coca-Cola-sponsored indigenous community; past its liquor-infused outpost, where men's bodies are

always scattered near – and sometimes on – the road; then through the effectively Communist, teetotaling Zapatista villages, before switching colectivos at a military outpost / makeshift truckstop. There, dozens of wooden shacks, each buttressed by a Coke- or Pepsi-branded refrigerator, all sell the same packaged foods. By design. Because the first non-PRI* President in Modern Mexico was a Coca-Cola executive, whose answer to the country's intractable poverty was free enterprise: "Let them sell Coke products!"

The gringo climbs into a van. Its seatbelts are inevitably cut out or upholstered over for reasons he doesn't understand. Packed like sardines, knees grinding into sheetmetal seats, passengers sway – like wheat in the wind, thinks the gringo – as the van hurtles around curves. Eventually, the jungle canopy opens, the van stops. Streets are checkered with burlap sacks laid out to dry coffee berries in the sun, but the only coffee available to drink is Nescafe. People pile into a pickup. The gringo sits with women and children. Men stand on the tailgate, hang out the back. Blindly accelerating up a twisty road, the sound of a vomiting child is muffled by the semis carrying lumber out of the jungle, diapers and beer back in. Light fades and the fog gets dense as we enter *la selva negra*, the dark jungle.

The painter's house is on the edge of town, in Esquipilas Guayabal, a settlement named after the place his people came from. There, crops grew easily, the soil was fertile. But the volcano wiped out their village, so the government brought them to this hard land, where they need iron tools to turn the soil, where they had to learn Spanish and worship the mestizos' god, *Jesús*.

The painter's father is a *campesino*, a peasant farmer. He grows corn and beans in his *milpa*, which he plants and harvests by hand. The painter's mother spends her days cooking on an open fire. Their two-room abode is shared by three adult siblings, one spouse, and a grandchild. It has one bed, one television, two hammocks, dirt floors, and cinder block walls that are brightened by the painter's work. On these canvases, fields of color are pierced by animal spirits, the Zoque *cosmovisión* merges with the abstractions and struggles of modernity. The gringo wonders how the painter became a painter, what lit this fire inside him, how he became modern and educated without leaving his family, their culture and traditions.

It's late, they make coffee for the gringo. He'd rather have a beer, but he doesn't want to offend. In towns throughout the jungle, he noticed more signs for *Alcohólicos Anónimos* than he saw *cantinas*. The gringo wants to sleep. He'll stay unsuccessfully in a dormitory for Native children, and in a hotel that rents rooms by the hour, before he's taken to the best digs in town: the Franciscan monastery. Here, too, beds are concave, there is no hot water. But the place is spotless, and cheery monks-in-training sing and dance whenever they're not praying or watching *telenovelas*. The gringo marvels that, it seems here, the Church provides a certain refuge for boys who like boys, despite the homophobia that it preaches.

They rent a truck: *el coloradito*. Coloradito has no reverse. To turn around the gringo must drive up an incline, hit the clutch, roll backwards and spin the wheel. Only one headlight works. No taillights, no gas gauge, no speedometer. One evening, after filming and fighting with their actor don Juan, coloradito won't start. Night falls as they push it to the edge of the mountain. Once

coloradito gains momentum, the gringo hops in and steers through the fog, around curves dimly lit by its lone headlight, as they coast downhill in the dark. The painter signals approaching cars with a flashlight. It starts raining. They roll into town, get the truck fixed. A few days later, the gas tank falls out. They give up on coloradito.

Meanwhile, the state of Chiapas is plastered with images of the very young, very white grandson of a former governor hugging indigenous people. Though other candidates have more substantial policy proposals, *el güero* wins the governorship in a landslide, then spends millions in state funds advertising his victory across the country. He marries a *telenovela* star. Though they look nothing alike, the gringo is often taken for *el güero*.

Likewise, Mexico elects the handsome husband of a telenovela star to be President. Forty-three student activists disappear in the state of Guerrero. Circumstantial evidence implicates a mayor and his wife, along with drug cartel hitmen, but state and federal forces are also suspect. Vigils are held across the country. The gringo arrives during a national day of protest; he joins the peaceful marches. Masked men break off to firebomb two convenience stores and a bank. President Peña Nieto declares protesters “only want to destabilize the country,” but locals tell the gringo that the vandals are plants, hired by the government to discredit the protests.

Traveling to the painter's village the next day, the gringo has to walk across a *bloqueo*. The road is blocked to protest the lack of running water: *el güero* had promised a treatment plant in exchange for votes, but water never came so locals shut the road down. Meanwhile, in the painter's village, a sewer line breaks and floods several streets and dozens of houses with raw sewage – *aguas negras*. The mayor, who doesn't live in the town he governs, releases a statement declaring that affected families must pool money together if they want anything fixed. So residents fill buckets with sewage and flood city hall. The painter documents this action; his photos are broadcast across the state. The mayor is not happy. His minions revoke the aid – local and federal – that had been promised to the painter's sister's boyfriend, who was shot in the crossfire of the encroaching drug war.

Flying back to the States, the gringo is surprised to see something interesting on airport TVs. Nationwide protests have erupted, since grand juries failed to indict the police officers who killed Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and – a few miles from his home – John Crawford III.

After five years, the painter and the gringo have nearly finished their movie. It's about a shaman, don Juan, who falls under the spell of a pyramid-scheme-marketed nutritional supplement. It's a documentary. When Juan asks the gringo to buy into the pyramid scheme, he declares “I have faith in this product because, you see in the video, even rich people use it. It cures!” The gringo thinks Marx and Benjamin are still right: capitalism and consumer cultures are not (just) modern and rational, but cultish systems that operate on faith and fetish, magic and desire. Pyramid schemes like OmniLife, and charlatan industrialists like its CEO, evangelize Capitalism – and initiate people like Juan into this cult – in the few remote areas where it's not already the dominant religion.

Traveling to the Mexican premiere of *The Modern Jungle* in the traditional garb of his people, the painter is stopped for questioning, three times, after passing airport security. Then he is grabbed from behind, pulled out of the boarding line. Two passengers wait for him, take out their phones, start recording. They ask the police why they're targeting this passenger, the painter. The police don't respond, they let him go.

The gringo's people are devastated when their country elects an egotistical developer who wants to build a wall, but he finds that many Mexicans are unfazed: they're used to being ruled by self-serving hypocrites. The gringo can't decide if this approach signifies healthy perspective, or a politically impotent resignation to fate. Then, a light in the darkness: Native Americans and other activists successfully defend their water, this earth, from a militarized coalition of government and industry. At least this parcel is protected, at least for now. The gringo and the painter present their film in Chiapas. The theater is packed: people sit in the aisles, stand in the back. Zoque activists, local water protectors, join the filmmakers on stage to protest the plight of the painter's people, whose land and resources continue being exploited by government and industry, for prisons, dams, mining and now fracking. At least tonight someone is listening.