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# SOCIAL STRUGGLES AND THE COLONIALITY OF GENDER

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### Introduction

Today, as the last natural resources are located in first nation people's land, it seems that the ecological frontier coincides with an epistemic human frontier. For example, the resource war we are facing is one in which first nations are struggling to preserve their lands, their rivers and mountains, dignity, and their right to self-determination (Icaza and Vazquez 2017). What can we learn from these ongoing social struggles resisting violent forms of power destroying land, women's lives and hope? This question inspires the steps taken in this chapter.

We start by sharing three small vignettes which aim to transmit how different social struggles for land, women lives and hope, which are place-based<sup>1</sup> yet connected to global dynamics of violence and extermination, are taking place across Abya Yala<sup>2</sup> (Americas). This is followed by a brief introduction to decolonial thinking key concepts. In the third and final step, two questions are asked and some initial reflections provided: what is decolonial feminism and what might happen to the way we make sense of social struggles in global politics when gender is understood from its underside, coloniality?

The key objective of this chapter is to generate even more questions to the imagined potential readers: people interested in global politics, their actors and current processes, and in particular, people aiming to think and relate to global politics and each other *otherwise*.<sup>3</sup> To that effect, throughout the chapter some collective and individual reflections are shared. These have emerged from co-learning moments and encounters *with*<sup>4</sup> people who within and/or outside academia are generating *otherwise* forms of thinking, sensing and relating to land, life and women's struggles across the Americas (Barbosa, Icaza and Ocampo 2015).

Contrary to mainstream academic style that makes absent the person(s) who writes the text to such an extreme degree that her emotion-less and body-less knowledge appears to arise naturally from a distant/abstract space, this text starts with a positioning of the self that writes as a *yosotras* (I-we)<sup>5</sup>: 'I speak to "us" because from there I see the possibility of building worlds where life is born and grows without fear, with the possibility of recognizing our vulnerability and perseverance' (CarteArte 2016). To write as an I-we, to write as *yosotras*, not only questions dominant forms of representing and writing about the world, people and their struggles, but also highlights the fact that the ideas in this chapter, like any other knowledge, emerge from co-learning moments and encounters (Leyva 2013; Icaza 2015a). I-we wrote in this specific form with the intention

of generating a dialogue in the form of questions that generate even more questions: 'asking, we walk', said the Zapatistas.

This form of writing, knowing and sharing from a communal self is what decolonial thinker Rolando Vazquez calls a trans-decolonial move as one that:

enact[s] relational forms of personification that are often not only in a fluidity of genders but also in a non-individualized position, in a fluidity between the communal and a plural self, and a non-anthropocentric position, in a fluidity between earth and the communal vulnerable self, a communal self.

(Vazquez 2017a forthcoming)

## **Situating knowledge**

### ***Land***

*In our cosmovisions, we are beings coming from Earth, Water and Corn  
We Lenca people are the ancestral guardians of rivers  
protected by the spirits of girls who teach us that  
giving our lives in multiple ways to defend the rivers  
is to give life for the well-being of humanity and this planet.  
Wake up, Wake up humanity! There is no more time!  
Our conscience will be shaken by the fact that we are only contemplating  
our own destruction by capitalist, racist and patriarchal predation.  
The Rio Gualcarque has called us, as well as the other rivers  
that are being seriously threatened around the world  
We must go.  
The Mother Earth, militarized, enclosed, poisoned,  
where the elementary rights are systematically violated,  
requires us to act.*

These are the words of Lenca indigenous leader Berta Caceres' acceptance speech at the Goldman Environmental Award Ceremony of 2015.<sup>6</sup> Berta dedicated the award to 'all rebellions, to my mother and to the people of Agua Blanca and COPINH'. COPINH is the Honduras-based *Consejo Civico of Organizations Populares e Indigenas*:

an Indigenous Lenca organization made up of 200 Lenca communities in the western Honduran states of Intibuca, Lempira, La Paz, and Santa Barbara. COPINH was born in 1993 when the Indigenous and popular movements in the Honduran state of Intibuca came together to stop logging and advance popular struggles. Today, COPINH encompasses four states in western Honduras and struggles for the rights of the Lenca people, including environmental, cultural, economic, social, health, education, and Indigenous rights. COPINH defends the Lenca territory and our natural resources as part of our Lenca cosmovision of respect for Mother Earth.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, Berta led COPINH's struggle against the world largest dam construction 'Agua Zarca Dam' in the Gualcarque River. Sadly, a few months after her speech at the Goldman Environmental Award Ceremony, Berta was assassinated, presumably by members of the private security forces of DESA, the local owner and developer of the project. In April 2016, as part of a group

