



Against Discursive Colonialism: Intercultural Dialogues as a Path to Decolonizing Feminist Anthropology

R. AÍDA HERNÁNDEZ CASTILLO

CIESAS-México/Red de Feminismos Descoloniales

THIS ARTICLE IS BASED ON A PAPER that I presented during the annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP), as a keynote speaker in the Coss Dialogue sessions. I was pleasantly surprised to hear that most participants of SAAP use the term “American” in its continental, rather than in the US-centric sense. I am glad that many of the philosophers of this community of knowledge have opened their dialogues to the voices and experiences south of the Río Bravo. We are living during very difficult times in which cultures and practices of violence, as well as aggressive exclusion and intolerance, are affecting our communities on both sides of the border. In this context of multiple violences, it is urgent to open spaces of interdisciplinary dialogue, like the Coss Dialogue sessions and this special issue of *The Pluralist*, to build bridges between different disciplines in the effort of confronting the pedagogy of death that is navigating across our continent. Please consider this article as an invitation to continue building and promoting bridges of solidarity between our communities of knowledge.

In this essay, I would like to address two experiences of activist research that have taught me very important lessons about decolonizing my own feminism and rethinking my anthropological methodologies from a dialogical perspective. In order to effectively convey the evolution of my perspectives, I would like to share some of the genealogy of my life experiences with you.

Situating My Epistemological Dialogues

During the late 1980s, I lived in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the administrative capital of a predominantly marginal Maya-Tsotsil community. It was after many years of working with local feminist organizations in San Cristóbal, and also as a result of the work that many brilliant scholarly feminists have done





on *discursive colonialism* (Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisted”), that I would begin to question the methodologies used by these organizations with which I had actively worked.

My time living in the rain forest of Chiapas exposed me to Indigenous organizations and their Mayan epistemologies and ontologies, all of which had a direct impact on the way I viewed and experienced the world at the time. It was not only my feminist perspectives that were evolving; I was also rethinking many of my positions on resistance and social struggle, which had been grossly shaped by Marxist ideals. It quickly became unquestionably evident that in order to analyze and understand political struggles in the Americas, it is fundamental to consider the role of racism and internal colonialism.

My changing positionalities would be further motivated by a series of unfortunate events that took place during my time in Chiapas. On multiple occasions, I experienced political violence by the state against social movements, during which friends of mine were physically oppressed and sexually assaulted by government officials. The indignity of these events compelled me to participate in the creation of a women’s movement against state and gender violence. The movement evolved into the feminist organization COLEM (that means “free” in the Tsotsil language), in which I was an active member for ten years.

Since 1989, I have worked as a researcher and professor in a graduate program at the Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), where I have focused a great deal of my work on the racism and internal colonialism suffered by Indigenous women. The accumulation of these experiences led me to discover the urgency for developing political alliances that function under the politics of solidarity.

It was around these times in 1994, that the Zapatista movement stood up in arms as the first military movement in Latin America to incorporate the feminist ideals into their political agenda. The Zapatista fight against neoliberalism, racism, and patriarchy have become an example for an entire school of feminists who work toward the decolonization of politics in both practice and theory (see Speed et al.).

Working with feminist organizations that fight against sexual and domestic violence, and that work with victims who are predominantly Indigenous women, I confronted the “idealizing discourse” that mainstream Mexican anthropology imposes on Indigenous cultures. But at the same time, I also was critical of the profound ethnocentrism adopted by a significant branch of liberal feminism. In this polarized debate, women’s rights have been viewed as a completely separate struggle from that of Indigenous people’s fight for their





“collective rights.” By assuming these issues to be opposite to one another, the organizations have been unable to reconcile their political and social agendas. It has been a challenge to find the subtle and overlapping perspectives of women’s and Indigenous rights—those that recognize the power dialogues that constitute Indigenous and women’s identities yet also assert Indigenous peoples’ right to their own culture and self-determination.

The complexity presented by the polarization of the different social movements is that each movement tends to remain rigidly focused on the movement’s individual mission while ignoring and often rejecting other very important demands that directly affect their community. There were Indigenous women who experienced the intersection of multiple oppressions, with whom I worked with for so many years and who taught me to understand women’s rights from a different lens; for these women, the challenge was to change the Indigenous traditions that oppressed them without abandoning or betraying their fight for Indigenous rights.

