

**“WORKING PAPER 19”**

***Dissidences, learnings, and organizational  
experiences of Latin American women:  
Decolonial Dialogues***

***Adriana Franco***



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Calle de Filosofía y Letras 88  
04360, Copilco Universidad  
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# DISSIDENCES, LEARNINGS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN: DECOLONIAL DIALOGUES

*Adriana Franco*

## RESUMEN

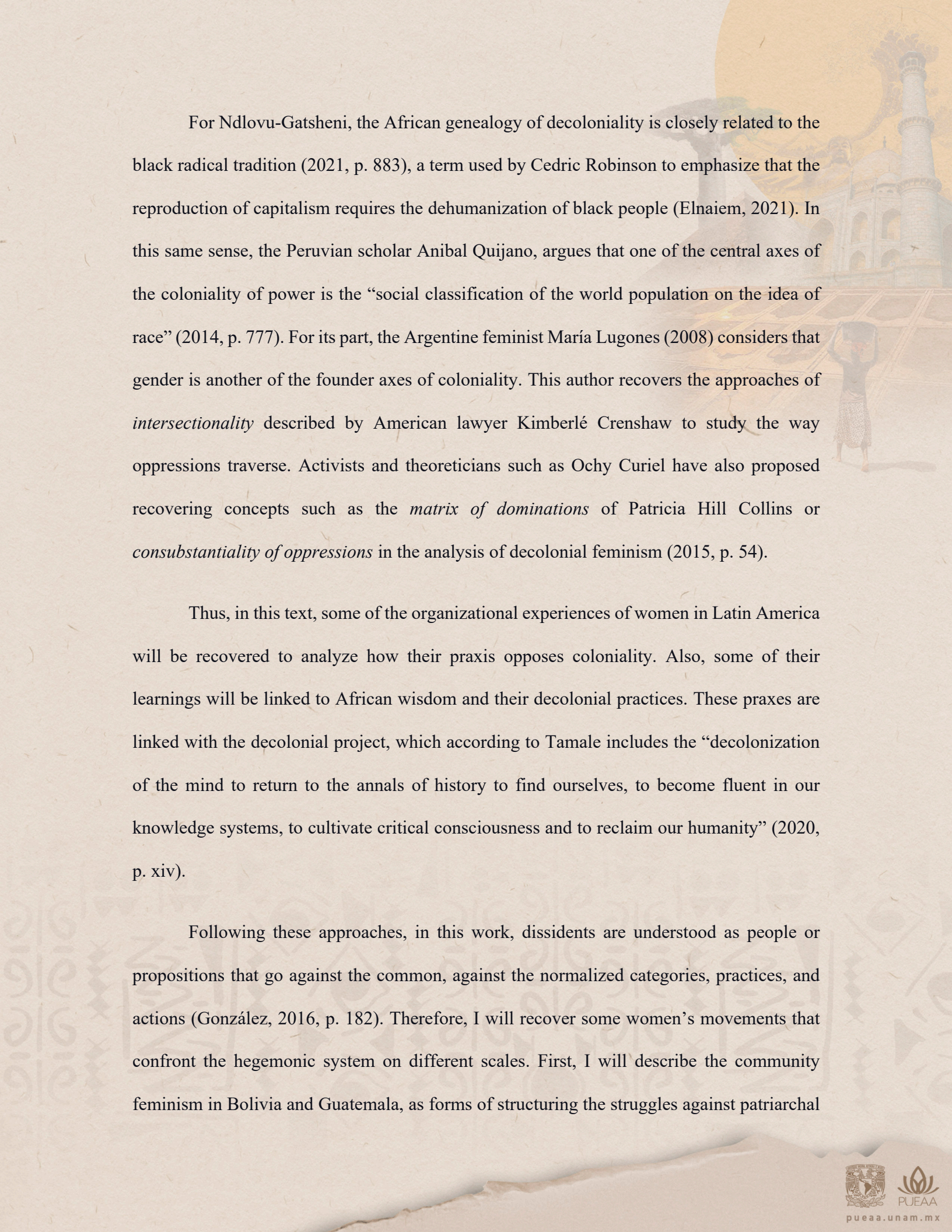
En años recientes, la violencia contra las mujeres ha incrementado de manera significativa en América Latina. Ante este contexto las mujeres no han permanecido pasivas, sino que se han organizado para confrontar la violencia del sistema. El feminismo comunitario de Bolivia y Guatemala, así como la organización de mujeres negras en Brasil, son sólo algunos ejemplos de los diferentes movimientos de mujeres en toda la región. Las propuestas que han surgido de estos grupos han visibilizado la violencia histórica del capitalismo y también están proponiendo nuevas formas de socialización a partir de la recuperación de su propio conocimiento y experiencias. De este modo, algunos de sus planteamientos serán -compartidos, enfatizando que las propuestas confrontan el sistema predominante y brindan alternativas para enfrentar la crisis civilizatoria.