of students and colleagues at the Institute of Social Studies<sup>8</sup> and neighbors from The Hague, the city that hosts the International Criminal Court, we welcomed Berta's family and COPINH. Their visit was part of an international tour supported by different human rights organizations<sup>9</sup> to raise awareness not only of the growing local opposition to the Agua Zarca Dam but also to claim justice for Berta's assassination. As The Hague also hosts FMO, the Dutch development bank which is partially financing the construction of the hydroelectric plant at the Gualcarque River, these organizations organized a demonstration outside FMO's headquarters, accompanied by some ISS students and staff.

A few weeks after the demonstration, FMO suspended but did not cancel their financial involvement and established a fact-finding commission to Honduras that delivered their final report in October 2016.<sup>10</sup> COPINH and Berta's family continue to reject FMO conclusions: 'The [FMO] report selectively chooses to repeat DESA's narrative and allegations, often without verifying the facts, while excluding significant information that challenges this narrative and reflects the disastrous reality of the Agua Zarca Hydroelectric Project.'<sup>11</sup>

Some months ago, Berta's daughter and I came together once more. This time we were members of one of the few initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean involved in collaborative research and coalition-building with social movements: the Transnational Network of Other Knowledges, hosted by the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO).<sup>12</sup> To this day, Berta's daughter's message at ISS still resonates in me: *Berta didn't die, she multiplied*. This is the message that also inspired a tribute to Berta at the 2016 Goldman Environmental Prize Ceremony by poets Leslie Valencia, Terisa Siagatonu and Erika Vivianna Céspedes: '*Bertha, as indigenous women, we know that death is just the Earth's way of reminding us who we belong to...*'<sup>13</sup>

As this chapter was being written, and amidst the monothematic media obsession with Donald Trump's new set of US/Mexican policies on trade, immigration and security, the sad news that came from Mexico has already been sidelined: Tarahumara leader Isidro Baldenegro Lopez, 2005 Goldman Environmental awardee,<sup>14</sup> was assassinated. Like his own father some decades ago, Isidro was killed by clandestine loggers who over the years have tried to stop Tarahumara people's struggles to defend the communal forest of *Coloradas de la Virgen*.

In a world predominantly run under the modern logic that prioritizes the economy over anything else (including life), spirituality challenges its very logic since it's founded on a way of relating to the world that prioritizes life, the relationship to every being: rocks, plants, rivers, animals, people and spirits. Midwives who carry the knowledge learned in dreams taking care of life and growing the plants they need for this, people who run *Temazcales* from one lineage or another in their many perhaps hybrid forms, they are all guardians of the heart of the earth, resisting with their bodies and their practices the violence of discrimination, coloniality, neoliberalism, epistemicide, development and its institutions.<sup>15</sup>

We wonder if Isidro's struggle, like the struggles of many other 'Guardians of the heart of the Earth' in Mexico and around the world would be once more be condemned to oblivion or not? Maybe Isidro will not die but multiply too?

### **Women's lives**

*Traigo un infierno*  
(*Makila 69*)<sup>16</sup>

*Tè gusta la mala vida*  
*me dicen los muertos*  
*Tè gusta la mala vida*

*I am carrying the hell inside me*

*You like evil life,*  
*death people tell me*  
*You like evil life,*

me dicen los muertos  
Y a mi me da por reír  
mientras les digo que sí  
Me voy a escapar otra vez al amor  
Traigo un infierno muy dentro de mí  
que va a estallar, que va a estallar  
Hay una guerra en este país  
que ya estallo,  
que ya estallo  
Hay una guerra en este país  
en contra de ti  
Hay una guerra en contra de mí  
Hay una Guerra en este país  
que ya estallo,  
que ya hasta yo,  
que ya hasta tu puedes morir  
(Obeja Negra featured by Makila 69)<sup>17</sup>  
Ninguna Guerra en mi nombre  
Genocidas primeros mandatarios  
Ninguna Guerra en nuestro nombre  
Desde la Frontera Norte  
No se nos olvidan  
las miles de voces  
Acalladas de mujeres  
Que no tuvieron la oportunidad  
De retumbar en estas bocinas  
y esta palabra  
Así que tremendo ruido por aquellas  
Que no lograron hacerlo  
Por que estamos locas  
Y seguiremos locas  
Y regresaremos  
y nuestra venganza será ser felices  
Y sonreír, y caminar seguras  
Libres, sin miedo, unidas, vivas!  
Vivas nos queremos  
Vivas, nos queremos

death people tell me  
And I laugh  
while I tell them Yes  
I am going to escape once more to love  
I am carrying the hell inside me  
it is going to blow up, to blow up  
There is a war in this country  
that has already blown up  
that has already blown up  
There is a war in this country  
against you  
There is a war in this country against me  
There is a war in this country  
that has already blown up  
that even me  
that even you could die  
  
