

Critical Latin American Feminisms: Community-Based, Experience-Based, and Gender-Unraveling

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ABSTRACT. Objective/Context: In the following pages, I describe three political feminist projects from Latin America, which we can characterize as critical, given that these projects endorse positions historically attributed to the political left. **Methodology:** Since I am addressing specific feminist experiences that are not eminently theoretical, I use the few theorizations produced by the movements mentioned above and interviews and descriptions of the activism of these feminist political projects. I apply aspects of a cultural studies perspective with a non-hegemonic methodology, deploying the creativity that characterizes the article's subjects, and some elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology. **Conclusions:** I show that all three of these political proposals—although there are differences among them—have common ground and points of convergence that are important for thinking differently about critical Latin American feminisms. Specifically, I demonstrate that some of them share three characteristics: first, they are not born out of or made in academia; second, they are/live in the community; and third, they seek to unravel gender. **Originality:** This article presents an overview of these feminisms that have been of interest to feminists while providing academic readers with insight into social movements and their language. It could serve as a tool to discuss the relevance of these feminisms and expand the ongoing discussion in Latin America.

KEYWORDS: critical feminism; community; experience; gender; Latin America.

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Feminismos críticos latinoamericanos: basados en la comunidad, en la experiencia y en desentrañar el género

RESUMEN. **Objetivo/Contexto:** se describen tres proyectos políticos feministas de América Latina que podemos caracterizar como críticos, dado que estos proyectos respaldan posiciones que históricamente se han atribuido a la izquierda política. **Metodología:** dado que se abordan experiencias feministas específicas que no son eminentemente teóricas, se recurre tanto a las pocas teorizaciones producidas por los movimientos mencionados anteriormente, como a entrevistas y descripciones del activismo de estos proyectos políticos feministas. Se emplean aspectos de una perspectiva de estudios culturales con una metodología no hegemónica, desplegando la creatividad que caracteriza a los sujetos del artículo y algunos aspectos de la metodología de Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP). **Conclusiones:** se muestra que las tres propuestas políticas, aunque tienen diferencias entre ellas, tienen terreno común y puntos de convergencia que son importantes para pensar de manera diferente sobre los feminismos críticos de América Latina. Específicamente, se muestra que algunos de ellos comparten tres características, que son: primero, no nacen ni se hacen en la academia; segundo, están/viven en la comunidad; y tercero, buscan desentrañar el género. **Originalidad:** este artículo presenta una visión general de estos feminismos que han interesado a las feministas, al tiempo que proporciona a los lectores académicos una visión de los movimientos sociales y su lenguaje. Podría servir como herramienta para discutir la relevancia de estos feminismos y expandir la discusión en curso en América Latina.

PALABRAS CLAVE: América Latina; comunidad; experiencia; feminismo crítico; género.

Feminismos críticos latino-americanos: baseados na comunidade, na experiência e em desvendar o gênero

RESUMO. **Objetivo/contexto:** são descritos três projetos políticos feministas da América Latina que podemos caracterizar como críticos, uma vez que esses projetos apoiam posições que historicamente foram atribuídas à esquerda política. **Metodologia:** como são abordadas experiências feministas específicas que não são eminentemente teóricas, recorre-se tanto às poucas teorizações produzidas pelos movimentos mencionados anteriormente, quanto a entrevistas e descrições do ativismo desses projetos políticos feministas. São empregados aspectos de uma perspectiva de estudos culturais com uma metodologia não hegemônica, desdobrando a criatividade que caracteriza os sujeitos do artigo e alguns aspectos da metodologia de Pesquisa-Ação Participativa (PAP). **Conclusões:** mostra-se que as três propostas políticas, embora tenham diferenças entre si, têm terreno comum e pontos de convergência que são importantes para pensar de forma diferente sobre os feminismos críticos da América Latina. Especificamente, mostra-se que alguns deles compartilham três características, que são: primeiro, não nascem nem se fazem na academia; segundo, estão/vivem na comunidade; e terceiro, buscam desvendar o gênero. **Originalidade:** este artigo apresenta uma visão geral desses feminismos que têm interessado às feministas, ao mesmo tempo em que fornece

aos leitores acadêmicos uma visão dos movimentos sociais e sua linguagem. Poderia servir como ferramenta para discutir a relevância desses feminismos e expandir a discussão em curso na América Latina.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: América Latina; comunidade; experiência; feminismo crítico; gênero.

Introduction

Until recently, in Latin America, hegemonic accounts of feminism tended to understand feminism in the region as a movement born out of the struggle for universal suffrage and its evolution as contingent on the subsequent waves of new demands by women in the Global North.

However, many feminist movements that have circulated for several decades in our region have shown that, in these territories, feminism does not simply obey dynamics imported from the Global North; it is rather a disputed terrain. These movements have also demonstrated that we can talk about feminisms, in plural, and about these feminisms as the strife of women in our territory that has long responded to multiple forms of oppression. In this regard, the well-known Aymara feminist Adriana Guzmán states: “Feminists in the workers’ movement or in the struggle against dictatorships are ‘facts’ that do not fit into the waves, and the anti-colonial struggles of our indigenous grandmothers, with our people and our community, fit even less” (Guzmán 2019, 9).

Guzmán’s vision is shared by other feminists in the region, for whom feminism has lived in the struggles of women in our territories long before the birth of the feminist movement in the Global North. For these Latin American feminists—critical feminists—it is impossible to discuss feminist contests in this region through the European gaze and experience.¹

However, beyond the question of what elements make these Latin American feminisms different from those of the Global North,² and beyond efforts to develop a historical analysis of the conditions for their emergence, in the

1 This last point resonates with scholar Chandra Mohanty’s well-known critique of hegemonic feminisms (1988), where she signaled the narrowness of thinking about our feminist struggles through Western eyes. However, it is somewhat new to link this to an assertion that feminist contests existed before feminism was born in the Global North, as has been argued by feminists such as Lorena Cabnal and Adriana Guzmán.