When endeavoring to intersect this political divide, I worked hand in hand with Indigenous women who supported me in rethinking ways to create bridges across movements through Indigenous perspectives. To this end, and with the ultimate goal of decolonizing feminist anthropology, it is fundamental to understand the theorization of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies through the voices and perspectives of their own political documents, documented speeches, memoirs, and intellectual writings.

New Paths in Dialogical Anthropology

Research methodologies have been subject to scrutiny over the years, often deemed to have a somewhat shallow focus or intent. The questions “Knowledge for what purpose and for whom?” were raised by Karl Marx, who wrote a lot about the often pointlessness of philosophical reflection. Marx argued, in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, that trying to understand the world is ultimately pointless if it is not followed by active efforts to transform it. This notion has challenged the myth of positive neutrality. Another sociologist who raised this very question was Robert Lynd. In his 1939 book *Knowledge for What?*, he challenges the futile effort to address theoretical queries and concerns rather than addressing the issues of the individuals who are the objects of the study.

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” (84).





Similarly, at the turn of the twentieth century, Pragmatic philosophers such as Jane Addams and John Dewey criticized the separation of practice from theory, and cognition from experience. During the 1960s and 1970s, Latin American anthropologists, theorists, and researchers promoting participatory research were focusing a great deal on the need to decolonize social sciences as an entire discipline.

These discussions are ongoing within social scientific and philosophical debates, and although the reasoning may be consistent, the methodologies fluctuate. Historic truth as well as the conceptualizations of power shed light on the contrasting perspectives between old-school Marxist anthropologists promoting the activist research and anthropologists like myself who continue to advocate for collaborative dialogical research as the most adequate methodology. But we do so 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).

It is very important not to forget the theoretical genealogies that have led to our understanding of the world today. Without honoring genealogies of knowledge, we run the risk of claiming as new the paths that others in the field of collaborative research and decolonizing theory have already walked. As a Latin American scholar who spent a lot of time working with English-speaking academics, I feel a very strong calling to honor and give credit to the Latin American theory that has played an important role in shaping my career. For example, Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory inspired an entire generation of social scientists to explore and develop new methodological strategies for social transformation. These new perspectives sought to utilize the knowledge and experience of the working classes to create frameworks and processes that would increase political awareness. Through an inclusive approach to education, working with the objects of study to develop the right methodologies became the key to social transformation.

In Mexico, these methodologies were implemented through a series of research projects that sought to create inclusive participatory collaborations between academia and Indigenous organizations. The goal of these projects was to focus research on tangible needs of the communities being studied in order to act as a support system to empower communities to overcome their struggles. This kind of co-participatory research became very popular during the 1970s, and is considered to be one of Latin America's most significant contributions to social science research theory.

While inclusive co-participatory research became popular as a practice across Latin America, there was also a surge in Indigenous and *campesino*





(farmer or farm laborer) movements challenging national initiatives. The movements protested government's utter exclusion of Indigenous peoples from economic and political systems and accused them of repressing their cultural identities. These same voices echoed concerns over the damaging role that anthropological research can have on Indigenous communities when the research is used to dominate rather than support them (see Bonfil Batalla).

Many Latin American social scientists resonated a lot with this new wave of concern, and many even decided to abandon academia altogether. Some scholars became advisors to Indigenous, peasant, and grassroots organizations, while others built their own NGOs and research centers with the goal of practicing a more inclusive and dialogical research methodology. In Mexico, this was the case for the Institute of Anthropological Advice in the Maya Region (Instituto de Asesoría Antropológica para la Región Maya [IN-AREMAC]), directed by Andrés Aubry in San Cristóbal de las Casas; Circo Maya, coordinated by Armando Bartra; and the Center of Activist Research for Women (Centro de Investigación-Acción para la Mujer [CIAM]) founded by Mercedes Olivera.

During my time living in Chiapas, it was the NGOs affiliated with the Catholic Church that promoted co-participatory research methods through pastoral work, strongly guided by liberation theology. The interaction between researcher and object of research was intended to transform the relationship from a vertical to a more horizontal dynamic. Nevertheless, these efforts were still guided by the notion that the researcher is the supporting entity who will bring greater awareness to the subject. This dynamic is rooted in a paternalistic view of popular sectors and their knowledge, the latter of which was considered to be distorted by a false awareness.