Any war in my name  
Genocidal country leaders  
Any war in our names  
From the Northern border  
We do not forget  
the thousands of women's voices  
silenced  
That did not have opportunity  
to rumble in these horns  
and these words  
So, let's make a tremendous noise for them  
who were not able to make it  
Because we are crazy  
We will be crazy  
We will return  
and our revenge will be to be happy  
and smile, and walk safe  
free, without fear, united... Alive!  
Alive we want to be  
Alive, we love each other

Above are the lyrics of two different songs. The first one 'Traigo un infierno' was written by Mexican artist Nidia Barajas from *Makila 69*, an electro acoustic duet formed with her male partner and bass player, El Alas Blisssett. The second one is an intervention by *Obeja Negra* (Black Sheep), a female Mexican rapper and member of *Batallones Femeninos*.<sup>18</sup> The three of them were born in the Mexico-US border cities of Tijuana or Ciudad Juárez, the latter, the so-called Mexican capital of femicides and drug-related murders, and were invited to perform at the Zapatista Arts Festival COMPARTE held in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico in the summer of 2016.<sup>19</sup>

After some brief conversations and informal exchanges with them, *Obeja Negra* shared the manifesto *CarteArte: Abajo y a la Izquierda en Morado*.<sup>20</sup> The document, a collaborative product of conversations among women in Mexico, delineates feminist political and epistemic principles

for liberation within and in spite of ‘machista/misogynist leftist activism’: ‘I am learning that “we” is political and ethically built, not by sexual determination, nor by gender roles, but from the social class “we” are’ (CarteArte 2016).

CarteArte as a collective exercise also denounces the appropriation of women struggles by people like us, writing from a comfortable paid position in a European University and occupying positions of racial/socio-economic/gender/sexual privilege, while also calling for life and care of each other.

A few months ago, through social media we learned that *Obeja Negra* and Batallones Femeninos have been actively engaged in supporting the families of the disappeared students of Ayotzinapa.<sup>21</sup> This is how we also learned that in December 2016, *Obeja Negra* was illegally detained by local authorities in Oaxaca, Mexico. It was through social media that we supported the campaign for her release.<sup>22</sup> Is this how support from positions of privilege contributes to the enactment of a collective self? We keep ourselves asking this.

### **Hope**

A few months ago, again through social media we were listening to the messages of the Water Defenders at Standing Rock opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL).<sup>23</sup> Here is the testimony of Phyllis Young, former councilwoman for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and Central Oceti Sakowin camp organizer:

It’s about the whole world. It’s about Mother Earth, having endured her suffering for this long, she needs our help. She needs our protection. She’s a female, and Indigenous people are the keepers of Mother Earth. We’re obligated to keep her water for her, and maintain the life as created, and for us. We have deep spiritual obligation to protect our place.<sup>24</sup>

Phyllis’ words make us feel a sense of hope that is nested in caring for the Earth. This kind of hope not only stems from practices of organizing resistance modeled according to the future we aspire to, or what some call politics of hope (i.e. Dinnerstein 2014). It is also a kind of hope embedded in the certainty of past struggles that determines who we are but also the way ahead of us (Vazquez 2017b, forthcoming). Hope can be seen in the struggles for autonomy by Indigenous people and those of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean, who are oriented towards a politics of dignity (Icaza and Vazquez 2017, forthcoming).

The moment is critical: the pipeline is near completion and still must be stopped before it reaches the Missouri river... We have been met along our trip so far with amazing acts of solidarity and donations from store clerks and people along the way when we tell them we are going to Standing Rock. Thank all of you for your support, please donate and continue posting and talking about the historic and inspiring Standing Rock fight to stop the DAPL. Love and Solidarity!! Never Give Up.<sup>25</sup>

The call was clear once more. We were called to support a ‘we’, and so we did.