2 It would be very interesting to investigate how these feminist proposals differ from those of the Global North. Nevertheless, that would entail a different approach, which is not my intention in this paper.

following pages, I would like to characterize three aspects present in some critical Latin American feminisms, which are relevant for rethinking current feminist struggles in the region. These aspects are: they are born out of experience; they occur in community, in opposition to an individualist experience; and although they emerge from the colonial imposition of gender, they invite us to unravel it.

The political projects I refer to are primarily Afro-Caribbean decolonial feminism, community feminism, Aymara feminism from Bolivia,³ and the feminism of the Network of Women Healers in Guatemala. These projects are alive and in action today. Their common ground is their identity as anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-patriarchal struggles that began as protests against the violence committed against those bodies identified as women's bodies but that include more than gender-based demands. However, by pointing out that they share certain characteristics, I do not wish to imply that the particular experiences of these movements and forms of feminist strife are not unique or that they are all the same. What I am suggesting is that, although there are differences among them, they have common ground and points of convergence that are important for thinking differently about critical Latin American feminism.

Below, I will specifically refer to these three feminist projects, particularly through the voices of Ochy Curiel,⁴ Adriana Guzmán, and Lorena Cabnal, because they *embody* in their own way the characteristics I discuss here. I recognize that they are not the only theoretical sources of the kind of feminism I analyze, but they are the *living* sources of this feminism.

Since I address specific feminist experiences that are not eminently theoretical, I would like to advise the reader that, in the following pages, I will use the few theorizations produced by the movements mentioned above and interviews—conducted by third parties—and descriptions of the activism of these feminists.

It is worth clarifying that although I am an academic, I learned about the movements I refer to in this article not through academia but through my feminist activism. I have had the honor of working with the great Ochy Curiel as my *maestra*, because I belong to La Tremenda Revoltosa Batucada Feminista. I met the incredible Lorena Cabnal through a friend who works in human rights. And finally, I learned about Adriana Guzmán's ideas thanks to a fellow *batuquera* who shared Guzmán's messages with us at a significant political moment. To that extent, I am also part of what I am narrating.

3 Given the ongoing legal proceeding involving serious accusations against Julieta Paredes, a well-known feminist from Bolivia who pioneered community feminism, I have decided not to use her words or perspective.

4 Although María Lugones is the founder of decolonial feminism, I prefer to research this perspective through the feminist work of Ochy Curiel because she has embodied the characteristics I discuss.

Because of that, the information I have gathered has been made possible by my own involvement in the feminist movement. In the same way, my analysis has arisen from the movement to which I belong. Therefore, it could be considered that I have used some elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology.

1. They Are Not Born Out of or Made in Academia or by Learning Feminist Theory

For Adriana Guzmán, an Aymara feminist from Bolivia, feminism “is not studied, it is done” (Guzmán 2019, 1). In her book *Descolonizar la memoria, decolonizar feminismos* (*Decolonizing memory, decolonizing feminisms*), she asserts that “the [feminist] struggle is done from the body, not from books or theory. These can contribute, but they do not mobilize; oppressions do, rage with dignity does, as sister Betty Cariño used to say” (Guzmán 2019, 2).

These assertions have been shared by numerous feminists in the region, emphasizing the fact that these feminisms are not born from specific knowledge of feminist issues. Neither are they theoretical elaborations, in the sense we have conceived of theory from the canon of Western epistemology (with its roots in the Greeks and its deployment in European Modernity). These are theoretical elaborations, but they quite differ from what we normally understand the term to mean.⁵

In contrast to the idea that feminism is a studied subject, the feminists I discuss see feminism as anchored in experience. It is born from concrete materialities, from movements of peoples, from their breath that rises against an oppressive system and that rose against the suffering caused by the invasion, the kidnapping of people from Africa, and the genocide in the territory of Latin America, also known as Abya Yala. It does not have its genesis, or at least not exclusively, in the exploits of women in Europe.

As Adriana Guzmán adds, “We are not daughters of the Enlightenment” (Guzmán 2019, 2). This statement is powerful; in addition to pointing out that women’s resistance struggles in Abya Yala preceded the celebrated struggles of the French Revolution, it reveals that this feminism is not based on knowledge to be attained by reading the feminist canon established by/in the Global North. It is not born of the enlightened desire—what we can call a Kantian desire—to achieve autonomy through reason and knowledge.

5 I will not enter into this discussion, which has been addressed by numerous academics and activists, primarily adherents of the decolonial perspective, such as Ochy Curiel, but also by philosophers such as Jacques Rancière (2003).

However, the fact that these feminisms are born out of experience does not mean that they have not been nourished by theory. Curiel, Guzmán, and Cabnal do not deny having used and been exposed to theories. But, as explained by Curiel, experience came first, and theory followed (Curiel 2022). Political consciousness, in her case, was first born through art, through music. It was through her connection with the lesbian movement in Santo Domingo that she encountered some theories from intellectuals such as Audrey Lord (Curiel 2022).

But what does it mean that these feminisms are born from experiences rather than theories? To better explain this characteristic, I would like to briefly refer to Ochy Curiel's experience with her activism before addressing Lorena Cabnal's experience with the birth of territorial community feminism⁶ in the mountains of Xalapán.

The decolonial feminist Ochy Curiel has stated on many occasions that her feminist action is not in academia, even though she works there, or in her writing, even though it is prolific, but in her activism. In this regard, Curiel (2022) says:

What I write essentially comes out of experience. It is not born in academia. I teach in academia, but beyond that, what we have done as Afro-descendant feminists, as decolonial feminists, lesbian feminists, autonomous feminists, we have done it on the streets. We have done it through experience, and that is fundamental.

For Curiel, academia is her workplace. Although she uses it as a location from where to disseminate her ideas, she does not view it as the place where she carries out her activism (Culturas UNEARTE 2021). Her activism occurs primarily in three locations: in GLEFAS, in La Tremenda Revoltosa,⁷ and in the Cimarronas Decolonial Feminist Schools.