## ABSTRACT

In recent years, violence against women has increased significantly in Latin America. Faced with this context, women have not been passive, but have organized themselves to confront the violence of the system. The community feminism of Bolivia and Guatemala, as well as the organization of black women in Brazil are just a few examples of the different women's movements throughout the region. The proposals that have come out of these groups have made visible the historical violence of capitalism and are also proposing new ways of socialization based on the recovery of their knowledge and experiences. In this way, in this text some of their approaches will be shared, emphasizing that the proposals confront the prevailing system and provide alternatives to face the crisis of civilization.

## INTRODUCTION

Decoloniality is a theoretical perspective, which analyses the power patterns of the modern capitalism. According to Ugandan academic Sylvia Tamale, decoloniality is “an ideological system, that explains the long-standing patterns of power that resulted from European colonialism, including the production of knowledge and the establishment of social orders” (2020, p. xiv). Since the expansion of this structure during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Cartesian and Euclidian knowledge has been placed at the center. Therefore, Europe has been self-appointed as the space where other social structures are classified and ordered. In this categorization, African, Asian, and Latin American wisdom has been omitted.



For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the African genealogy of decoloniality is closely related to the black radical tradition (2021, p. 883), a term used by Cedric Robinson to emphasize that the reproduction of capitalism requires the dehumanization of black people (Elnaiem, 2021). In this same sense, the Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano, argues that one of the central axes of the coloniality of power is the “social classification of the world population on the idea of race” (2014, p. 777). For its part, the Argentine feminist María Lugones (2008) considers that gender is another of the founder axes of coloniality. This author recovers the approaches of *intersectionality* described by American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw to study the way oppressions traverse. Activists and theoreticians such as Ochy Curiel have also proposed recovering concepts such as the *matrix of dominations* of Patricia Hill Collins or *constitutuality of oppressions* in the analysis of decolonial feminism (2015, p. 54).

Thus, in this text, some of the organizational experiences of women in Latin America will be recovered to analyze how their praxis opposes coloniality. Also, some of their learnings will be linked to African wisdom and their decolonial practices. These praxes are linked with the decolonial project, which according to Tamale includes the “decolonization of the mind to return to the annals of history to find ourselves, to become fluent in our knowledge systems, to cultivate critical consciousness and to reclaim our humanity” (2020, p. xiv).

Following these approaches, in this work, dissidents are understood as people or propositions that go against the common, against the normalized categories, practices, and actions (González, 2016, p. 182). Therefore, I will recover some women’s movements that confront the hegemonic system on different scales. First, I will describe the community feminism in Bolivia and Guatemala, as forms of structuring the struggles against patriarchal

and systemic violence in those territories. Then, I will recover some historical movements of black women in Brazil and their links with Africa and Latin America in their fight for land and dignity.

The examples mentioned here also question the hegemonic feminism, which has homologated becoming a woman and reduced the fight against patriarchy from the discourse of empowerment and equality. Despite this, community feminism and the organization of black women do not seek to silence or ignore the struggles of dominant women, but rather to be able to build their approaches to later generate dialogues and articulate struggles. They also fight to recover their stories, to protect their lands, to be active agents in their communities, and to modify the system of oppression and build horizontal structures.

### **COMMUNITY FEMINISM IN BOLIVIA AND GUATEMALA**

In Latin America, women's movements have contributed to the decolonial project proposed by Tamale and many other authors not only by recovering *herstories*<sup>1</sup> and wisdom, but also by reclaiming their dignity and humanity in the fight for their land. Community feminism in Bolivia is a non-separatist movement. Even though indigenous women recognize the violence committed by their male partners, they consider that men must be incorporated in the struggle to really transform social relations: They argue: “we start from community as inclusive principle that cares for life” (Paredes, 2013, p. 78).

