

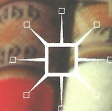


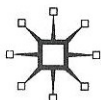
ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLABORATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

THE EFFECTS OF GLOBALIZATION

Edited by

June C. Nash & Hans C. Buechler





ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLABORATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

Selection and editorial content © June C. Nash and Hans C. Buechler 2016
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The contributions to this book are inspired by our desire to memorialize the work of Judith-Maria Buechler with a session held at the American Ethnological Society in New York City in April 2012. The studies she carried out with Hans Buechler in Bolivia, Switzerland, and Germany over more than four decades from the 1960s until her death in December 2011 exemplify a dialogical approach in fieldwork that encourages consultants from all walks of life and anthropologists in an exchange in which pretentive as well as responsive contributions are recognized and accredited. The work of one of our contributors and close friend, Helen Safa, in the course of preparing this manuscript for publication gives this commentary a particularly poignant insight into the nature of friendship, and occupational ties, but also more general positionalities influence the way we consider our mission as does the nature of cross-cultural collaborations.



Image 0.1 Collaborations: Judith-Maria writing her dissertation with one of her

Ethnographic Collaborations in
Latin America

The Effects of Globalization

Edited by
June C. Nash and Hans C. Buechler

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Prologue: A Personal Tribute to Judith-Maria

G. Alexander Moore

I quite vividly recall a moment early in the 1960s when, riding in a New York City taxicab¹ as a graduate student with Margaret Mead, she remarked that Judith-Maria combined the scholarly drive of German professional culture with the Chinese Mandarin reverence for scholarship. This remark gets to the heart of an initial—and formative—global dislocation in Judith-Maria's background: she was born in Shanghai to a German Jewish physician and elected politician who had fled Germany the day after Adolf Hitler took power, and his Prussian wife of Protestant gentry origin. She and I shared ties to Shanghai, and that coincidence gave us our initial bond when we met as fellow graduate students of anthropology at Columbia University. My birth was scheduled for Shanghai, about the same time as hers. But the Japanese invaded, and my mother, a US Navy wife, fled to Manila, where I was born in October 1937. Six months later, Mother returned to Shanghai. The city was under Japanese occupation, but not the International Settlement, where we resided. Our families never crossed paths, but the two of us shared a pampered infancy in that Settlement. My family left around 1940. My parents were from Lexington, Virginia, and had I been born there I would have been a tenth-generation Scots-Irish Presbyterian on my father's side, from a deeply rooted line of well-educated farmers, lawyers, and physicians. Instead, I too had a globally dislocated place of origin.

Let me expound a bit about being a Western infant in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s. In my case, I was simply one of many children born in Asia to US Naval personnel over the many decades of the Yangtze Patrol, an antipiracy operation started in 1854, dissolved in

Feminist Activist Research and Intercultural Dialogues

Rosalva Aída Hernández

In this chapter, I would like to address two experiences of intercultural dialogues that have taught me very important lessons to decolonize my own feminism and rethink my activist research methodologies from a dialogical perspective. Before discussing these two intercultural dialogues and their lessons for decolonizing feminist anthropology, I would like to share some of my own genealogy and the experiences that led me to question my way of living and understanding anthropology and feminism. The voices of organized indigenous women, together with critical reflections on the discursive colonialism of scholarly feminisms, led me to question the work methodologies of the feminist organization to which I belonged in the late 1980s in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, a Mestizo city surrounded by marginal Maya-Tsotsil indigenous neighborhoods and the administrative center of a mostly indigenous region.

But it was not only feminist scholarly readings that made me question the colonizing practices of some hegemonic urban feminisms. Living in Mayan communities of the sierra and jungle regions of Chiapas brought me close not only to other forms of knowledge but also to the political and organizational experiences of indigenous peoples, which caused me to rethink many of my Marxist and feminist views on resistance and social struggle, incorporating the critique of racism and internal colonialism as a fundamental axis of political struggle.

During those years, I experienced state repression and the criminalization of social movements firsthand, when several friends suffered

repression and sexual violence at the hands of government forces. These experiences led me to participate in the creation of a broad women's movement against State violence and sexual and domestic violence, which would later become the feminist organization COLEM, of which I was a member for ten years. My experience in COLEM, questioning and struggling against patriarchal violence, and my work as an anthropologist at the Center for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), discussing racism and internal colonialism against indigenous peoples, led me to reflect on political alliances and on the need to develop a politics of solidarity among diverse women.

In 1994, the Zapatista movement brought together struggles against neoliberalism, racism, and patriarchy, becoming the first military political movement in Latin America to claim women's rights as a fundamental part of its political agenda. Its influence has been very important both theoretically and politically for a whole generation of feminists who have assumed the task of decolonization as a fundamental condition for reconsidering our political agenda.

My double identity as a scholar and a member of a feminist organization that works against sexual and domestic violence through a center that supports women and minors, where a considerable percentage of the users are indigenous women, led me to confront both the idealizing discourses on indigenous culture of an important sector of Mexican anthropology and the ethnocentrism of an important sector of liberal feminism. In a polarized context in which women's rights have been presented as incompatible with peoples' collective rights, it has been difficult to propose more nuanced viewpoints on indigenous cultures that recognize the power dialogues that constitute them, but that also assert indigenous peoples' right to their own culture and self-determination.