GLEFAS stands for Latin American Feminist Studies, Education, and Action Group. The feminists in this group, made up of Afro-descendant, indigenous, and mestiza women from Abya Yala, are part of “a group woven from multiple countries, providing theoretical/political training for social movement activists. It is a space for dialogues, discussions, research, our own publications, and movement actions, always linked to social movements” (Culturas UNEARTE 2021).

6 I should mention that the first women to create a project called *community feminism* were Bolivian feminists (Julieta Paredes, Adriana Guzmán, and others). From there, the project came to Guatemala.

7 I must clarify that, at the publication date of this paper, Ochy Curiel is no longer participating in La Tremenda Revoltosa.

The second group, La Tremenda Revoltosa, is a feminist *batucada* drum group whose activist purpose is connected to art. As explained by Curiel:

[Its] purpose is to bring denunciations and proposals to the streets with the rhythm of our drums, bodies, and slogans, as a creative form of activism. [It is] an autonomous, self-managed collective with a radical position against oppressions, such as racism, heterosexism, classism, militarism, and violence, which impact the lives of women, trans people, lesbians, and socially disadvantaged people, such as working-class Afro-descendants and indigenous people. Always connected to a range of social movements [in Colombia] that are working for peace with social justice in the country, are defending their territories against extractivist neoliberal capitalism, and are fighting to eliminate racism and all forms of violence. (Culturas UNEARTE 2021)

Finally, the Cimarronas (Maroons) Decolonial Feminist Schools in the Dominican Republic are described in the following terms:

[They] were born out of the need to work with young Afro-descendants to consolidate a decolonial Maroon feminism, which fights racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. At the same time, we undertake actions by building solidarity between the Dominican and the Haitian people—a bond that Dominican elites have attempted to break as a result of their racist, anti-Haitian positions. (Culturas UNEARTE 2021)

Curiel's position here shows us not only that feminism is born out of experiences but also is inextricably linked to activism, actions for social transformation, and changes in people's living conditions.

On the other hand, Lorena Cabnal's experience illustrates another facet of this characteristic: although concepts or theories can support these Abya Yala feminists by connecting and invigorating their feminism, they are not the impetus for their feminist struggle. To understand this better, I will take a moment to share the experience and words of Lorena Cabnal.

In 2011, the term *community feminists* was publicly used for the first time as the political position of Lorena Cabnal and the women with whom she weaves that feminism. However, a process had already been underway for several years before this declaration. In a 2016 interview, Cabnal asserted that a "cosmogonic hunch" emerged within her around 2003:

I remember that some years ago, in 2003 or 2004, I remember that I wondered a lot ... why indigenous women have to deal with the most problems; why indigenous women are the most impoverished, why we lack access to education, why we have so many children, why we don't eat well, why we experience sexism... (UChile Indígena 2016)

Although this hunch was what brought her to the indignation and dignified rage that would lead to a feminist organization, Cabnal had been working for years to promote children's rights and prevent sexual violence against their bodies.

Cabnal herself was a victim of sexual violence at a very young age. After she completed her university studies, she decided to head to the mountain community of Santa María de Xalapán. Although she was born in an impoverished urban indigenous community—one of the indigenous communities displaced by the internal armed conflict (her grandparents migrated to flee from Guatemala's civil war)—she decided, as part of her recovery of her ancestral territory and memory, to return to the mountain. And once she got there, her fight for the bodies of children began (DW Fuerza Latina 2019).

Her questioning about women's rights arose in the context of these struggles. Cabnal's querying led her to organize a first meeting of mountain women, with the pretext of bringing them together to prepare for the day of the dead, since women, Cabnal says, only had permission to leave home for five activities: field work, grinding corn to make tortillas, bringing water, collecting firewood, and going to the Catholic church (CICODE UGR 2015; Cabnal, personal conversation, 2020).

That meeting—which brought out again a series of questions and hunches, along with a great deal of indignation—prompted Cabnal and other mountain women to take action. They began to plan productive projects that could help lift the mountain women out of poverty and seek aid from NGOs in Guatemala City.

At that point, after knocking on several doors without a reply, Cabnal went to seek help from the Women's Sector (Sector Mujeres), a national coalition of women's and social organizations that had played a key role in the Guatemalan peace accords. Cabnal had become aware of the Women's Sector's work earlier through a job with the Xalapán Network of Social Communicators.

Although the Women's Sector could not respond to their immediate needs for subsistence and support the productive projects planned by these mountain women, the coalition offered them "political education for women" (Gargallo 2015, 159). This was the beginning of some mountain women's path to political education, which they then replicated with other women, crafting their own ways of communicating those analyses of reality coming from the city and adapting them to the reality of the mountain.

Through queries like “Who am I?” they also began to question their ethnic identity. These queries were more than doubts about belonging to indigenous peoples. Rather, they led Cabnal to investigate her community further “because at the time it was only referred to as the indigenous community of Santa María de Xalapán. Nobody talked about or knew which ethnic group it belonged to” (Gargallo 2015, 173, modified by personal conversation, 2020). In fact, Cabnal remembers that, while looking for help from the central government for her community in 2003, she found that the census did not include the people of the mountain as an indigenous group but rather as a *ladino* population in a livestock area⁸ (CICODE UGR 2015).

Thus, Cabnal set out on a search that led her to powerful knowledge: the inhabitants of the mountain belonged to the Xinka people and the Maya people. Regarding this, Cabnal states: “We are Xinkas. There is a story here; we are different from the Maya people. We are two ancient peoples who have inhabited these lands, with their richness in their difference” (Gargallo 2015, 174).

The mountain women’s recognition of their ethnic identity made them “raise their spirits, their indignation, their resistance. We carried that feeling from community to community. We joined with the Indigenous Government and with the fight against mining, which was also started by women, and then the people rose up” (Gargallo 2015, 174).

In this way, tying their efforts to those of other men and women of the mountain, they began a path of struggle for the recognition of their people, against statistical genocide, structural racism, the impoverishment and illiteracy of mountain women, and the lack of access to health care for the entire population of the territory of Xalapán. Along with this new recognition of their ethnic identity, they began to recognize their singular struggle as women. Their strife was not only as indigenous Xinka/Maya women because “ethnic identity was the start of the struggle to know who I am [...] because I am a woman and I have rights” (Gargallo 2015, 174).