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “Feminist history, or history viewed from a female or feminine perspective. The word was coined by militant feminists in the US in 1970, although the standard word *history* is not, in fact, a compound of *his* + *story* but derives from the Greek and Latin *historia*, meaning narrative”.

The movement is based on political praxis. It is directly linked to social movements, particularly the gas and water wars from the beginning of the 21st century, which allowed the arrival of an indigenous government in Bolivia. As already mentioned, praxis preceded theorizing in this feminism. Adriana Guzman even said that they felt the patriarchy, but they did not have the concepts to name it. The project recovers the bodies, *herstories*, and proposals for future organization.

In their analysis of governmental policies toward women, they identified five core aspects that must be questioned to modify the structure of exploitation (Paredes, 2013):

1. The structural adjustment policies implemented in Bolivia in the mid-1980s, which have been fostered by the historic and internal colonialism and its racial axis.
2. The cancellation of the provision of social services by the State, which has exacerbated the unpaid work carried out by women. Also, the weakening of the State has served the interest of capital.
3. The State abandonment of the direction of development in the country. Thus, Bolivia has lost its sovereignty and dignity to subordinate itself to the interests of corporations.
4. The omission of the real needs of the people by the imposition of a democratic façade.
5. The increase of violence against poor and indigenous women due to neoliberalism.

Community feminism recovers the vindications of the grandmothers and includes the colonial violence and the junction of patriarchies in their reflections. Thus, they consider that in their territories there was an ancestral patriarchy that was link with the occidental one during colonization. For Adriana Guzman, feminism is the “movement of women who fight for women”. And although it is a very broad approach, Aymara women are also aware that the hegemonic feminism has excluded non-white women from the vindications. For that

reason, they not only stand up for the mountain (or the land against the State and the corporations) but also fight within feminism itself.

Communal feminism “is a feminism that disputes institutionality, always attentive to depatriarchalizing the relations of political spaces but without neglecting the process of decolonization as part of the same framework, thus implying the decolonization of hegemonic feminism itself” (Marcha y acción por la diversidad, 2022). In that way, Adriana Guzman argues that there is not only one model of feminism and that every feminist should fight the patriarchy and oppression against women in various territories. Communal feminists also fight for the territory against extractivism and its violence, which they identified as a link with the oppressions experienced by women and girls in Africa (Guzmán, 2022).

The organization of women in Bolivia is historic, which is demonstrated in the name of one of the most important associations in the country: Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas Indígenas Originarias de Bolivia “Bartolina Sisa”. For Aymara women, Bartolina Sisa and Gregoria Apaza are two referents for the political leadership in Aymara rebellions against Spanish rule in El Alto (González, 2000, p. 182). That is why the women’s movement has recovered them today. The Confederation of “Las Bartolinas” was founded in 1980 with the objective that rural women participate in the political life of the country.

Nowadays, “Las Bartolinas” work to recover the territorial, food sovereignty, and dignity of peasant, indigenous and native women in Bolivia. According to them, they also want to achieve equitable participation of women in the political, social, and economic spaces and promote the formation and training of the “sisters” permanently as a mechanism to free minds from oppression, and ignorance and achieve true freedom. Thus, the organization of

women is extensive in Bolivia, and they mainly seek to eliminate violence against women, encourage their participation in different spaces, and fight against extractivism and the neoliberal capitalist system, amongst others.

Community feminism in Guatemala is another political praxis that also places the community at the center of the discussion. In this movement, the epistemic place is linked with ancestrality, orality, and healing knowledge. In Guatemala, Mayan women have reflected on occidental patriarchy and its association with war. Since colonization, Mayan women have been systematically violated. More recently, during the sixties war, rape was a strategy to take away women's land. Therefore, the identity claim and the defense of the territory —mainly against mining companies— have been central to shaping the feminism movement (Martínez, 2021, p. 123).

The arrival of mining corporations in their territories has generated various forms of violence against women. For this reason, since the beginning of the 21st century Mayan women considered that to defend the territory, they also had to place and consider their bodies. They have theorized about the concept *cuero-territorio/territorio-tierra* to highlight that violence against women's bodies is reflected in the territories and vice versa. This idea should not be understood from two separate elements but as a single materiality. For them, consciously recovering the first territory (their bodies) is a political act for emancipation.