### **Making sense of social struggles for land, women’s lives and hope in global politics**

When confronted with experiences of social struggles for land, women’s lives and hope across the Global South/North divide, one of the common starting points in global politics in thinking

about these struggles is capitalism as the dominant mode of production. By taking capitalism as a starting point, Lenca, Tarahumara and Sioux people's resistance to either a hydroelectric plant, illegal logging or a pipe line can be explained as one of many contemporary struggles against accumulation by land dispossession, while their cruel assassinations have been one of the many costs of the battle against global predatory capitalism. From such a point of departure, the attempt to understand what role the racialization of originary people in Abya Yala might play, alongside the complex effects experienced, negotiated and resisted by communities inhabiting sacred ancestral territories, can be seen as a distraction introduced by well-intentioned academics like us.

But then, what allows a few to generate analysis and knowledge on land dispossession and about 'others' struggles against it? Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has explained the role that 'academic research' has historically played in the subjugation of indigenous peoples. Outsider experts not only speak for those subjugated by capital but also extract their knowledges for their own personal and professional benefit. The lack of attention to this academic extractivism as part of the problem, of what needs to be transformed, has been a constant. In contrast, attention to academic extractivism allows us to ask who and when, why and where knowledge is generated, opening the possibility of a knowing that sits in bodies and territories and their local histories, in contrast to a disembodied, abstract knowledge with universalist pretensions (Mignolo 2003, 2010).

Meanwhile, when taking gender as a key starting point in the understanding of struggles for land, women's lives and hope, the complex effects in power relations within communities of people affected by trends in land dispossession become central in intellectual and policy oriented enquiries. In particular, changing gender power relations within the communities and of the communities with state and capital actors (i.e. from local government to security forces) are key in thinking about these social struggles.

From this starting point, the struggles pursued by artists/activists such as Makila 69 and *Obeja Negra*, their lyrics and aesthetics could be seen as not only reflecting their commitment to social justice for women, but also as expressing non-heteronormative ideals about what it means to be a female and an artist resisting the violent destruction of women's bodies in Mexico. However, what troubles us is that by taking gender as a starting point, we generate the invisibility of other ways of understanding, sensing and relating to what now is named 'nature', 'culture', 'body', 'women'. This operation is inevitably marked by coloniality and this is to what we turn next.

### **On decolonial thinking**

Decolonial thinking has been recently contributed to an effort to understand social struggles in global politics (Icaza 2015b, 2010; Icaza and Vazquez 2013). Coloniality refers to:

long-standing patterns of power that emerge in the context of colonialism, which redefine culture, labor, intersubjective relations, aspirations of the self, common sense, and knowledge production in ways that accredit the superiority of the colonizer. Surviving long after colonialism has been overthrown, coloniality permeates consciousness and social relations in contemporary life.

(Mendoza 2016; 114)

Hence, coloniality is not colonialism, but a complex set of logics (e.g. dehumanization of the colonized) that is common to all forms of colonialism: Spanish, Dutch, British, settler, and

non-settler (Lugonés 2010a, 2010b; Mignolo 2003, 2013; Quijano 2000; Vazquez 2014). Decolonial thinkers consider both modern and historical outcomes of colonialism.

The colony is both the condition of possibility and the proving ground of the Western nation-state, and rights-bearing citizenship tethered to men of property. In other words, the freedom of the European and the colonial settler depends on the unfreedom of the colonized.

(Mendoza 2016: 113)

Coloniality of power, a term originally coined by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, puts forward the idea that racialization was key for colonization (Quijano 2000). Moreover, this notion explains that ‘the basic and universal social classification of the population of the planet in terms of the idea of “race” is introduced for the first time’ with the conquest of the Americas (Lugonés 2010a: 371). From this perspective ‘Western modernity’ constitutes a dominant project of civilization that claimed universality for itself at the moment of the violent encounter with ‘the Other’ and the subsequent concealment of this violence. This seminal encounter goes back to 1492 when *Abya Yala* was conquered by the Spanish empire and the genocide of millions of indigenous peoples, their knowledge and ways of being in the world took place (Mignolo 2003; Quijano 2000). Therefore, hegemonic histories of modernity locating its beginning in the eighteenth century as a product of the Renaissance or the Industrial Revolution are not accepted but challenged (Icaza 2017, forthcoming).

Coloniality (of power, capitalism, gender, being, knowledge) as the underside of modernity constitutes an epistemic location from which reality is conceived. This is a dominant *locus of enunciation* from where one thinks/senses/relates with human and non-human ‘others’ in hierarchical and often violent forms (Mignolo 2003; Vazquez 2014). The starting point of early decolonial writings was the affirmation that ‘there is no modernity without coloniality’. As co-constitutive binomial, modernity/coloniality was defined as a structure of management that operates by controlling the economy, authority (government, politics), knowledge and subjectivities, gender and sexuality (Mignolo 2013; Quijano 2000).