These efforts for recognition were followed by other stages of political education. As part of this process, in 2005, they publicly denounced “land expropriation and dispossession [...] in the mountains” by landowners (Gargallo 2015, 176).

In 2007, with the participation of young women, they took on another area of struggle: denouncing sexual violence committed through “abductions of 11, 12,

8 In Guatemala, the term *ladino* or *ladina* refers to the mestizo (mixed-race) population. It has its origin in the colonial era, when this term was used to designate the Spanish-speaking population: those who were not born in the Spanish Peninsula but were not indigenous either.

13, and 14-year-old girls to start an involuntary marital life” (Gargallo 2015, 176) and the trafficking of girls and young women. They powerfully fought against violence against the body/land territory, denouncing it “as serious attacks on the rights of women and indigenous peoples” (Gargallo 2015, 176, modified by personal conversation, 2020). They expressed these criticisms not to the Guatemalan government but to the Indigenous Government of the mountain, made up of 357 men, without the presence of women. There, they asked for a hearing to call out and report cases of sexual violence. It was at that moment that the slogan “*Liki tuyahaki na altepet kwerpo-narú*” was born, which means “defending and reclaiming the body/land territory” (Cabnal, personal conversation, 2020).

In addition to these struggles, during that period, they established two educational centers for mountain women while holding other training schools with feminists from the Women’s Sector. That was when they started to talk about sexual and reproductive rights (CICODE UGR 2015).

But it was in 2008, after this group of mountain women participated in the Social Forum of the Americas, that some of them—not all—recognized themselves as feminists, but not before having experienced a shock. In that forum, in the space of the women’s tent, they found “a blanket of lesbian feminists with the naked bodies of women showing their affection” (Gargallo 2015, 177). This shocked many of the indigenous women who participated in the forum. Thus, later, to process what they had experienced there, they asked about the name “feminist” and what it meant for them to call themselves feminists. It was then that they made “a political pact to strengthen feminism,” although some did not call themselves feminists. With this, Cabnal says, territorial community feminism was born, although without the name yet; this would come two years later, in 2010.

2. They Are/Live in Community, in Opposition to Individualism

An issue repeatedly raised by feminists, such as Ochy Curiel, Lorena Cabnal, and Adriana Guzmán, is that feminism is born from being-with-others, that is, out of the community, in a network, not as a solitary experience. And they repeat this in their discourse as much as in the scope of their feminist action (their practice⁹). These feminists act in community: Lorena Cabnal in/with the Network

9 I am aware of the difficulties of assuming the dichotomy of theory and practice as mutually exclusive, especially if we attempt to cast aside these notions that have been so problematic for our peoples. But it is relevant here because some feminists are prone to believe that we can have a theoretical or discursive life and another very different practical one as if everything we do with our writing could replace the concrete life of being-with-others.

of Women Healers; Ochy Curiel in/with GLEFAS, La Tremenda Revoltosa, and the Decolonial Schools; and Adriana Guzmán in/with the CommunityFeminists.¹⁰

Their feminist political work takes place through being-with-others, in the midst of others, not by following a call to a solitary and individualist life, in a fragmented social body, among other reasons, because these feminisms are convinced that political action cannot be understood outside of a real community, much less by replacing it with an imaginary community.¹¹

In the words of Adriana Guzmán, feminism is born “from the community, not from bourgeois individualism” (Guzmán 2019, 13), that is, in opposition to liberal feminism. Thus, it develops from the community because this is *de facto* how this feminism is enacted but also as a critique of individualism.

On this point, I would like to make a clarification. I have said community, and not communal, following feminists such as Ochy Curiel (2021, personal conversation) because there is a difference between the two terms. This difference arises from the work of Maya K’iche activist and sociologist Gladys Tzul Tzul, with her case analyses of communal lands in Guatemala and the indigenous communal governance on these lands (Tzul Tzul 2018). According to Tzul Tzul, we can think of community as alluding to a group of people and collective work. On the other hand, in addition to referring to collective work and a group of people, communal denotes a form of organization for the management and reproduction of life outside the State.

Although the feminists I discuss here describe themselves as anti-system and seek an end to all forms of oppression, the management and reproduction of life in its most basic sense is not carried out in community but rather

10 The name of the organization Guzmán belonged/belongs to is in dispute.

11 On this point, I would like to refer to and critique some of my earlier works. Several years ago, I defended some conclusions I drew from my reading of French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s *Proletarian Nights* (2012). I defended the importance of a type of community that does not necessarily occur through the congregation and continuity of bodies—a kind of community in absence.

This kind of reading is very convenient for those of us in academia. It promotes the idea that we can weave community at a comfortable distance from bodies and struggles, based on singular transformations and what we consider to be erosions of the system from a singular register. To some extent, my reading alluded to the importance of ethical transformations or micro-politics (Deleuze and Guattari 2001).

These are undoubtedly important, and I am not seeking to negate them or disdain everyday life and small transformations, as if they were irrelevant to the reconfiguration of power.

Instead, I am critiquing my earlier position because these transformations cannot be exalted to the point of substituting them for action-with-others, action-in-common, and actions against the system—actions that seek to transform the material conditions of exploitation and the balance of power because this sort of emphasis ends up isolating and atomizing power, without any cohesion.

performed within the framework of laws and institutions. Nevertheless, in addition to this, the struggles waged by some community organizations, such as prison abolitionism, are carried out by demanding certain actions from the authorities. In other words, many of the struggles focus on demands made to the government, and the resolution of those demands takes place within the framework of the State. It is not always the case with communal organizations insofar as they have their own governance and justice system within each territory and operate independently of the State.

To better understand communal as distinct from community, I would like to refer to Gladys Tzul Tzul's words and analysis on communal governance (2018). It refers to political structures allowing for the survival of indigenous communal lands in Guatemala (*ayllus* in the Andes and *resguardos* in Colombia) "to govern life communally, to defend and preserve the concrete wealth produced by communal work" (35).