At this political crossroads, it was the indigenous women themselves who offered me clues on how to rethink indigenous demands from a nonessentialist perspective. Their theorizations on culture, tradition, and gender equity, set down in political documents, memoirs of encounters, and public discourses, but also systematized in their intellectual writings, are fundamental perspectives that must be taken into account by the project to decolonize feminist anthropology.

Toward a Critical, Dialogical Anthropology in Our Local Practices

A great deal has been written since Karl Marx questioned the exclusively reflective nature of philosophy, when in his eleventh thesis on

Feuerbach, he stated that philosophers have dedicated themselves to merely understanding the world, when the point is to transform the world. The question of "knowledge for what purpose and for whom?" has been at the center of debate in the social sciences, and has periodically questioned the myth of positivist neutrality. In 1939, North American sociologist Robert Lynd—in his classic book entitled *Knowledge for What?*—questioned the pointlessness of social sciences that construct their research problems only in response to theoretical concerns emerging from the development in the field of study, without considering the problems and needs of the social actors with whom the work is carried out. In the midst of the Cold War, C. Wright Mills dared to point out that "[i]n today's world, it is not enough to be an academic; one must be sufficiently concerned about the world and angry enough to shout. It's not enough to understand the world; one should try to change it" (Mills 1956: 84). In Latin America, critical anthropologists, dependence theorists, and those promoting coparticipatory research dedicated much of their writings during the 1960s and 1970s to reflecting upon the need to decolonize the social sciences and on the use of knowledge for social justice.

Nearly half a century later, we continue to struggle against the ghosts of positivist social sciences that claim to be apolitical and, using a discourse of neutrality, discredit any attempt to link academic thought with activism, labeling it as "social work," while they conceal their own political commitment to the status quo (see Gross and Plattner 2002).

In response to these attempts at discreditation, which are frequently made from entities at which decisions are made regarding research support and funding, it is necessary to once again demonstrate that critical thinking is not incompatible with academic rigor, and that constructing a research agenda in dialogue with the social actors with whom we work does not distort anthropological knowledge, but instead strengthens it and makes it possible to transcend the limited academic world.

While these debates seem to repeat themselves cyclically in social sciences—like the Aurelians and Arcadios in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—we find that the theoretical and political arguments—like the lives of the inhabitants of Macondo—are not the same, although they appear to be. The changes in conceptualizations of power and the existence of historic truth point to important differences between Marxist anthropologists who promoted activist research in the 1960s, and those of us who continue to insist on/vindicate the need for collaborative research—however based on a

recognition of the partiality of our perspective, the multiplicity of *subject positions* that define the identities of social actors and their relations of subordination, and the limitations of our *situated knowledge* (see Haraway 1991).

Recognizing these differences does not imply rejecting the path taken up to this point. In fact, it is important to learn about and recuperate the experiences of past decades and not to pretend to have discovered something previously unknown (*descubir el hilo negro*, we would say in Spanish) when we talk of collaborative research and decolonizing theory. Beginning in the 1960s, the pedagogical and political proposals of Paulo Freire inspired an entire generation of social scientists, who developed a series of methodological strategies to recuperate the knowledge of popular sectors, promote processes of increasing political awareness, and through those processes, achieve social transformation. In the case of Mexico, these ideas led to a series of research projects that were linked to indigenous and campesino organizations, in an attempt to build a bridge between the academic interests of researchers and the concrete needs of those sectors. What is known as activist research or coparticipatory research was popularized during the 1970s, and is considered by many to be one of Latin America's principle contributions to the world's social sciences. When the Participatory Research Network was formed and headed by Fals Borda, Francisco Vio Grossi, and Carlos Rodríguez Brandao, it proposed "the integration of the people with the researchers, to learn about and transform their reality, and in this way achieve their liberation" (Hall 1983: 19).

The political enthusiasm generated by these new methodologies coincided with the emergence of a continental indigenous and campesino movement that questioned the national projects in Latin America—which excluded them economically and politically, and denied them the right to their cultural identities. These new voices raised the issue of the relationship between anthropologists and the "objects" of their research, and at a number of continental indigenous conferences, some participants charged that anthropology was being used to dominate and control indigenous peoples (see Bonfil 1981).

The voices of these new social actors played a role in politicizing many Latin American social scientists who were in contact with this changing reality. Some decided to renounce academic work and become involved as participants or advisers to indigenous, campesino, and popular organizations. Others decided to create independent research centers, in order to develop a new type of social science more

committed to dialoguing with social actors. In Mexico, this was the case for the Instituto de Asesoría Antropológica para la región Maya asociación civil C. (INAREMAC), directed by Andrés Aubry in San Cristóbal de las Casas; Circo Maya, coordinated by Armando Bartra; and the Centro de Investigación-acción de la Mujer Latinoamericana (CIAM), founded by Mercedes Olivera.