More recently, modernity/coloniality as the binomial around which gravitates decolonial thinking has as a departure point the acknowledgment of the limits and exteriority of modernity (Vazquez 2014: 173). This is to mark a contrast with the thinking centered in the Western philosophical tradition, in which modernity in its different facets (i.e. unfinished, plural and hybrid, postmodern, global, postcolonial and so on) is assumed as the totality of our reality.

For decolonial thinking modernity (with its modernities) cannot claim to cover all the historical reality. There is an outside, something beyond modernity... ways of living and inhabiting the world that come from other geo-genealogies, non-Western and non-modern.

(Vazquez 2014: 173)

The above means that, for example, the ancestral relation of Lenca people with the Balcarque river, of Sioux people with the Missouri River, of Tarahumara people with the forest of Colorado de la Virgen, is of course touched by modernity/coloniality and can be explained through its frameworks of understanding as pure superstition or as cultural discourse that claims a place in the politics of representation. However, this relationship also transcends and exceeds these frameworks.

Vazquez (2017b) reminds us of notions of the communal and the ancestral self in originary people’s philosophies in *Abya Yala* as belonging to other geo-genealogies. Meanwhile, the

work of Mexican ethno-historian feminist Sylvia Marcos (2006) on Mesoamerican civilizations' eroticism and spirituality reveals the existence of fluid dualities 500 years before non-binary sexualities were 'theorized' by feminists. But most importantly, Marcos' notion of fluid dualities in relation to sexuality reveals an exteriority to Western feminist anti-essentialist approaches to sexuality, and with it a starting point to think about ways of being erotic *otherwise*. In both cases, the work of Vazquez and Marcos informed by Mesoamerican philosophies showcases a point of departure other than Western philosophical traditions.

Therefore, to be conscious about modernity's underside (coloniality) grants a decolonial perspective to one's own perspective which becomes a thinking, sensing and doing that is situated in the exteriority of 'modernity' (e.g. Dussel 2001; Vazquez 2014: 173). This exteriority to modernity, nonetheless, 'should not be thought as a pure outside, untouched by the modern: it refers to an outside that is precisely constituted as difference by hegemonic discourse' (Escobar 2007: 186).

Modernity/coloniality has recently been explained as two different historical movements or forms of relationship with reality which highlight their different loci of enunciation: the historical movement of modernity from which hegemony and privilege has named reality, for example, the name given to 'civilized and uncivilized people', and more recently 'developed and under-developed countries' and their peoples as always lacking or in need of experts and professionals of development (Escobar 1995). Meanwhile, the historical movement of coloniality is a moment in which the negation of realities and worlds *otherwise* (i.e. the Gualquaque river and the Missouri river in a sacred relationship) that go beyond the dominant modern geo-genealogy of modernity takes place, for example, when knowledge systems outside or in the margins of human rationality are denied validity (i.e. a sacred relationship) (Vazquez 2014; Icaza 2015).

The decolonial option is a third movement in which trajectories in knowledges and cosmologies that have been actively produced as backward or 'sub-altern' by hegemonic forms of understanding resistance to land dispossession and destruction of women's bodies become politically visible (Santos et al. 2007). This has been explored in relation to *sumak kawsay* (the good living) and global trade politics in South America (Walsh 2011) and in relation to customary law, the monocultural perception of 'human rights' and global social dissent (Icaza 2015; Suarez-Krabbe 2016). Decoloniality has also been defined by Mexican-American teachers in the US as a 'political, epistemological and spiritual project' that deliberately attempts to disengage from coloniality (Cervantes and Saldana 2015: 86).

Meanwhile, decolonial thinkers interested in a shift towards a knowing that sits in bodies and territories and their local histories have considered border thinking and border subjectivities as decolonial ways of knowing, sensing and relating to the world (Mignolo 2010; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006). Nigerian poet Ijeoma Umebinyuo<sup>26</sup> helps us to express what border subjectivity might feel for some of us:

*So, here you are,  
Too foreign for home  
Too foreign for here  
Never enough for both*

Border thinking as an *embodied consciousness* allows a thinking from concrete incarnated experiences of colonial difference and the wounds left on us (Lugonés 1992; Icaza and Vazquez 2016). As such, it is a possibility for a critical re-thinking of the geo and body politics of knowledge, the modern/colonial foundations of political economy analysis, and of gender (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Grosfoguel 2007; Lugonés 2010a, 2010b).