According to Tzul Tzul, on the one hand, there are communal authorities, people responsible for dialoguing and negotiating with other communities and Guatemalan State authorities. They are appointed by the community and can be recalled through the direct control of community assemblies, where the decisions these people communicate to other communities are discussed. On the other hand, communal governance refers to the multiple practices and strategies "of the communal work carried out by indigenous communities to produce the water drunk every day in their homes; to build roads; to reforest communal forests; and to manage the avenues for the best possible resolution of conflicts arising from the use and enjoyment of communal property" (Tzul Tzul 2018, 35).

Communal work, as understood and experienced by these communities, is "the backbone of indigenous communal governance [...]. Because it is the energy needed for the production and safeguarding of common goods [...], it sustains the spheres of autonomy and life" (Tzul Tzul 2018, 23). It is the way to collectively manage life in a concrete manner. The benefits of living in community are possible thanks to collective work that enables these benefits. In this regard, Tzul Tzul states, "Unlike other societies, where the unit of exchange is only money, in indigenous communities the social unit of exchange is communal work, which fulfills the function of regulating what is shared through the community" (2018, 72).

Thus, this communal framework and politics are anti-system, not only because they are in opposition to the maxims of capitalism and the State, such as individualism (which is also the case with many community organizations), but also because life is managed outside the limits established by the Guatemalan State. Therefore, understood in this way, communal refers to being outside the confines of the State.

This description by Tzul Tzul of the communal allows us to assert that the feminisms I am characterizing on these pages, even if they are anti-system, in opposition to the individualistic maxims of capitalism, do not necessarily engage in communal experiences that occur outside the limits of the State. Rather, these feminisms invoke a destination, a world to come, with a very different role for the State than the role it plays today. This is also the case of CommunityFeminism to which Adriana Guzmán belongs. According to Guzmán, her actions within this feminism focus on the following:

[W]eaving rebellions, but community weaving. We are not menders of male and patriarchal left-wing, right-wing, or indigenist projects. With our hands and our memory, we weave symbols, presentations and representations, threads, the historical materiality of our bodies and our concrete conditions, making creativity an instrument for building and struggle. (Guzmán 2019, 53)

But it also has this characteristic: it occurs in a social movement, with a clear idea of a future society, and it demands the “liberation of the community [...] the liberation of others and nature” (Guzmán 2019, 53). To that extent, it is a movement that joins with or is part of a broader social movement, therefore taking up the concrete demands of that movement, not only those of feminism. This perspective is contrary to Eurocentric feminism, which centers on the individual. In this regard, Guzmán states:

Eurocentric feminism is a feminism of luminaries, of “thinkers,” an agglomeration of individual efforts [...] This way of thinking and acting based on individualism, by a small select group, has led them to concentrate their energy on the various explanations of the oppressions experienced by women, without building a proposal for society or a social movement. Yet both are essential and dependent on each other because a proposal is not built out of one’s navel but out of everyone’s bodies, and that is what the movement does. (Guzmán 2019, 51)

To examine one current of this anti-system but non-communal collective action, I would like to refer to a case of decolonial feminism with the concrete experience of Ochy Curiel. To do so, I will briefly describe one of the activisms in which Curiel participates, La Tremenda Revoltosa. Curiel says in this regard:

Batucadas come from Afro-Brazilian resistance, although they have their origins in Africa. The interesting thing about this project is that we managed [...] for it to be built collectively [and democratically]. I believe that this is a *sine qua non* of a decolonial project. And we carry it out collectively not only in our decision-making, but also in our music. What we tried to do with the *batucada* was to not only play, for example, the genres of music that are always played in *batucadas*, like *zamba*, *reggae*, etc., but also to incorporate certain genres of music that have been played in Colombia for centuries, like *cumbia* and *currulao* [...] and to produce our project in the streets, because that is our biggest stage, which is capable of connecting with this country's history. (Curiel 2022)

This issue mentioned by Curiel—that the *batucada* is built collectively—has also been discussed by La Tremenda Revoltosa:

Through our *batucada*, we question the relationship between knowledge and power in the sense that you do not have to be an expert to be part of the *batucada*. We build the knowledge of our songs and our political vision collectively [...]. We all make our decisions together and also work collectively through working groups. (La Tremenda Revoltosa Batucada Feminista 2021)

They have also affirmed that the fact that their main location of action is the street imbues their *batucada* with a particular collective character. Because it only exists in action; in other words, it exists to the extent that it comes into existence in the streets, in being with others, in protests and demonstrations. Even though they hold training activities and have various spaces that are not on the streets, such as their Connected Dialogue forums (La Tremenda Revoltosa Batucada Feminista 2021), the action that gives them their existence is the act of being in the streets:

Our main area of action is the streets, those territorial spaces where, with our voices, our drums, and our bodies, [we subvert] the privileges of race, class, and sex, of control and militarization. [...]

The pandemic has reminded us that it is possible to come together in other ways, using technology even from other territories [...]. Yet it has also clearly shown us that the revolution will not be made from our computers but by

putting our bodies in the streets, in our case with our drums fused to our bodies and hearts. (La Tremenda Revoltosa Batucada Feminista 2021)

Thus, La Tremenda Batucada has incorporated collective, community, and horizontal practices. Although there are visible figures like Ochy Curiel, the work is done collectively, carried out by other women who are part of the group and allow it to exist.

At this point, it is relevant to mention a problem that can arise from a simple reading of these community-based feminist projects, namely, believing that there is a homogeneous group of women or feminists to which one can appeal. This problem lies in emphasizing the singular—universalizing that singularity while losing sight of the community and one's role in the oppressive system, which gives rise to a split from the broader community and an avoidance of one's responsibility in the system of oppressions.

To demonstrate the first problem, I would like to return to the argument made by Curiel in a 2019 interview in which she was asked about racism in the feminist movement (Guerrero 2019). Her ideas on this question in earlier texts build on the analyses of black feminists (Curiel 2007), namely, regarding the universalization of the female subject. Discussing women's strikes called from the Global North, Curiel noted that these strikes continue to repeat the problematic universal category of *women*. The second problem lies in conceiving existence in fragmentation rather than as part of a web of oppressions, a tapestry, a matrix of oppression. I will begin with the first problem.