I do not defend my land territory just because I need natural resources to live and leave a decent life for other generations. In the approach of recovery and historical defense of my *territorio cuerpo tierra*, I assume the recovery of my expropriated body, to generate life, joy, vitality, pleasures, and construction of liberating knowledge for decision making, and this power together with the defense of my *territorio tierra*, because I cannot



conceive of this woman's body, without a space on earth that dignifies my existence, and promotes my life to the full (Cabnal, 2010, p. 23).

They also consider that with colonization a junction of patriarchies was created. Therefore, as the community feminists of Bolivia, they argue that there was an ancestral patriarchy that was linked to the occidental one during colonialism. Community feminists in Guatemala criticize the duality of *Sumak Kawsay* pointing out that in the complementarity between men and women there is a relationship of subordination against the latter. Despite this, they are not opposed to the approach of a good life in its entirety, as suggested by the *Sumak Kawsay*, but rather question the relations of domination against women promoted by this approach and the communal organization (Cabnal, 2010).

Notwithstanding, they are not separatists either and they redeem communal organization intending to fight the oppression of the system. To fight against extractivism and the accompanying sexual violence and human displacement, they need to be organized. However, this does not imply that they will tolerate local violence. They want to change relations of domination on different scales and organize the community for the defense of the territory against the state, oil, and mining companies.

As already said, community feminism in Guatemala is closely linked with ancestral healing. In 2015, ten women human rights defenders conformed “TZK’AT Red de Sanadoras Ancestrales del Feminismo Comunitario Territorial desde Iximulew”. These women, who work as healers, herbalists, and midwives, amongst others, take care of:

1. The defense of the *territorio cuerpo-tierra* as a space to recover life against sexual and territorial violence, and femicide.

2. The *Acuerpamiento territorial* (“territorial cuddling”) to defend collectively the *territorio cuerpo* and protect and guard women defenders through dialogue and social organization.
3. The healing as a political cosmic path in which ancestral wisdom guide emotional and spiritual healing processes.
4. The territorial alliances for the protection of the collective rights of indigenous women and peoples.

In sum, the organization of women in Guatemala seek to eliminate violence against women, particularly through the concept of *territorio cuerpo-tierra*, recover ancestral knowledge such as healing, fight against extractivism and the patriarchal system, amongst others.

#### **BLACK WOMEN IN BRAZIL**

In Brazil, black women's movements are closely linked to the African senses of the world. During the presentation “Feminismos negros en Latinoamérica. Diálogos en Brasil sobre el problema del colonialismo” in September 2021, Bilina Amaral pointed out that the knowledge of the diaspora is central to their struggles, which is why she claims the epistemicidal process against African knowledge during slavery. She also criticized the Brazilian dynamics and history, emphasizing that revolutions in Brazil have only implied the change of political power among white populations.


Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, thousands of enslaved people arrived in Brazil because of colonial capitalist interests. Brazil was the major destination of enslaved people. Actually, “of all slaves exported to Americas, 41 per cent went to Brazil” (Bush, 2008, p. 676). Many of them were women. However, they were not thought of as women. They were

just represented as slave workers and their bodies were projected to be violable, which, in addition, guaranteed the reproduction of more enslaved people. Since slavery, black women were placed in a subordinate relationship and their knowledge was considered irrational and useless. Therefore, claiming such knowledge is central in the struggle for dignity.

In the same talk that I commented on, Thaís Saggiono emphasized that human beings are part of nature, which shows us the resonances of the approaches of black women and community feminists through the concept *territorio cuerpo-tierra*. This is also related to the African concept of *ukama*, which highlights the relationship between humanity, spirituality, and ecology (Terblanché-Greff, 2019, p. 106). Thus, unlike western thought, nature and humans are not understood as different dichotomies but as the same entity.

Saggiono also recovered the struggles for land as a central element of the movements of black women in Brazil and highlighted the community organization of the quilombos, where most decisions are made by the community. The struggle of the quilombos is not something new. It dates to the 16th century during the period of slavery. Quilombos are a form of territoriality. That is, a particular form of interaction between a specific group—in this case, enslaved people who fled—and a determined territory. Therefore, territoriality implies a sense of the world,

It is the product and producer of a conception of the world, of the cosmos, of life and death, of relationships, of politics, of a subject or subjects of the social process. All of this contributes to forging ways of life and, at the same time, each way of life, in historical evolution, changes and transforms its perceptions based on experience and knowledge of reality. The material and the social interact (Ceceña, 2018, p. 181).