## Decolonial feminism and the coloniality of gender

So, what is decolonial feminism? To date, feminisms have been successful in introducing the category 'gender' not as a biological fact but as a historically constructed set of social relations of power. Once this idea is taken as a point of departure, feminist analyses informed, for example, by Marxism stress the role of capitalist primitive accumulation as having a prominent role in shaping social relations and laying ground for the centrality of the material in gender (e.g. Federici 2014).

On the other side of the intellectual spectrum informed by Western philosophy, post-structuralist feminist approaches have over the years conducted research on the inter-subjective cultural meanings of gender to explain the construction of hierarchies of 'value' (Peterson 2003). In this way, their emphasis on discourses on sexual difference, understood as meaning systems, are seen as imposing heteronormativity (e.g. Griffin 2007). Meanwhile, post-colonial feminist approaches by exploring the colonial imperative to control bodies and sexualities provide us with analyses on how this complex operation works for the benefit of empires (Peterson 2003).

In all these feminist approaches, gender might be differently conceptualized and articulated, but nonetheless is a common point of departure. Gender might be socially constructed hence highly contextual, or fluid and performative, entangled with race and/or class, sexuality and so on, but always a point of departure. This is precisely a stark difference with Maria Lugones' decolonial feminism for whom gender is not the point of departure but coloniality.

Elsewhere, we have argued that the work of feminist philosopher, popular educator and decolonial thinker Maria Lugonés constitutes a powerful perspective for a critical re-thinking of social resistance to neoliberalism in global politics (Icaza 2010; Icaza and Vazquez 2016; Icaza 2017, forthcoming). Lugonés' decolonial feminism acknowledges 'gender' as a key analytical category, but is engaged with its coloniality. This means an interest/focus on the underside of gender. This involves, among many other aspects, to acknowledge the complex and violent effects that 'gender' as a mainstream category in many feminisms has in the co-production of ways of being and sense of one's relation to different worlds (human and non-human) as non-existent together with the subsequent concealment of such operation (Icaza and Vazquez 2016).

Meanwhile, Lugonés' central concept of coloniality of gender allows us to understand the historical movement towards the imposition of a global Eurocentered capitalist heterosexual order that today is still in place (Lugonés 2007). From this perspective, class and race, but also gender are understood as social categories that were imposed in the colonial encounter through different technologies of dehumanization (Lugonés 2007). In other words, sexual difference was imposed as a system of sociability for some, but not to all bodies (Lugonés 2007, 2010a, 2010b). This means accepting the separation of humans from non-humans as being central to colonization: while gender granted a civilized status to those men and women who inhabit the domain of the human, those who lack gender are subject to gross exploitation or outright genocide (Lugonés 2010a, 2010b). This is why for Lugonés 'the Other has no gender [because] only the civilized are men or women. Indigenous people of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human species – as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild' (Lugonés 2010: 743). The coloniality of gender is then an invitation to consider 'gender' geo-historically as a colonial construct, and not a universal condition that existed before colonization (Icaza and Vazquez 2016).

The colonizers used gender to break the will of indigenous men and women, imposing new hierarchies that were institutionalized with colonialism. The bodies of women became the terrain on which indigenous men negotiated survival under new colonial

conditions ... systemic sexual violence the dark side of modern/colonial gender system still present to this day.

(Mendoza 2015: 116)

Therefore, for us as decolonial feminists, the point of departure then is not gender, but classification and dehumanization of some but not all bodies. 'If I am right about the coloniality of gender in the distinction between the human and the non-human, sex has to stand alone...sex was made to stand alone in the characterization of the colonized' (Lugonés 2010b: 744). Gender is then a characteristic of humanity imposed as a sexual order differently according to racial lines (Lugonés 2010b).

As a consequence of this, gender as a universalism becomes visible from its coloniality, from what erases or disregards, for example, the sense of communal selves of originary women in Mesoamerica being classified as 'backward', or 'reproducing heteronormativity', a 'culturalist discourse' or 'identity politics'. It is from this point of departure that we can start to see the limitations and violence of the category gender. 'Coloniality of gender is useful precisely because it situates gender in relation to the genocidal logic of the coloniality of power (classification of people on the basis of race)' (Mendoza 2016: 118). In other words, this means that gender contributes to a genocidal logic that currently is expressed in violent forms of dehumanization as the racialization of certain bodies; the non-normative bodies, and that also is expressed in femicides, trafficking and the killing of indigenous people (Lugonés 2010a, 2010b; Mendoza 2016).