In Chiapas, where I lived and worked for 15 years, coparticipatory research was popularized by some independent researchers linked to nongovernmental organizations and to the Catholic Church, in which the pastoral work in this region was guided by liberation theology. Action research consisted of "recovering" the knowledge of popular sectors with respect to their social reality, supporting the process of systematizing that knowledge, and promoting their awareness-raising process. Even though this research model was intended to transform the hierarchical relationships between the researcher and those being studied, the theoretical premise—inherited from Marxism—that intellectuals could raise the awareness of the "oppressed" was based on a paternalistic view of popular sectors and their knowledge, which was considered to be "distorted" by a "false awareness."

This was part of the inheritance reproduced and eventually confronted by those of us who in recent years have opted for more collaborative research from a feminist perspective. Many of us who are feminist anthropologists decided to use research—in the academic institutions and independent organizations in which we are working—to support the empowerment and awareness-raising processes of women in popular sectors. Nonetheless, critical reflection has led some of us to recognize that we were reproducing some of the ethnocentric perspectives of Marxism. Now, the apparently infallible method is not historic materialism, but instead, a type of gender analysis that emerges from a Western intellectual tradition and that, most of the time, is insensitive to cultural differences.

The proposal we have been working on, with other women who are academic colleagues and activists who are part of the Red de Feminismos Descoloniales (Decolonial Feminist Network), is based on questioning the homogenizing, generalizing perspectives of patriarchy and what are considered to be "women's interests." By rejecting the idea of a preexisting collective subject ("women") and by considering any collectivity to be the product of alliances between those who are different, we are presented with the challenge of building a political agenda on the basis of dialogue and negotiation. Within this task, research has a great deal to contribute in terms of knowledge

and recognition of the cultural and historic specificities of social subjects. In contrast with the action research of the 1970s, this feminist proposal is not based on the premise that we have some historic truth to share, but rather, the purpose is to create a space for dialogue with other women—through research and organizational work—to discuss and analyze the different conceptions and experiences of subordination and resistance. And here, I would venture to borrow the concept of *dialogical anthropology* developed by Dennis Tedlock (1991), referring to a new form of conducting ethnography in which dialogue is fundamental for text development, and which proposes that the researcher is included and recognized as part of the dialogue established with those being studied. Taking this proposal beyond textual strategies, I would suggest that it can be applied to a new way of interacting in the field with social actors. Borrowing from Faye Harrison, we might ask ourselves, “Why conceive the dialogical relationships as textual strategies and not as concrete collaborations? Why is ‘dispersal authority’ considered to be a narrative style instead of an empowerment strategy for the people we work with? ...and why is the notion of cultural criticism limited to granting academics the privilege of intercultural knowledge?” (Harrison 1991: 5).

Feminist Activist Research and Intercultural Dialogues

The dialogical feminist anthropology I am proposing, unlike coparticipatory research, does not intend to transform reality on the basis of a method or theory considered to be infallible. Rather, together with the social actors with whom we work, the idea is to reflect upon and deconstruct the issues in a shared social reality—and based on these dialogues, to jointly develop a research agenda that makes our knowledge relevant for the those social actors.

In coparticipatory research, the commitment of social scientists with their objects-subjects of study was an easy decision: it was only necessary to take sides with “the people” or those marginalized, in opposition to those responsible for exploitation. However, to the degree that our analyses of power become more complex, we are obliged to reject homogenizing, harmonious representations of those subordinated, recognizing the different levels of inequality experienced in social collectives. Committed social sciences confront new ethical and methodological dilemmas. If we accept the reality that

our representations and analysis—of indigenous peoples, of migrants, women, and religious minorities, to mention some examples—may have political implications for these groups, it is important to acknowledge the *gray* tones existing in between the *blacks and whites* emphasized in the analyses of the past.

By renouncing the certainties that Marxism granted to coparticipatory research in the 1970s and 1980s, we confront new challenges in carrying out socially committed research. The social actors with whom we work—in our case, women—often look to the collaborative relationship for infallible answers to the problems they are facing, more than seeking critical questioning of shared reality. The first collaborative research study that I conducted was together with members of my feminist organization and indigenous women from various political and productive organizations in the early nineties. The purpose of that research was to explore the possibilities and limitations of national law and indigenous normative systems, in relation to sexual and domestic violence. Resistance to giving definitive solutions to the problems discussed was sometimes disappointing for the women participating. Our idea was not to present national law as simply a tool for State control and domination nor to advocate it as a panacea for ethnic and gender oppression. At the same time, our intention was not to satanize what is referred to as indigenous law nor to idealize it as a mechanism for cultural resistance. Our proposal was to explore the possibilities and limitations of both legal systems in relation to the specific problems of indigenous women, for the purpose of seeking alternatives more in line with the cultural and social context in which our organization carried out its work in fighting against sexual and domestic violence. There were many problems in that experience, and I have discussed them elsewhere (see Hernández Castillo 2002). My intention here is not to present that experience as an ideal model for reversing the relations of power in a research process; however, it has been part of a methodological and political search to break with the dichotomies of the researcher and those studied, of the “I” and the “other,” and together, to build a “we” based on the articulation of differences.