Many researchers, such as myself, adopted this methodology in an effort to raise awareness amongst Indigenous women. Eventually, we would confront the legacy of this methodology and realize the extent of our active participation and reproduction of ethnocentric Marxist ideals. Now, the apparently infallible method is not historical materialism, but is instead a type of gender analysis that emerges from a Western intellectual tradition and that, most of the time, is insensitive to cultural differences.

In collaboration with other colleagues, all of whom are academic women and activists belonging to the network Red de Feminismos Descoloniales (Decolonial Feminist Network), we have been working on a proposal that questions the homogenizing, generalizing perspectives of patriarchy and what are often considered to be "women's interests." By rejecting the idea of a pre-existing 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 fundamental cultural and historic aspects of the lives of social subjects.

Dialogical anthropology is an approach developed by Dennis Tedlock where dialogue is said to be crucial for conducting effective ethnographic research. This methodology considers the role of the researcher to be an integral part of the research dialogue. Branching off this methodology, the feminist proposal of the Red de Feminismos Descoloniales seeks to create a safe space of dialogue with women as a research method to identify and analyze experiences of oppression and social resistance. I believe that this approach, beyond merely theory, has a great applicable research potential. Faye Harrison raised these questions: “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? . . . [A]nd why is the notion of cultural criticism limited to granting academics the privilege of intercultural knowledge?” (5).

In contrast to co-participatory research, the dialogical approach I suggest stays away from efforts to transform a certain reality based on the research method. What it does is merely understand and analyze a given reality with the goal of deconstructing the issue, layer by layer, in a space of collective dialogue. Through dialogue, we seek to break down an issue to its very core before we presume to understand what needs to be done in order to rebuild it. And thus, through this type of interaction, the researcher seeks to shape their research according to the needs of the subjects.

The issue I have with co-participatory research, as it has been done in the past, is that it assumes a dichotomic conception of power: the researcher has to be in alliance with the “oppressed” subject and in opposition with the oppressor. This simplified perspective merely homogenizes all subordinate groups into one category (“victim”) without considering the complex differences and nuances of every struggle. As committed social scientists and researchers, we must be able to recognize the implications that the representation we have of marginalized groups will subsequently have on them. It is fundamental to recognize and consider all the grey areas that are disregarded by past research methods.

Class was seen as the sole factor by which the researcher identifies the oppressor and the victim. In reality, it is much more complex than this. When we understand and recognize the plurality of relations of subordination, homogenizing a struggle becomes nearly impossible. 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. The next section will guide you through two experiences in activist research that caused me to question and eventually confront my feminist ideals, and that played a pivotal role in shaping my identity as a feminist and as an anthropologist.

Alliances with the Continental Network of Indigenous Women: Cosmivision and Resistance to Globalization

The first dialogue experience I would like to share is about my time researching and working with the Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas (ECMIA, for its name in Spanish). The time I spent with this group of women expanded my boundaries of understanding feminism far beyond my own experience as a woman who exists in a patriarchal society; I gained a new understanding of dominance, one not only exerted between genders, but also between humans and the earth. Learning from epistemologies and ontologies, in which the separation between humans and non-humans is not the basic axis to relate to the world, has destabilized many of my feminist certainties.

My dialogues with the ECMIA led me to challenge the “globalized localisms” of universal women’s rights. In what are considered “progressive” efforts to improve gender equality by better incorporating women into development strategies, programs, and policies, nations across the globe are imposing a universal conception of women’s rights. Indigenous women have condemned this grossly ethnocentric approach to feminism since the 1990s, calling for a more nuanced approach that recognizes the different realities to which women belong. In their case, they urged for their collective rights as Indigenous peoples to be recognized as a fundamental element of their rights as women, and not separated from one another (see Sierra and Hernández Castillo). Their criticism also targeted the individualistic understanding of feminism, which completely disregards their cosmivision and Indigenous epistemologies. These criticism charges are what inspired the rise of decolonial feminism as a new theoretical field of study and advocacy. There are several edited volumes that dive deep into this very concept, using different examples of Indigenous, Chicana, Muslim feminists who question the ethnocentric





feminism and propose different epistemologies for understanding resistance and domination (see Suárez Návaz and Hernández; Bidaseca and Vázquez Laba).