### **Conclusion: feminist decolonial un-learnings and re-learnings**

As a final step, we ask ourselves what might happen to the way 'we' think about social struggles for land, women's lives and hope, using the coloniality of gender as our point of departure? To take coloniality of gender as our point of departure implies not to seek to classify what these struggles are or are not, but to learn how they challenge the logics of coloniality. An example of these logics, which has been pervasive and deeply ingrained in modern/colonial academia, is our impulse to classify and name what our human and non-humans others are or do (Santos et al. 2007; Vazquez 2014). For example, in global politics analyses dealing with transborder forms of resistance, the dominant impulse has been to explain whether these are sufficiently counter-hegemonic or revolutionary, or not, and to what extent these contribute to the destabilizing of dominant discourses and representations (i.e. Icaza 2010; Icaza and Vazquez 2016).

Once our task is no longer to contribute to the logic of 'classification' of what a social struggle is or is not, we might ask ourselves how we make sense of social struggles of peoples and their communities without (re)colonizing such experiences. Such a questioning has inspired the embodied thought and praxis that this chapter aims to explore. However, the implications of such questioning are more far-reaching than this short text, and bring forward the task of decolonisation of gender and the effects of this on feminist and non-feminist practices of knowledge within and outside the academia. An endeavor of such magnitude calls for a collective effort in the decolonizing of our methodologies (Smith 2012) and ways of working, which means not doing research *on behalf of* or *about* these struggles but allowing these resistances to challenge the 'us' we are aiming to enact. And this is happening in contexts of horror and extreme forms of violence that lead us to question ourselves how to advocate for life, as a political act: one that vindicates lives, bodies, and voices in communal projects (Silva Londoño 2017).

As an epistemic proposal, the coloniality of gender call us to be attentive to our points of departure and to position ourselves on the side of what has been produced as inexistent – women of color, indigenous women, trans women – by logics of dehumanization and

classification of white, Western, bourgeois, Eurocentred frameworks of knowledge, including some feminisms (Lugonés 2010a, 2010b). This attention might lead us to be brave enough to raise questions about life: whose life are we talking about? Whose bodies are being made dispensable and disregarded by the logic of coloniality? How do we take part in this?

Coloniality of gender as a point of departure allows us to learn from the 500-year-old resistance of originary people in Abya Yala when addressing the above questions from our different collective life projects. It is from this point of departure that we have been able to perceive what the Zapatists in Mexico or Nasa people in Colombia (Suarez-Krabbe 2016) called the *Death Project* as what has been consuming land, women's lives and hope. But most importantly, in listening about the Death Project we have realized that we are all implicated at different levels and to different extents in such a project: through our patterns of consumption and socio-economic privilege that are sustained by trends of exploitation of certain bodies and destitution of lands and through our modern/colonial subjectivities and sublime forms of self-control that are sustained in the disdain of some forms of knowing and sensing (Suarez-Krabbe 2016; Vazquez 2017b).

To confront this means for some of us to embark on processes of un-learning privileges (epistemic, racial, socio-economic, etc.) and of re-learning from communal forms of resistance (Esteva et al. 2013) to the Death Project of coloniality. If gender is a social construct, hence not natural but imposed as a way of organizing/controlling societies, then who imposed it over whom, what existed before and what still remains? These are the questions that might inspire more questions to come.