We have lost the apparent clarity in conceiving of the difference between those dominating and those dominated on the basis of a single axis of subordination: class. When we see the plurality of relations of subordination, all possibilities of homogenous collectives disappear, and it becomes difficult to acknowledge a collective interest that should be supported by researchers. Nevertheless, recognizing these

challenges should not lead to political demobilization, but rather to a search for creative forms of producing knowledge and proposing strategies for engaging in struggle.

In the following sections, I would like to address two dialogues that helped me rethink my feminist premises for activist research and deeply influenced my own identity as an anthropologist and as a feminist.

First Dialogue with the Continental Network of Indigenous Women: Cosmovision as a Political Tool in Indigenous Women's Struggle

The first dialogue that I want to address is my activist research experience with organized indigenous women through the Continental Network of Indigenous Women, with whom I have learned the need to broaden my conception of gender rights from a nonindividualistic understanding of being a woman, and to reconsider the issue of domination through a more holistic perspective that includes not only the relations between men and women, women and women, and men and men, but also between human beings and nature.

Nation-states have promoted women's rights as "globalized localisms" through their programs to incorporate women in development, while assuming some international commitments to incorporate a limited gender perspective in their public policies. This epistemic colonialism started to be denounced by organized indigenous women who, from the early 1990s, argued for the need to recognize their collective rights as part of their peoples as a condition for an integral exercise of their rights as women (see Hernández Castillo and Sierra 2005) and to assert their *cosmovision* as a fundamental perspective to question the West's civilizing project (see *Memoria de la Primera Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América* 2003). These voices were essential for the emergence of new theoretical concepts to decolonize feminism. At least two collective books were published that included this term in the title: *Decolonizing Feminism: Theories and Practices from the Margins* (Suárez and Hernández Castillo 2008) and *Feminisms and Postcoloniality: Decolonizing Feminisms from and in Latin America* (Bidaseca and Vázquez Laba 2011), which gathered voices of indigenous, Chicana, and Muslim feminists from various parts of Africa and Latin America, who question feminist universalisms and propose other epistemologies to think about domination and emancipation.

In the search for other ways to imagine the world and to conceive other possible futures, the temptation to idealize indigenous cultures

has been very present. In reaction to racism and ethnocentrism, indigenous intellectuals or scholars in solidarity have often tended to present an ahistorical view of indigenous people, denying internal contradictions and power relations in the communities, as well as the impact of colonialism on their current-day cultural practices. These representations can become new forms of "discursive colonialism" that do not allow observing how their cultural practices are constantly updated or perceiving the internal dynamics of domination and resistance that develop among indigenous peoples.

Among the challenges that those of us who have assumed the difficult task of decolonizing our feminisms have faced, is recognizing our own ethnocentrism and rejecting the logics of power that produce the "nonexistence" (De Sousa Santos 2009) of indigenous and peasant women, while we break away from "Orientalizing" strategies (Said 1978) that represent them as our alterity, as the holders of a "primordial knowledge" that will serve as the fundament of our emancipation. To impose on them, through our representations, the "responsibility of saving us" by means of their "alternative knowledges" is another form of colonialism and does not encourage the critical dialogues that we need.

Since its foundation, I have had the opportunity to follow up close the creation and consolidation of the Continental Network of Indigenous Women, from whose members I have learned other ways of understanding culture and rethinking the relationship between decolonization and depatriarchalization. The Network is an international coordination body created in 1993 by initiative of native Canadian women. It brings together 52 women's organizations from 17 countries in North, Central, and South America, which seek a space to exchange experiences, develop joint initiatives, and give visibility to indigenous women internationally (see Berrío Palomo 2004).

The memoirs, resolutions, and internal documents of the Continental Network of Indigenous Women are a source of theorization that speaks of other ways of understanding women's rights and their relation to peoples' collective rights. In these women's voices and experiences, we can see how they have incorporated elements of their own *cosmovision* as a means of empowerment in their political struggles, reviving the discourse of the complementarity between men and women as an ideal to be achieved, more than as a lived reality. By recovering the spirituality of the ancestors and reinventing new practices and rituals that are more inclusive, organized indigenous women in the Americas are establishing the bases to rethink culture from gender and gender from culture.

The theorizations derived from these encounters account for the new utopian horizons that organized indigenous women are constructing based on the recovery of the historic memory of their peoples. I am interested in reflecting on the effects of resistance and the decentering of hegemonic discourses by the rhetoric and practice of indigenous women who vindicate the spirituality and cosmovision of their peoples.

Analyzing religious spaces as spaces of resistance to various forms of domination has been one of the priorities of the region's anthropology and sociology in recent decades. These studies have demonstrated the fallacies of the old Marxist premise that "religion is the opium of the people," by analyzing how ritual spaces allow social actors to reject, dispute, or negotiate with the structures of domination that frame their lives.¹ Along this line of analysis, I am interested in reflecting on how indigenous spirituality is being vindicated by the members of the Continental Network of Indigenous Women, especially by organized women in Mexico and Guatemala, to resist the homogenizing impulse of globalization and the acculturating policies of nation-states, as well as to confront the ethnocentrism of some feminisms that, based on a liberal conception of the individual and a rhetoric of equality, develop their emancipatory projects.