Most of the quilombos were created from the resistance of enslaved people, who fled from the coffee, sugar, and cotton plantations. However, they were not exclusive to/for these populations. For some authors, like Edson Carneiro, the quilombos were the continuation of Africa in Brazil. This territoriality had resonances in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. The people who fled and built new territorialities in Central America were known as Cimarrones and Garífunas. For its part, the territories established by these people in Venezuela were called Cumbes, and in Colombia and Cuba Palenques, just to mention a few examples (Gálvez, 2020).

Many women actively participated in these movements, historically, Dandara dos Palmares, who was part of the quilombo dos Palmares, is one example. “Palmares is generally regarded as the largest and longest-lived fugitive community in Brazil. Today, Zumbi and Dandara maintain symbolic importance as Afro-Brazilians continue to struggle for racial and social equality” (Williams, 2017, p. 1). Many inhabitants of Palmares were from Africa, principally from the West, and others were black people born there.

Palmares welcomed not only formerly enslaved blacks, but also indigenous people, mulattos, and some whites. Palmares became economically self-sufficient by diversifying agricultural production of crops such as corn, beans, manioc, potatoes, and sugarcane. The existence and strength of Palmares as an economically self-sufficient community was a threat to the system of slavery in colonial Brazil. Palmares was subject to frequent military attacks between 1672 and 1694. The quilombo resisted incursions from both the Dutch and the Portuguese, maintaining its existence for nearly a century (Williams, 2017, p. 1).

Saggiono also remembered other black women who defended their communities and territories in Latin America as Florinda Soriano Muñoz, also known as Mamá Tingó, who

fought for the rights of peasants in the Dominican Republic, and Felicitas Campos, who claimed the rights to the land in Colombia.

In Brazil, black people have historically fought and resisted. More recently, the Unified Black Movement (MNU for its acronym in Portuguese) has begun to structure their demands for land. They also demonstrate and organize against racial discrimination and violence. This movement originated in 1978 and its main objective was to recover the land that the quilombola communities and their descendants have occupied over time (Covin, 2006, p. 5). The organizational structuring coincides with the neoliberal period when new strategies began to be established to dispossess the communities of their land (Federici, 2018).

Despite the struggles and some legal reforms, in 2020 “only 9% of the quilombo communities obtained legal recognition of their lands” (Gálvez, 2020). However, the fight continues. One of the communities that have obtained recognition of their territories is Rio das Ras. In the state of Bahia, the land of the quilombo Rio das Ras is a collective property and decisions are made in assemblies. “According to what is stipulated by law, the quilombola land, like that of the indigenous peoples, cannot be sold or divided up, collective property respects the space of each family unit and its crops, and the rest are common spaces” (Gálvez, 2020). For the recognition of quilombolas rights, women have played a relevant role both in resistance and in the reproduction of new ways of socialization where individualism and accumulation are relegated.

In the presentation on black feminism in Latin America Eliane Almeida de Souza said that to modify the violent logic of this system, it is necessary to reconnect with spiritualities.

Thus, although these have been thought of as irrational since modern Western science, spiritualities are different ways of thinking about and relating to the world. Therefore, if we want to change the way we relate to nature, it would be desirable to consider, listen and interact with these conceptions. The relation with spirits also implies a more horizontal interaction with nature, which can also be seen in the African idea of Ubuntu (Terblanché-Greeff, 2019).

For various African groups, nature is not an object, but an integral part of communities. As already mentioned, for Shona communities, the term *ukama* implies relationships in a broad sense because it includes nature, the spiritual, and future generations (Le Grange, 2012). Likewise, African American authors such as Leah Thomas consider that *intersectional environmentalism* is essential to analyze the relationship between social and environmental injustice. She emphasized that we will not be able to modify our dynamics with nature if we do not eradicate the oppressions of race, class, and gender, among others, which articulate the capitalist system.

Eliane also recovered the African roots to claim the dignity of black people in Latin America and the world and considered that solidarity economies, based on the Ubuntu philosophy, can generate sociality schemes that are not based on exploitation and domination. These economies would not hoard, but share; they would not dominate, but dialogue; they would not loot, but relate to nature. That is, they could consider humanity from a broad and communal sense.