Efforts to broaden feminist theory to include indigenous perspectives have been occurring for some time. However, these very efforts on behalf of indigenous scholars have often resulted in reducing indigenous cosmovisions to simplified and stereotypical views of much more complex and profound epistemologies and ontologies. In this shallow process of inclusion, the deeper conceptions of dignified life are misrepresented, and, at the same time, many of the nuances that make up a changing reality are ignored, denying internal contradictions and power relations in the communities, as well as denying the impact of colonialism on their current-day cultural practices. These representations can become new forms of discursive colonialism that do not acknowledge how their cultural practices are constantly being updated or perceive the internal dynamics of domination and resistance that develop among indigenous peoples.

Embarking on the journey to decolonize your own feminism inevitably leads you to a number of confrontations with your own ethnocentrism. In order to deconstruct these views, you must reject the logics of power that produce the “non-existence” of indigenous and peasant women (de Sousa Santos). However, as we break away from the orientaling perspective (Said) that perceives indigenous peoples as an “otherness” of our Western ontology, which views “them” and their *cosmovision* as the key to our emancipation, the expectation that accepting their ontologies will break us free from our own colonized perspectives is in itself a product of a colonizing approach to feminism.

The Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas (EC-MIA), founded in 1993, is an international network of fifty-two feminist organizations from countries across the American continents, working to support the struggles of Indigenous women (see Berrío Palomo). It has been through the work of this Network and its inspiring members that I learned to question the relationship between decolonization and depatriarchalization. The memoirs, resolutions, and internal documents of ECMIA are a source of theorization that speaks from other ontologies and 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, between humans and non-humans, more as an ideal to





be achieved than as a lived reality. Indigenous women who seek to re-invent new traditions and cultural practices to become more inclusive are proposing a cultural approach to gender, as well as a gender approach to 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 discourses and practices of Indigenous women who vindicate the spirituality and cosmovision of their peoples.

I am interested in reflecting on how Indigenous spirituality is being lived and vindicated by the members of the Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas—particularly, the experience of organized women in Mexico and Guatemala who strive to resist the homogenizing impulse of globalization and the acculturating policies of nation-states. I am also interested in their confrontation of ethnocentric feminisms that are based on a liberal conception of the individual and a rhetoric of equality while they develop their emancipatory projects. The experiences of the network have shaped the way many of the members have accepted and appropriated the different feminisms of Latin America. There have been a few members from Mexico and Guatemala who propose strategies of Indigenous feminisms seeking to rebuild gender dynamics through reflection and dialogue. On the other hand, many also dismiss feminism altogether and instead trust cosmovision as the only outlet able to transform and re-create gender relations. Despite resistance and rejection of these culturally situated perspectives by some feminisms, their proposals have gained an important place in the continental movement of Indigenous women. Since the First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas (Oaxaca City, 2002), these voices have 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 understanding 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. (*Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América* 126)





This explicit rejection of feminism is based on a radical and separatist perspective, a stereotype that underlies many of the viewpoints that women from popular social movements have about feminisms, and that many feminists have unfortunately reproduced. Their unwillingness to understand the genesis of these non-Western political and epistemological proposals, as well as the imposition of a feminist agenda that is insensitive to the cultural diversity of Latin America, contribute to the rejection of the concept of feminism altogether by many Indigenous women.

The work of Indigenous intellectuals who have attended important events of the Network in recent years have become greatly influential to the theorization and knowledge of many Indigenous women. The First Summit dove into the concepts of complementarity and duality during the debate panel on *Education, Spirituality and Culture*, which resulted in a declaration:

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 knowledge 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 knowledge, 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. (Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América 128)

Conservative branches of the Catholic Church and liberal feminists both rejected Indigenous women's claim to their own spirituality. The letter that was sent by the Episcopal Commission of the Indigenous Pastoral to the First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas accused them of interpreting 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."¹





This letter was the beginning of an intense controversy that took place primarily in the *Proceso* magazine, where 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 an understanding of gender that describes

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 qtd. in Gabriel Xiquín)

These perspectives are a powerful means to understanding and challenging the colonizing discourse of Indigenous men, as well as functioning as a stimulus to consider culture from a basis of gender equity.

The acknowledgment of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies should be done in a profound manner that does not simply idealize Indigenous culture on the premise of their cosmovision. The values that make up Indigenous ontologies are meant to be recovered and implemented and not used to stereotype entire cultures. Indigenous peoples recognize that “there 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” (Estela qtd. in Gabriel Xiquín).