The various genealogies and organizational experiences of the participants of this incipient continental movement of indigenous women have had an influence on whether they have appropriated the tools and critiques of Latin American feminisms and how they have done so. Some of them, especially in Mexico and Guatemala, have started to speak of the existence of indigenous feminisms that prioritize reflection and practice to transform inequalities between the genders. Other sectors, however, have rejected the concept of feminism and have opted to vindicate indigenous cosmovision as a space from which to rethink power relations between men and women. The discourse and practice of indigenous feminists, such as the members of the Kaqla group in Guatemala or some of the members of the Guerrero Indigenous Women's Coordinating Committee, has had much more resonance with the agenda of feminist organizations, which has created possibilities for political alliances. However, the ethnocentrism of some sectors of the academy and of feminist activism have hindered dialogue with the sectors of indigenous women who vindicate cosmovision, and the emancipatory potential that indigenous spirituality has for them has been hardly explored.

Despite the resistance against and the rejection of these culturally situated perspectives by some feminisms, their proposals have gained

an important place in the continental movement of indigenous women. Following the First Indigenous Women Summit of the Americas, held in Oaxaca City in 2002, these voices started playing an important role. As early as the preparatory documents, there was a rejection of the concept of feminism and a vindication of the concepts of complementarity and duality as fundamental to understand gender relations:

In this document, a feminist inclination will not be observed, since, for indigenous people, cosmovision values each being, and duality is of great importance. It is important to acknowledge that the influence of the invading cultures partially deteriorated this vision regarding women's role in society; because of that, this principle is not observed in our days and great social imbalances and inequalities are suffered. In such a changing world with a model based on Western cultures, it has been difficult to maintain the culture of indigenous peoples intact. (*Memoria de la Primera Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América* 2003: 126)

This explicit rejection of feminism is based on a perception of it as radical and separatist, a stereotype that underlies many of the viewpoints that women from peoples' movements have of feminisms, and that many feminists have unfortunately reproduced. Their unwillingness to understand the genesis of these non-Western political and epistemological proposals and the imposition of a feminist agenda that is insensitive to the cultural diversity of Latin America also contributes to the rejection of the concept of feminism by many indigenous women.

Indigenous women are developing their own theorizations based on the work of their organic intellectuals, who have participated in continental events in the last decade. These theorizations are reflected in the resolutions of the First Summit, at which the concepts of complementarity and duality were the axis of the debates of the Roundtable on Education, Spirituality, and Culture, which resulted in a declaration in which the participants stated,

We recognize that spirituality is the basis of knowledge and that indigenous education therefore must strengthen it and maintain it, treating it with respect.... We propose developing our own identity, recovering ancestral knowledges and listening to the voices of our ancestors and our spiritual voices to choose the way and build the future. We reaffirm the need to cultivate spirituality by bearing witness, sharing our experiences and our own knowledges, taking advantage of mutual energies and assuming our culture's concepts and beliefs. We return to indigenous

cosmovision or the science of indigenous peoples, acknowledging the elders as holders of ancestral knowledge, so that they are the teachers of future generations. We strengthen the community's spiritual practices, whereby adults teach youths and children through practice. We revalue spirituality as the main axis of culture by practicing our principles and through training to strengthen our knowledges. (op. cit.: 128).

This vindication of a spirituality and an epistemology of their own by indigenous women prompted rejection by both the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church and liberal feminists. The letter sent by the Episcopal Commission of the Indigenous Pastoral to the First Indigenous Women Summit of the Americas, accusing them of approaching spirituality “from a perspective that is entirely distant from the cultural and spiritual reality of the various ethnic groups that compose our indigenous peoples” and of “imposing the concept of sexual and reproductive rights, which imply population control programs that are against the values of maternity and life, which are fundamental in indigenous cultures, a fact that has been repeatedly denounced by the communities,”² was the beginning of an intense controversy that took place primarily in the *Proceso* magazine, in which the polarized viewpoints on indigenous women's rights were made evident, but especially the practices of erasure and silencing of their voices by Catholic conservatism and liberal feminism.

Based on this conception of cosmovision and spirituality, some Mayan women propose a concept of gender that implies

“a relation that is respectful, sincere, equitable, of balance, of equilibrium—what in the West would be equity—, of respect, and of harmony, in which both men and women have the opportunity, without it meaning an additional load for the woman, but a Facilitating element. Only this way can we be spiritually well, with human beings, with the earth, the sky, and the elements of nature that give us oxygen....Because of that, for us, speaking of gender implies resorting to the concept of Duality as understood by indigenous cosmovision, according to which everything in the universe operates in terms of Duality, the sky and the earth, joy and sorrow, night and day complement each other: one cannot be without the other. If there were ten days with only sun, we would die, we could not withstand it. Everything works in terms of Duality, and undoubtedly man and woman.” (Estela, indigenous woman from the Political Association of Mayan Women, Moloj, Mayib' Ixoquib', Guatemala. Cited in Calixta Gabriel 2004)

It is evident that, from these perspectives, the concept of complementarity is not an excuse to avoid speaking of power and violence in gender relations, but, on the contrary, a critical tool to question the colonizing attitudes of indigenous men and to argue for the need to rethink culture from the perspective of gender equity.