In an interview about these feminist strikes, Curiel said, "Who can strike? Can a domestic worker, Afro-descendant, indigenous, peasant, or working-class woman strike? She cannot, because she has a job that she cannot leave because if she does so, she will be fired and she and her family will starve." She added, "The ones who strike are always women who have labor privileges and are able to strike on March 8" (Guerrero 2019).

A principal issue in Curiel's response is that although she seems to be speaking in terms of social class, alluding to the fact that women with economic privileges are able to strike—that is, they are in a hierarchical position that allows them to decide to protest because their livelihood does not depend on it—she is also responding in terms of race and geopolitical location. This analysis is useful because it helps understand that some feminisms, which claim to appeal to the broad community of women, *de facto* continue to be marked by racism, classism, and the privilege granted by geolocalization.

Indeed, there is no homogeneous group of *women* who can strike. Those women who are able to do it in the Global North—where the call has been

made—have a privilege arising from their historical, racial, and spatial circumstances: a privilege that allows them to strike without negative consequences for their own life and survival, for instance, without running the risk of being deported. For example, the ability of a migrant woman from Abya Yala to strike in Europe is not the same as that of a European woman, specifically a European domestic worker.

This intended homogenization is based on an intentional universalization of the *female* subject. It is believed that there is a group of women as a sum of individual women in which the singular signifier *woman* has particularities, but it is universalized despite this. As African American women theorists pointed out decades ago, this happens because women's diverse experiences based on their different racial and class conditions are ignored. For many theorists, such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), this implies hiding one's own racism under the category of *women*.

Thus, the category of *women*, which is intended to refer to a homogeneous group and is therefore repeatedly used by feminist groups in their demands, theorizations, and calls, entails violence¹² toward African American, indigenous, migrant, and other women, and reiterates the logic of exclusion against many women.

This violence and exclusion was/is carried out by feminist theories that were/are based on ignoring the concrete experiences of being a woman, “where race, class, and sexuality played central roles in social reproduction” (Curiel 2007, 4).

On this issue, Afro-Brazilian philosopher and feminist Sueli Carneiro says:

We—black women—are part of a contingent of women, probably the majority, who never recognized [the] myth [of fragility] in themselves because they were never treated as fragile. We are part of a contingent of women who worked for centuries as slaves, working the land, or on the streets as street vendors or prostitutes; women who did not understand at all when feminists said that women should claim the streets and work.

We are part of a contingent of women with an identity as objects. Yesterday, at the service of fragile ladies and noble idiot gentlemen. Today, domestic servants of liberated women. (Carneiro 2005, 22)

12 This violence is not merely symbolic. Although this form of violence does not involve physical violence, it does entail structural violence deployed in an attempt to eradicate human plurality (the plurality of the world of women), thereby removing the possibility of politics, as Arendt argued in numerous texts (Arendt 1958).

The call for a women's strike disregards the diversity of oppressions without the clear message that violence is often exercised by some women against other women within the "women's" movement itself. It fails to signal racism that still permeates women's movements and continues to problematically reiterate the assumption of the existence of a homogeneous, universal *female* subject.

Now, to briefly address the second point, I will highlight a fundamental problem in assuming the existence of a homogeneous group of women engaged in the same struggles: it understands the feminist strife in a register based on the fragmentation and singularity of oppressions.

If my action is based on a perspective that forgets the broader community, beyond those white women who have not yet been able to individually access positions of power that have historically been reserved for men, I fail to understand my role in the oppression I exercise against others. I am unable to see that oppressions are like a web in which I play a role as both oppressed and oppressor.

Feminist struggles are often based on a feminism with an emphasis on the individual (individualist feminism), which does not conceive of their oppression as part of a web of oppressions. This occurs because this struggle is seen as a fight to break the glass ceiling for some women, even if breaking it means that a migrant/working-class woman has to pick up the broken glass.

An understanding of this interconnection is facilitated by thinking of oppressions in terms of a *matrix of oppression*—an original idea of Patricia Hill Collins (2000) taken up by feminists such as Curiel in Latin America. A matrix that produces differentiated subjectivities, although not in a totalizing way because this matrix mutates and is transformed and because there are forms of subjectivation that erode it. These subjectivities are intertwined; that is, they depend on one another to exist. In the particular case of feminism, for example, the matrix of oppression shows us that, as feminists, our role is not only to see the impact of patriarchy in our lives and the violence we experience as women but also how racism, class exploitation, capitalism, heteronormativity, and militarism combine and are intertwined and cause other forms of violence. As a feminist, this understanding, for example, allows or rather impels me to be mindful of the violence that I myself can exert on other beings because although I am oppressed, I am also or can be an oppressor. And I must take responsibility for that based on this understanding.

In other words, seeing oppressions in terms of a matrix allows for a different understanding of the oppressive system in which it is not possible to think about the intersection of oppressions only in certain individuals. It is significant to notice the injustice produced against particular individuals to better understand resistance and any violence I may exercise even while I am attacked or

oppressed. Yet we must also see how oppressions are related to each other, how they are organized in a structure that we call a system, that is, how some are leveraged on others.

To conclude this point on the community-based nature of these feminisms, I would like to mention an issue that is central for many of the critical feminisms in action in Abya Yala and which is present in the words of Community Feminism that I cited above, namely the belief that community does not only refer to other human or other animal lives but also includes other beings considered lifeless from an ontological register, such as stones, mountains, rivers, and fire. This means that community is not only built with other human lives.