The claims of black women in Latin America and the world are not just based on the sexual axis of oppression, but also recover the intersection of dominations to understand and

modify their realities. To understand what they are fighting against, I would like to share some parts of a poem written by Esther Pineda, a black Venezuelan woman who has contributed extensively to the fight against these oppressions. The title of the poem is “Civilización”:

Minimizaste mi existencia  
Saqueaste mis recursos  
Me arrancaste de mi tierra  
Me trataste como bestia  
Comerciaste con mi cuerpo  
Me esclavizaste  
Me quitaste a mi familia  
Vendiste a mis hijos  
Me negaste el amor  
Excluiste mi cultura  
Despreciaste mi herencia  
Me impusiste tu religión

[You minimized my existence You plundered my resources You ripped me off my land You treated me like a beast You traded my body You enslaved me You took my family from me You sold my children You denied me love You excluded my culture You despised my inheritance You imposed your religion on me].

In this first part of the poem, Esther states the oppressions that black communities have gone through. This included both direct and symbolic violence from which black knowledge and experiences sought to be omitted. That is why Bilina in Brazil placed

epistemicide at the center of the debate, and that is why decolonial feminists claim that historical recovery will allow to recover dignity. In the poem, Esther also points out that the oppression did not stop with the end of slavery or with American independence, but rather this violence is reproduced today through direct, cultural, and structural violence:

Nos niegas los empleos.

Nos condenas a vivir en las periferias.

Repites que somos agresivos y violentos,

Insistes en que de haber acatado

Las órdenes de la policía,

Seguiremos con vida

[You deny us jobs. You condemn us to live on the peripheries. You repeat that we are aggressive and violent, You insist that if we had obeyed police orders, we would stay alive].

In this way, black women in Brazil and Latin America are fighting against the intersection of oppression that they experience. They also claim their histories, identities, and ways of socialization. They fight for their land and recover the knowledge of the diaspora and place the experience in the center of the analysis. They talk about the violence, but they do not position themselves in a place of victims. They are women with agency and capacity for resistance and organization.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

In short, community feminism in Bolivia and Guatemala, and black women's movements in Brazil are dissident organizations that have resonances with decolonial approaches. Their ideas confront establish normality and propose alternatives. Unlike Western colonial



knowledge, these women demonstrate that experience is fundamental for wisdom. For these movements, knowledge is woven into experiences and practices, into corporality and territoriality. Thus, the feelings are placed in a harmonic and horizontal relation with their thoughts. For Euclidian science, knowledge is built from individuality and dichotomies. Notwithstanding, we are situated subjects and our environments are essential for the construction of knowledge. We are also diverse, not polarized. So, there are not only two bounded possibilities to develop in the world.

Likewise, community feminism and black women's organization demand justice and dignity and propose the construction of different worlds that are not based on accumulation and dispossession. They focus on community and dialogue. In their approaches, they include diversity as an enrichment point. They also feel, analyze, and theorize the different oppressions that cross their bodies to understand and transform them. For them, separatism is not an option because they need to act with their peers to transform their reality, because even though their male partners have a better position than them, they are also in a subordinated dynamic concerning world order. These women also promote care economies of collective and solidarity responsibilities instead of economies of grabbing and inequality.

For them, the land is a space for organization, dignity, and resistance. They do not consider nature as an object. They assume that we are part of nature. Therefore, the exploitation and dispossession of land are perceived as violence against the communities. For that reason, they fight for land and against extractivism. Healing knowledge and spiritualities are also relevant for these movements, which implies a confrontation against the hegemonic territoriality, which is closely linked with capitalism. Also, ancestral healing is central to recognizing and confronting the historical and continuous violence against their

bodies and lands. They also make visible and fight the violation against their bodies, which since the time of slavery and colonization have been functional for the reproduction of the system.

With this text, I do not intend to speak for others or occupy spaces that do not correspond to me. I just want to share some of the lessons that I have learned from these dissidents, which not only criticize the system but also propose alternatives. The main intention is to invite us to listen and dialogue with this knowledge in a horizontal relationship because even though we have considered that cartesian interpretations are the only valid, others come up with a different sociality. Community feminism and the black women's movement suggest creating a different fabric in this world, where all voices are heard without amplifying and reproducing those that promote violence.

We are in a context of civilizational crisis, where it is imperative to modify our forms of production, consumption, distribution, and disposal. During the neoliberal period, violence has been exacerbated and bifurcations have widened, which should invite us to design new ways of life that are not based on oppression. The system has reached social and environmental limits that probably cannot be reversed. However, the approaches of these women give us some clues to modify our relationships and change our dynamics with others and with nature, to live and not only survive in a world that seems to collapse.

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