Recuperating their theorizations and recognizing their emancipatory potential should not imply idealizing today's indigenous cultures. Their proposals speak of a cosmovision that is based on important values that must be recovered and put in practice, and in no way mean to insinuate that they represent the culture that already frames their everyday lives. On the contrary, they acknowledge that “[t]here are currently vast differences between the situation of women and men, but this does not mean that it was always thus. In this case there is the possibility of going back to the roots and recovering the space that belongs to women according to indigenous cosmovision” (ibid.).

Disqualifying these proposals because they are not based on our notion of equality or because they do not vindicate our concern with sexual and reproductive rights, or they do not do so in the same way we think of them in urban and mestizo regions, reproduces the mechanisms of silencing and exclusion of political movements marked by patriarchal perspectives.

Second Dialogue from the Female CERESO of Atlacholaya: Oral History as a Tool to Dismantle Multiple Oppressions³

The second dialogue in my activist research experiences has been with indigenous and Mestizo women in prison, from whom I have learned that, even where there appears to be no room for resistance, in one of the most totalizing state institutions—the prison—reconstructing trajectories of exclusion through shared and collectively reflected oral history can be a tool for uncovering the intersections between racism, patriarchy, and capitalism.

I arrived at the women's Center for Social Rehabilitation (CERESO) in Atlacholaya, Morelos, in 2008, believing that my anthropological research on the Mexican justice system could somehow contribute to improving women's access to justice, without imagining to what extent those women's reflections and experiences would change my life. This experience made me understand the importance of oral history as a tool for feminist reflection and as a strategy to destabilize colonial racist and sexist discourses. While it is true that feminist theoreticians have written much about the importance of recovering the history of

everyday life and accounting for women's experiences through oral history,⁴ I could not imagine how the collective reconstruction of individual histories could serve to build sisterhood among diverse women and to write a counterhistory that revealed how the coloniality of power determines the lack of access to justice by indigenous and peasant women.

Oral history, in the context of our activist research experience, has ceased to be a "methodological tool for researchers" to become, instead, a means of collective reflection that exposes the way in which ethnic and class hierarchies impacted the trajectories of exclusion experienced by the women inmates and their lack of access to justice. Contrasting the experiences of indigenous and nonindigenous women, among women who are campesinas, factory workers, and professionals, between homosexual and heterosexual women—as they shared and reflected upon their life histories—has served to expose the hierarchies defining the system of justice in Mexico and society in general.

Expecting to have an ethnographic approach to the feminine penitentiary environment, I planned to undertake field research by recording the life stories of indigenous women in the women's CERESO in Morelos. This particular CERESO was established in the year 2000 to replace the old penal complex at Atlacomulco in the state of Morelos, which was criticized for the dreadful living conditions for its inmates. Designed as a modern correctional facility, the new detention center includes a section intended exclusively for female inmates, unlike most penal complexes that are made for male prisoners only and are later adapted to fit female inmates (Azaola and Yacamán 1996).

The women's section of the CERESO in Morelos is the penitentiary with the highest number of female prisoners in the state. It houses 205 inmates, 34 percent of whom are under preventive detention, and 65 percent are sentenced inmates, plus there are 15 minors.⁵ The penitentiary's installed capacity is for only 120 interns (*Female CERESO's Penitentiary Diagnostics*, Morelos 2009), in spite of which it is considered to be a model penitentiary due to its modern infrastructure and because the complex has sports and educational facilities (Velázquez Domínguez 2004).

In accordance with the methodological design of our collective project, I was interested in applying collaborative methodologies inside the penitentiary environment. This entailed new challenges for me, since it was not the same as working with organized women fighting for social justice as in my work with the Continental Network of Indigenous Women, or as accompanying organizing processes in which I was

involved, as in my work with COLEM. An alternative would have been to approach a human rights or women's organization that would like to sponsor our research team's project. At any rate, collaboration came our way through a different channel.

An obstacle to carrying out the research was the resistance of prison authorities to grant research permits for correctional centers anywhere in the country. Nevertheless, most of the inmate programs for reentering society are of a cultural and educational nature. Many universities, like Mexico City's Autonomous University (UACM) and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and special government institutions such as the Social Rehabilitation Patronage or the Morelos State Social Reentry, are involved in these endeavors. Through a personal contact, I managed to enter as a guest to a workshop that was taking place at Atlacholoaya Women's CERESO. Elena de Hoyos, a feminist poet, was conducting a workshop entitled "Woman: Writing Can Change Your Life." It had been going on for a year, involving between ten and twelve inmates—none of them indigenous—with educational levels ranging from completed elementary school to technical education. When I introduced myself and explained my interest in writing life stories of indigenous prisoner women, they offered to do the interviews themselves with their fellow inmates if I provided the proper methodological training.