If we reject such proposals because they are not in line with our own notion of equality and they do not attend our concerns over sexual and reproductive rights in the same way that our Westernized urban ideologies do, we are contributing to the continuation of the dynamics of power that silence and oppress Indigenous women, reproducing political movements that are shaped and led by racist and patriarchal perspectives.





Alliances with Women in Prisons: Oral History as a Tool to Dismantle Multiple Oppressions

The second dialogue experience that has shaped my own feminist epistemology has been my work and research with Indigenous and *mestizo* inmates of the Center for Social Rehabilitation (CERESO) in Atlacholoaya in Morelos. When I arrived at the prison in 2008, I had great expectations about how my work could help inmates. I never imagined this experience would have such a life-changing impact on my own life views. Working with these women, I experienced how resistance is possible even in the most rigid environments of oppression and control, such as state prisons.

The work that I carried out with inmates at Atlacholoaya taught me a great lesson about the role that oral history can play in revealing the ways in which inmates' lives have been shaped by racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Oral history has been used by feminists as a powerful tool to reconstruct life experiences and to challenge oppressive discourses. Nevertheless, I had never read about the role that oral history could play in building sisterhood through collective dialogue. It was through this same dynamic that I discovered how sorority and dialogue can work hand in hand to write a counter-history that exposes the colonialist power dynamics responsible for incarcerating Indigenous peasant women and that continues to deprive them from access to justice.

During this research experience, oral history was not utilized as a mere methodological tool, but rather, it became a platform for collective reflection. It was through this collective dialogue that we managed to expose the role that class, ethnicity, and gender play in determining an individual's lack of access to justice. By comparing the experiences of women with diverse ethnicities, professions, sexual preferences, and social classes, we were able to shed light on the social hierarchy of the Mexican justice system, which is a direct reflection of Mexican society as a whole. With the goal of conducting ethnographic research of the women's penitentiary system in Mexico, I planned to document Indigenous inmates' personal stories. I was interested in using collaborative methodologies, which posed a new challenge for me as a researcher as it was not an approach I had used in any of my previous research-activist experiences.

The prison is a very tightly regulated space that prohibits outside visitors, so getting access was the first challenge. Feminist poet Elena de Hoyos had been running a writing workshop with ten students, all of whom were *mestizo* women with a basic level of education. I approached Elena with my





proposal to document the life stories of Indigenous inmates. We decided that in order to create a collective space of dialogue, her students would receive the methodological training to do the interviews themselves.

This was the starting point of what would become the Colectiva Editorial de Mujeres en Prisión Hermanas en la Sombra (Publishing Collective of Women in Prison Sisters in the Shadows). Today, the collective has published seventeen books and numerous articles. Most importantly, the stories documented in these publications have contributed to the revision of cases and the release of several inmates who were serving unjust sentences.²

The “Life Histories Workshop” started in October 2008; as of April 2020, it was still taking place every Monday. For the first few years, the workshop focused on the lives of indigenous women. *Mestizo* women, who had the advantage of being able to read and write, would sit down with their fellow Indigenous inmates once a month to share their progress and make adequate changes to the story line. This intimate and collective process did more than just tell stories; it created deep and meaningful relationships between *mestizo* and Indigenous women—bonds that would have been unlikely outside the prison.

Inmates’ narratives revealed the racism and exclusion to which they are subject within their position in Mexican social strata, a hierarchy that is reproduced within the prison walls. Discussing the ways that Indigenous women’s ontologies contrast with that of urban *mestizo* women made up important themes of the workshop; examples included perspectives on “backwardness and progress” and the ethnocentric definition of what is considered by society to be a “dignified life.” What the workshops effectively revealed is that gender violence takes place in different forms and contexts. In the urban setting, it may be a more private occurrence, yet it is still widespread. Realizing the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence in Mexican society caused many inmates to reflect upon their own strength to fight this structural violence. They expressed the urgency to work on themselves, in order to become strong and effective mentors to their daughters, to be able to teach them the right values, and to move away from destructive relationships. To this end, inmates practiced this form of self-reflection by writing letters to other women who had suffered physical and sexual abuse:

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.³

Although special and distinctive to the Mexican context, my experience is not unique to ethnographic prison fieldwork. Researchers have long used on-site education as an entry point, and with it, many have played a complicit role with the institution to implement more effective control over inmates (Bruchac; Olguin). For this matter, an educator inside a prison holds a delicate, often untrustworthy, role that is not always welcomed by inmates. Whether the instructor is able to address the cultural context of inmates is a crucial factor that defines whether the workshop is actually useful to the progress of the inmate, or whether it serves as a tool for state control.⁴

My motivation behind the Life Histories Workshop has always been to inspire intercultural dialogue and relationships between Indigenous and *mestizo* women with very different backgrounds who nevertheless find themselves in very similar realities. Through these interactions, I sought to create a space of collective dialogue and reflection on common inequalities that led to their imprisonment. These women have not only learned to read and write, but are also writing novels, engaging in critical thought, and producing their own theorizations using different textual strategies.