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## Notes

- 1 The notion of place-based struggles considers place as 'a site of live cultures, economies and environments rather than nodes in a global and all-embracing capitalist system' (Escobar 2004, 223).
- 2 Abya Yala is the name given by originary people to the territory now known as the Americas before the colonial encounter in 1492.
- 3 The term otherwise is used here as 'another way of thinking, *un paradigma otro*' (Escobar 2007: 179).
- 4 The shift from doing research *about* to research *with* is not only a textual one, but an epistemic/political/ethical one. It entails being aware of extractivist forms of knowledge for the sake of one's interest, career or privileges (e.g. Smith 2012; Brown and Strega 2005). It also entails the embrace of the principles of collaborative/activist/engaged research and reflects on the dilemmas posed by these principles when conducting research (see: Barbosa, Icaza and Ocampo 2015; Leyva et al. 2015).
- 5 *Yosotras* literal translation from Spanish means me–us. It was developed by Mexican anthropologist Xochitl Leyva to think–write–sense from a *yosotras* (me–us) to emphasize the co–creation of learning and writing practices within collective endeavours and organizations (Leyva 2013).
- 6 This is the author's translation from Spanish to English. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR1kwx8b0ms>
- 7 COPINH: the name in English can be translated as Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras. COPINH official website description in English can be found at: <http://copinhenglish.blogspot.nl/p/who-we-are.html>
- 8 [www.iss.nl](http://www.iss.nl)
- 9 For example, Impunity Watch (<http://www.impunitywatch.org/html/index.php>) and the School of Americas Watch (<http://www.soaw.org/>)
- 10 See: <https://www.fmo.nl/agua-zarca>
- 11 See executive summary of COPINH analysis at: <https://www.copinh.org/media/documents/2016/09/copinh-fmo-report-response-english.pdf>
- 12 See: [https://www.clasco.org/grupos\\_trabajo/detalle\\_gt.php?ficha=995&s=5&idioma=http://www.encuentroredtoschiapas.jkopkutik.org/index.php/es/](https://www.clasco.org/grupos_trabajo/detalle_gt.php?ficha=995&s=5&idioma=http://www.encuentroredtoschiapas.jkopkutik.org/index.php/es/)
- 13 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMybBm6RT5g>
- 14 See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/18/isidro-baldenegro-lopez-killed-goldman-environmental-prize-mexico-berta-caceres>
- 15 Paulina 'Sat' Trejo Mendez shares her unpublished text 'Guardians of the Heart of the Earth'. Paulina is a PhD researcher at ISS and can be contacted at: [trejomendez@iss.nl](mailto:trejomendez@iss.nl)
- 16 '*Traigo un infierno*', Nidia Barajas, Lyrics: el Alas Blissett, music. Makila 69, Ni Diosa ni Diablo, ElectroAcusTrip Hope. Creative Commons Attribution License (reuse allowed). Published on May 10, 2014 on YouTube. Video available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXWKR GOLW6M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXWKR GOLW6M). Accessed on July 21, 2017.
- 17 '*Si*', Maquila 69 featured Obeja Negra, Concert at Paliacate, July 30, 2016, San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Nidia Barajas, Lyrics: el Alas Blissett, music. Makila 69, Ni Diosa ni Diablo, ElectroAcusTrip

- Hope. Creative Commons Attribution License (reuse allowed). Published on YouTube on Aug 2, 2016. Video available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqJjoysSuM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqJjoysSuM). Accessed on July 21, 2017.
- 18 Nidia, and Batallones Femeninos lyrics inspire anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, anti-racist principles and life projects. Batallones Femeninos and Makila 69 do not participate in commercial musical circuits nor in state-funded artistic initiatives and all their songs are free to download from the internet.
  - 19 COMPARTE has two meanings in Spanish: it literally translates as Sharing but it also means COMPA, the short way to speak about a *compañero/compañera* (partner) and ART, implying that the festival involved art that is committed in different ways and extents to Zapatista struggles for social justice. See: <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2016/07/08/the-comparte-festival-and-solidarity/>
  - 20 CarteArte has two meanings in Spanish: the act of sending letters, which implies a dialogue, and the activity of writing letters as an Art. Meanwhile, *abajo y a la izquierda*, is the Zapatista's way of referring to a position that is crucial in institutionalization and elitisms of 'official' leftist organizations and political parties in Mexico. A sincere thanks to Obeja Negra for sharing this document.
  - 21 On September 26 2014, the town of Ayotzinapa in the State of Guerrero, Mexico made world news headlines when 42 male students at the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural School, some of them minors and indigenous, were kidnapped and, according to Mexico's attorney general's office, killed and burned by members of the drug cartel *Guerreros Unidos*.
  - 22 According to the Mexican National Network of Female Defendants of Human Rights (RNDDHM), Obeja Negra's detention was part of the state's strategy to criminalize activists and social dissent. <http://im-defensoras.org/2016/12/carta-publica-rn-ddhm-denuncia-y-condena-la-detencion-ilegal-de-susana-molina/>
  - 23 See: [www.standingrock.org](http://www.standingrock.org)
  - 24 Source: [http://www.ecowatch.com/indigenous-women-dakota-access-pipeline-2069613663.html?utm\\_source=CR-TW&utm\\_medium=Social&utm\\_campaign=ClimateReality](http://www.ecowatch.com/indigenous-women-dakota-access-pipeline-2069613663.html?utm_source=CR-TW&utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=ClimateReality)
  - 25 Personal email exchange with a Water Defendant. November 3, 2011.
  - 26 All Ijeoma Umebinyuo are available at: <http://theijeoma.tumblr.com/>