This was the beginning of a space for dialogue and collective construction of knowledge that has brought new challenges for me, as an academic and an activist. What began as a writing workshop has become the *Colectiva Editorial de Mujeres en Prisión Hermanas en la Sombra* (Publishing Collective of Women in Prison Sisters in the Shadows), which has already published seven books as well as various articles for cultural and penitentiary journals. The stories and denouncements in these publications have played a part in the review of prosecution files and the release of a number of women who were unfairly imprisoned.⁶

The formal goal of the Life Histories Workshop, in which ten writers were involved, all of them inmates at the Atlacholoaya CERESO, was to "train participants in the technical elements of elaborating life histories, as a literary and reflective asset for gender inequality." The workshop has been taking place from October 2008 up until the day I am finishing this article (May 2015), and the women involved have undertaken their own project, each elaborating the life history of one of their indigenous inmates. Once a month, the fellow inmates whose histories are being summarized take part in the workshop to listen to

progress made, and to comment on and question the ways in which their lives are being represented by the workshop members.

This collective process has allowed us to create new bonds between indigenous and nonindigenous women, and has opened up a reflective sphere on racism and exclusions in Mexican society, reproduced within the penal environment. Through these dialogues, we confront ethnocentric perspectives on defining a dignified life, while questioning perspectives on “backwardness and progress” that tend to delineate the contrast between the lives of indigenous women and urban mestizo women. When we compare their histories, we realize that in most cases the “national system of justice” does not represent “progress” in relation to community forms of justice:

Since detention, most of us have suffered beatings, mistreatment, insults from the servants of the law, and in some cases, certain extortions that aren't subject to proceedings. Like magic, the medical reports and testimonies of these aggressions disappear in the trajectory from the prosecutor's office to the prison. And some little lines appear saying that the accused, now the alleged person responsible, appeared of her own free will to give her statement. The *costalazos*⁷ don't leave any signs, but they have damaged my inner flesh. (Excerpt from *Los Costalazos* by Águila del Mar, in *Mareas Cautivas*, 2013: 32)

As participants shared their life histories, they came to realize that sexual and domestic violence takes different forms, and is more private in urban settings, but is still there. By contrasting their histories, reflecting on them, and writing them down in a collective text, the women were able to not only denounce the racism, sexism, and classism in the penitentiary system but also construct new subjectivities by denaturalizing violence. In the spaces for collective reflection created for the reading of their life histories, participants began to express the need to strengthen themselves from within to confront violence, and especially, to teach their daughters outside of the prison how to avoid reproducing the types of relationships they had experienced. In an exercise completed within the framework of the workshop, participants wrote letters to women who have been mistreated psychologically and physically:

Break the chains of subjugation caused by the lack of high esteem. Find yourselves again and look around you. Life shouldn't be like it was for our mothers. We need to construct our own way of thinking and communicating with our spouses, instead of repeating the ways of life from

our families. To have our own way of living, to know how to express our own feelings and to teach our children to express their own feelings both with the people around them and with their romantic partners. To know how to say “no” to violence.⁸

Woman, if you dare to break the silence, you may be able to put an end to the pattern of violence that surrounds you and that you may actually be reproducing. It's understandable that if we live in a violent home, sooner or later we will reproduce the violence...but today, I encourage you to reveal yourself to fight against what humiliates you, what tramples on your dignity. Listen, you are invaluable. Don't remain silent. Shout, and fight for your rights, because after all, you're a woman.⁹

My experience has been by no means unique. Literary workshops have been a point of entrance for many academics into the penitentiary realm, and a number of analysts have pointed out the complications that occur between “instructors” and authorities in penal institutions, since workshops act as a means to feed the penal system's control and domestication needs (Bruchac 1987, Olguín 2009). The way in which the contents of the literary workshops respond to the cultural context of inmates and allow or hamper critical reflection shapes the hegemonic or counterhegemonic role these vehicles may have.¹⁰

With these ideas in mind, my purpose for the Life Histories Workshop has been to encourage intercultural exchange between indigenous and nonindigenous women and to promote critical reflection on the chain of ethnic, gender, and class inequalities that gave rise to their reclusion. The participants have begun to elaborate their own theorizations and reflections that they incorporate into their biographical narratives, thus rendering hybrid and novel forms that go beyond mere life histories.

Discussing similarities and differences, has been a central part of the workshops:

Personally, I feel this workshop helps me get to know my companions better, learn about their ideas, express ourselves better and I wish it also helps us become closer. I believe it is helping me be a better person, to express my feelings and thoughts and be more sensible to my companions. To illiterate indigenous women, our work has been a way of making their lives known, and along with theirs our own, as a form of mutual help. (*¿Y Ahora qué sigue?* 2008–1, 8: 3)

This collective process, which for a time broke with the prison's interior separation between rural and urban women, allowed for the

creation of new ties of solidarity between indigenous and nonindigenous women, and opened up a space to reflect upon the racism and exclusion in Mexican society that were being reproduced within penitentiary space.