To explain this point better, I refer to a common dual conception underlying many land defense struggles (not only in Abya Yala), which differs from the critical feminism point of view. Many land defense struggles seem to take place under a dual conception of land: on the one hand, they see land as an object to be appropriated and, on the other hand, as an enormous pantry from which “goods and services are extracted” (Solano 2020) in the present or the future (hence it is also thought of as a reserve for humanity). This double conception underlies many of the struggles waged by sectors critical of liberal extractivism. For that reason, although arising from different ideological perspectives (struggles for property vs. struggles for the environment, for example), many of them always imply an instrumental logic in the human/land equation: land is an instrument for the survival of human beings or humanity (for example, the assertion of forests as the lungs of the world).

So what does it mean to think differently about land and, consequently, about its defense? The struggle of the Network of Women Healers for the body/land territory gives us a glimpse of this notion of community beyond anthropocentrism.

In a personal conversation (2020), Lorena Cabnal emphasized the importance of the *web of life* not just as a simple statement but as a cosmogonic principle, called Tz'tat in Mayan but shared by many indigenous peoples. The *web of life*, states Cabnal, is one of the interpretative dimensions of life, in which it is assumed that everything is related to life. For example, a corn plant. For a corn plant to become corn, air, fire, hands, bees, sun, water, galaxies, bodies, ancestors, spirits, etc., are needed. It is a relational principle that provides life energy to all the plural manifestations of life (Cabnal, personal conversation, 2020).

In addition to the *web of life* that allows us to think about the interdependence of beings, another thread in the Healers' tapestry gives us further tools to think about the meaning of community: the concept of the body/land territory.

This is not an analytical category; it was born between 2005 and 2007 as a way of denouncing sexual violence against girls and women and during the struggle against mining in the Santa María de Xalapán mountain. It was born out of particular circumstances and the organizing of some mountain women. It has cosmogonic and political power insofar as it conceives of the body/land territory as a relational unit. Therefore, it is not, and is not conceived of as, fragmented; in other words, it is not conceived of as body territory, on the one hand, and land territory, on the other hand, but rather as a single unit.

When we think about the body/land territory as part of the *web of life* and, therefore, of water, air, stones, and other animals as part of the body/land territory, territorial struggles can be understood differently. This allows us to see that contests for the expulsion of mining companies are not only waged against the capitalist system but can also represent a dismantling of the anthropocentrism that continues to lead us toward what sociologist Jeremy Rifkin (Zafra 2020) has called the imminent danger of extinction. Therefore, this community not only includes what is considered human but also the complex *web of life*.

3. A Complex Relationship with Identity: Unraveling Gender

In her very complete work on feminism in Latin America (Abya Yala), Rivera Berruz (2018) states that the use of the term *gender* by feminists in the region varied over time and was infrequent partly because its arrival was late and its translation referred to more taxonomic notions, and partly because the concept of patriarchy, which arrived before the term *gender*, “offered a framework grounded in ideological and socioeconomic conditions that allowed for articulating the cause of women’s oppression” (Rivera Berruz 2018).

Yet the idea of unraveling gender, which we find in the work of feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa (2016), Ochy Curiel (not Adriana Guzmán), and, in a certain way, Lorena Cabnal, arises from a decolonial or new mestiza intention. It does not come from an interpretation or repetition of ideas developed in the Global North, such as the performativity of gender, but, for example, from a decolonial practice that emerges from the understanding of gender as an imposition brought to the Latin American territory by the invaders.

To examine this question of unraveling gender, I will refer to the ideas of two decolonial theorists—Ochy Curiel and Yuderkys Espinosa—regarding identity discourse. Although their critique of this discourse has been more developed around race, it includes several strands that will allow us to understand this notion of unraveling gender better.

Ochy Curiel's main postulates around identity discourse are centered on what she calls black women's dilemma with respect to identity politics. As Curiel explains:

Identity politics has created major dilemmas for some black women. On the one hand, they understand that it is important to reaffirm blackness as a necessary strategy in political struggle; on the other hand, it reinforces stereotypes and self-exclusions, and above all it could lose sight of the real causes of racism. (Curiel 2002, 98)

However, Curiel argues—and I believe that this issue is relevant when criticizing identity discourses—that assuming an identity discourse and, consequently, accepting and claiming an identity is often vital and strategic for bringing others into a struggle. Curiel says, “It is no coincidence that black men and women are always accused of being essentialists and that those who do so are generally white academics” (Curiel 2002, 110).

Curiel (2002) allows us to see that these identity-based struggles have a collective dimension that we cannot lose sight of when entering into debates on identity discourse. Referring to three case studies of black women's groups in Honduras, Costa Rica, and Brazil—conversations with women from those groups—Curiel states that claiming the identity of “black woman” in those three cases represents “a recognition of African cultural heritage that until now has been dismissed and made invisible. [It is a way to] develop a subjectivity where black women's self-esteem is not mutilated by the values of a white culture that is predominant in aesthetics, cultural expressions, representations, and symbols” (Curiel 2002, 105).

In addition, in various interviews, Curiel asserts that the affirmation of an identity, such as that of black women, facilitates shared action, community action, and political action, seeking to transform the living conditions of these women who historically were among the groups that suffered the most oppression in the territory of Abya Yala because of these identities assigned by the colonial system.

But it is a very particular form of shared action: claiming differently the identity assigned by the colonial system because, since the beginning of colonialism, a negative connotation has always been assigned to that identity (of black woman). It is an act that is also a way of twisting existing understandings of black women's identity. Curiel says in this regard:

When a woman identifies as “proudly black,” she upsets the scale of unvalued and negative values placed on her for years due to her racial condition. In other words, it re-symbolizes the negative into the positive, although it

does not necessarily deconstruct the categories. Therefore, for many black women, appealing to identity politics is a political act of resistance and often of transformation. (Curiel 2002, 107)

Despite the power recognized by these women and Curiel in taking on the identity of black women, some of the women interviewed by Curiel, and Curiel herself, see the limitations of remaining in an identity discourse. One of them said that staying in what is claimed as a certain culture “does not allow for political reflections on racism” (Curiel 2002, citing Sergia Galván). Curiel says in this regard: “It does not put an end to the economic, social, and political inequalities that are the result of racism and exploitation” (Curiel 2002, 108).