I do not seek to convey that there is a single methodology for feminist activist research that I believe is infallible; my only intention is to share the collective experiences of my life. I hope I have successfully portrayed some of the ways in which life histories can be used as a tool for analytical research, collective reflection, healing, and political dialogue.

Final Reflections

Dialogical activist research has played a fundamental role in transforming my own perspectives on gender rights. This process of transformation led me to confront my own complicity with the rejection and erasure of Indigenous ontologies. It is through the voices of the members of Indigenous movements who spoke up, who resisted the hegemonic feminist agenda, that we began to discover new ways to understand women's rights and the ways in which women's rights are bound to the collective rights of peoples. Through these spaces of dialogue and theorization, Indigenous women across Latin America are recovering the historic memory of their peoples and building new utopic horizons.

I feel a strong responsibility, as a feminist scholar, to understand the relationship between the different forms of violence that imprisoned Indigenous





women suffer and to reconstruct the colonial regimes of sexual violence and torture that relate territorial occupation with imprisonment. The construction of prisons in communal territories and the criminalization of Indigenous men and women are new forms of dispossession and displacement that perpetuate the colonial violence characteristic of the modern states of the Americas.

The construction of analytic bridges in order to comprehend these continuities in distinct national contexts requires acknowledging the new forms that the Empire takes in a moment of globalization of neoliberal capitalism. The capital that constructs the detention centers in the United States (Speed)—or the border infrastructure that impedes the crossing of Indigenous migrants—is the same capital that invests in the penitentiary industry and that constructs certified prisons in Mexico. At the same time, the militarization and paramilitarization that manifest in forms of torture and the use of sexual violence as a counterinsurgency weapon have centers of transnational production in military bases. This culture of violence is able to cross borders that do not have the poor and racialized bodies of the Indigenous migrants.

Standing before these transnational cultures of death, the Indigenous women of the Americas have developed creative strategies of resistance that range from the trans-border alliances of the Continental Network of Indigenous Women to the use of creative writing as a tool for denouncing the multiple forms of violence of the empire. Even in these spaces of apparent isolation and total control of the population, such as certified prisons, the women of the Sisters of the Shadow Editorial Collective have achieved the construction of an emotional community and have developed politics of solidarity that allow them to confront the institutional violence that devalues their daily lives. I hope that this article serves as an echo to their voices and hopes, and that this special issue contributes to building transnational alliances amongst academics who are committed to social justice.

NOTES

Some sections of this article are developed in my book *Multiple Injustices: Indigenous Women, Law, and Political Struggle in Latin America*, published by The University of Arizona Press in 2016. I want to thank Kathleen Wallace and Gregory Pappas for the invitation to the interesting dialogue that took place in the meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato in March 2020. I also want to thank Scott Pratt, Marilyn Fischer, and Mariana Alessandri for their careful reading of my work and for the interesting dialogue that took place during that meeting. Both of these discussions are available in this special issue of *The Pluralist*.

1. For the entire document, see www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/movimientosindigenas/docs/110.pdf.





2. The *Colectiva Editorial* has published, in 2010, with support from IWGIA and CIESAS, a book/video entitled *Bajo la sombra del guamuchil: Historias de vida de mujeres indígenas y campesinas presas* 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-volume collection entitled *Revelaciones intramuros* and several other handmade books. You can download some of their publications at www.rosalvaaidahernandez.com/es/proyectos-colectivos/hermanas-en-la-sombra/.

3. Exercise by Guadalupe Salgado, in the Life Histories Workshop at the Atlacholoaya Women's CERESO, 17 May, 2009.

4. In this regard, Ben Olguín contrasts the experience of Jean Trounstein, 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 Waldram, 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 counter-power: "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" (180).

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