Although the topic of violence was not central to these life histories, this theme surfaced in the majority of testimonies. The great challenge that we have faced, not just in the second part of the workshop but throughout the long-term process that has lasted until the present day (May 2015), has been to avoid revictimization in the name of denunciation. This has been a permanent preoccupation of those who work on processes of psychological and social accompaniment of victims of sexual violence (see Aranguren Romero 2010). Despite the fact that decisions to include experiences of domestic or sexual violence in life histories were taken in a reflexive manner by the women participants, as coordinators of the workshops we were concerned by the effects that having to narrate anew the horror of lived violence could have on the minds and bodies of the victims, and the lack of therapeutic resources to accompany these processes for those of us who had not been trained to deal with situations of emotional crisis. It was partly in response to this concern that, as the coordinators of the workshops, we requested the support of therapists Marie Laversin and Pilar Hinojosa who, using various healing techniques, have worked through the painful memories that this process stirred up in participants.

It is not my intention to give formulas or preestablished methods for feminist activist research, but rather I seek to share a collective experience of which I have been part, and to outline some ideas concerning how life histories can become an instrument for self-reflection, healing, and finally political contestation.

Final Reflections

As a feminist, I have found that dialogical activist research with indigenous women has contributed to a process of reformulating my own conceptions of gender rights, and has led me to a process criticizing my own complicities in the processes of “erasing” other conceptions and expectations in relation to justice for women.

The voices and experiences of the members of the Continental Network of Indigenous Women and of the women who participated in the Penitentiary Workshops on Life Histories (*Talleres Penitenciarios de Historias de Vida*) are a source of theorizations that speak to us of other forms of understanding women’s rights and their connections to

the collective rights of peoples. The theorizations arising from these collective spaces and others being created in different regions of Latin America point to new utopic horizons that organized indigenous women are constructing as they recover the historic memory of their peoples. My intention in this chapter was to reflect upon the effects of resistance and the process of decentering hegemonic discourses in the rhetoric and practice of indigenous women who are defending other ways of understanding justice and women’s rights.

In the activist research with indigenous women, we have attempted to establish epistemic dialogues on the basis of research and organizational work. We have discussed and analyzed different conceptions and experiences of subordination and resistance. In these dialogues, the contributions from indigenous intellectuals have been vital. Working in the academic world and in political activism, they are developing their own theorizations in relation to the collective rights of their peoples and the rights of women. In this new context, voices such as those of Martha Sánchez (2005, 2012), Alma López (2005), Georgina Méndez (2014), Tarcila Rivera (2005), Irma Alicia Velázquez (2003), and Millaray Painemal and Emma Chirix (2003, 2013) have been fundamental in responding to the representations and victimizations being made of indigenous women in the academic world and in public policies.

It is impossible to continue to practice anthropology without addressing these new voices and representations, and only through dialogue will we find the paths and possibilities for committed feminist anthropology.

Notes

1. Regarding religious spaces as spaces of resistance, see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Hernández Castillo 2004. A collection of works that specifically address the issue of religion as a space for women’s resistance can be found in Marcos 2000 and 2004.
2. For the entire document, see <http://www.convencion.org.uy/lang/en/mensaja-la-cumbre-de-mujeres-indigenas-de-las-americas?print=1>.
3. A deeper analysis of the situation of indigenous women in prisons and the results of this collaborative research can be found in “¿Del Estado Multicultural al Estado Penal? Mujeres Indígenas Presas y Criminalización de la Pobreza en México,” in Teresa Sierra, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, and Rachel Sieder *Justicias indígenas y estado. Violencias contemporáneas* (2013).
4. See Diane Wolf (1996); Reinhartz (1992); Fonow and Cook (1991).
5. The children are allowed to live with their mothers in the prison until they are six years old, at which time they are given to their relatives who have custody or they are kept under State custody.

6. The Colectiva Editorial has published, with support from IWGIA and CIESAS, a book/video entitled *Bajo la Sombra del Guamuchil. Historias de Vida de Mujeres Indígenas y Campesinas Presas* (2010) and a revised and extended version in 2015; with support from the Instituto de Cultura de Morelos, the handmade books entitled *Fragmentos de Mujer* (2011) and *Mareas Cautivas. Navegando las Letras de las Mujeres en Prisión* (2012); and with a scholarship from the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, a three-book collection entitled *Revelaciones Intramuros*.
7. *Costalazos* are a form of torture in which a person's body is wrapped in gunny sacks before being beaten to avoid leaving marks.
8. Exercise by Guadalupe Salgado, in the Life Histories Workshop at the Atlacholoaya Women's CERESO, May 17, 2009.
9. Exercise by Susuki Lee, in the Life Histories Workshop at the Atlacholoaya Women's CERESO, May 17, 2009.
10. In this regard, Ben Olguín (2009) contrasts the experience of Jean Trounstein (2001) with her literary workshop project known as *Shakespeare behind Bars*, in which the writer taught English theater from the sixteenth century to female prisoners, most of them women of color, while disregarding the prisoners' own writing, with the work of James B. Waldram (1997), who used Paulo Freire's pedagogy in his workshops to recover the spirituality and traditional knowledge of Canada's imprisoned native population. Sara Makowski, for her part, asserts that the Literary Workshop held in the Mexico City Women's Prison known as the Reclusorio Preventivo Femenil Oriente, where she conducted her research, was a space of counterpower: "In the Literature Workshop things that cannot be even mentioned in any other corner of the women's prison are spoken about and discussed. There, anxieties are shared, and the group increases its awareness of ways to transform complaints and pain into critical judgment" (1994: 180).

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