Ultimately, as argued by decolonial feminist Yuderlys Espinosa in various texts (see specifically Espinosa 2016), the problem is that this identity discourse repeats the colonial/modern logic that assigned locations to certain bodies, creating a kind of problematic essentialism. In addition, this discourse continues to be a way to hide the causes of oppressions, such as racism, heterosexism, and patriarchy, experienced by these identities (Curiel 2002). As Curiel explains:

The fact that “blackness” is our political priority will also maintain dualism, constructing an “I” that is always in opposition to the other, who is white. The construction of political subjects implies leaving this binary logic behind and understanding historical contexts. Although this must question white supremacy, it must go beyond this perspective to view the structural causes of racism as more complex phenomena that impact all levels of society. (Curiel 2002, 110)

More problematically, however, entrenchment in identities can fragment and weaken community organizations seeking to dismantle all systems of oppression.

Indeed, its main problem is that it reproduces a categorical logic that segments and fragments experiences of oppression. It continues to replicate “the dominant categorical logic” (Espinosa 2019, 288); in other words, it continues to reproduce the locations and identities of oppressions.

This is problematic because, for example, “rather than contributing to improving the lives of racialized women ... in general, what is taking place is a weakening of their communities’ models of collective resistance” (Espinosa 2019, 289). Affirming gender identity as the sole focus of struggle leaves us anchored in crude biologicism. It also continues to reproduce the separatisms of some currents of 1970’s radical feminism and, with it, the reproduction of the colonial and modern gaze, which has effects such as linking feminist struggles with transphobia.

However, this does not mean that these feminists are suggesting that gender should no longer matter or should no longer be an issue in feminist struggles. Following in part the positions taken by the Afro-descendant women interviewed by Ochy Curiel, there is no doubt that building struggles around identity—in this case, gender—is an important form of resistance and eroding systems of values and meaning of the human experience, against violence, femicides, abuse, rights violations, etc. The unraveling of gender should be our long-term goal, but at present, gender is helpful to make the master's house less oppressive for those of us who still inhabit it. The emphasis must be on clearly declaring that we have to organize beyond gender, connecting it to other forms of oppression that continue to reproduce oppression against people who have been named and identified as women.

Closing

Closing the above words means, among other things, leaving open questions. And one of the questions that merit greater depth than is possible in this text is regarding the relationship between these feminist movements and the existing power structure.

Some sectors of critical feminism critique the reformism undergirding the transformations sought by liberal feminism. Broadly speaking, those sectors point out that this reformism has a problem: although changes are possible (such as new laws), they must be made within the system while the system remains intact. Thus, from a critical feminist perspective, liberal feminism envisions ending the oppression experienced by some people without eliminating the same for everyone.

Yet, as I mentioned above, although the feminist movements I have discussed here are critical of the system, someone could say that their demands often seek changes within the existing institutional framework; for example, La Tremenda Revoltosa's participation in the broad social movement during the 2021 national strike in Colombia against regressive tax reform.¹³ Although the national strike's tactics were often confrontational and the mobilization revitalized social movement organizations, given that the strike addressed its demands to the State, it could be seen as engaging in a kind of reformism.

However, on this issue, I would like to mention two possible ways to refute that accusation. In case we agree that, indeed, there is a kind of reformism. First,

13 For information about the Colombian national strike in 2021, I recommend the Latin American version of *Jacobin* magazine.

an alternative analysis centered on the long-term impact of social mobilizations has been proposed by activist and historian Nick Estes (2018) in his book on the resistance of the Lakota people at Standing Rock in the United States. Writing about the Ghost Dance in the late nineteenth century, Estes argues that this kind of resistance is similar to the burrowing of moles, in an analogy first proposed by Marx. As Estes describes:

Karl Marx explained the nature of revolutions through the figure of the mole, which burrows through history, making elaborate tunnels and preparing to surface again. The most dramatic moments come when the mole breaks the surface: revolution. But revolution is a mere moment within the longer movement of history. The mole is easily defeated on the surface by counterrevolutionary forces if she hasn't adequately prepared her subterranean spaces, which provide shelter and safety; even when pushed back underground, the mole doesn't stop her work. (Estes 2019, 18)

Thus, beyond their immediate reformist impact on public policy, the actions of La Tremenda Revoltosa and the broader social movement in the 2021 national strike in Colombia can also be read as a preparation or prelude to a possible more extended transformation in the future. Thus, by strengthening social movements through the organizing experience of these protests, despite severe State repression, the national strike and similar mobilizations could be seen as building the movements' underground mole tunnels that will sustain them in times of adversity.

At the same time, the long-term power of these actions lies in their ability to keep alive the collective belief that another world is possible:

Hidden from view to outsiders, this constant tunneling, plotting, planning, harvesting, remembering, and conspiring for freedom—the collective faith that another world is possible—is the most important aspect of revolutionary work. (Estes 2019, 19)

Second, although the Colombian national strike and other actions in which Latin American critical feminists have engaged have fought to attain policy reforms from their States, their strategies for achieving these reforms have challenged, not reinforced, existing power structures. Rather than seeking to influence policies through lobbying or public appeals to purportedly enlightened policymakers, these groups have participated in mass mobilizations and other non-institutional actions. They have attempted to force policymakers to change

course by bringing pressure on them, using confrontational tactics while building the power of grassroots organizations.

Finally, given that the feminisms I examine above are part of the broader social movement active in the region, it is worth inquiring about the future of that broad movement. Since 2019, the region has seen a proliferation of protests and mobilizations that signal a rejection of the capitalist and extractivist model that impoverishes communities, which was exacerbated during the recent years of the pandemic. Some of these movements have turned to electoral political organizations; in Chile, for example, they have brought to government a party born in the heart of the social movement. Meanwhile, in countries such as Colombia, an existing electoral left has risen to power with the support of some social movements.

How will these movements continue to evolve? What will be their relationship with new left-leaning governments in the region? Will any changes occur in the repression meted out against these movements? What role will critical feminists in Latin America play in these movements, and how will these broader movements continue to incorporate or sideline feminist demands? These are some of the principal questions for future research and inquiry into critical feminism in Latin America.

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