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Rising up against institutional racism in the Americas
and beyond

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Cover art

Artwork by LB Back, based on the Wiphala symbol used by indigenous Andean peoples and movements.

About *Interface*

Interface: a journal for and about social movements is a peer-reviewed journal of practitioner research produced by movement participants and engaged academics. *Interface* is globally organised in a series of different regional collectives, and is produced as a multilingual journal. Peer-reviewed articles have been subject to double-blind review by one researcher and one movement practitioner.

The views expressed in any contributions to *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* are those of the authors and contributors, and do not necessarily represent those of *Interface*, the editors, the editorial collective, or the organizations to which the authors are affiliated. *Interface* is committed to the free exchange of ideas in the best tradition of intellectual and activist inquiry.

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Special issue:

Rising up against institutional racism in the Americas and beyond

Editors: Heike Schaumberg and Elisabet Dueholm Rasch

Invited Editor: Layla Brown-Vincent

A multilogue for antiracism in the Americas

This special issue was inspired by the powerful anti-racist movements that surged following the police killing of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. George's last words, "I can't breathe", while a white police officer's knee pressed into his neck for nine minutes, subsequently became an emblematic battle cry against institutional racism. The brutality of this incident, albeit by no means unusual, caused global outrage and mobilised responses on other continents such as Europe and Asia, despite the global pandemic and lockdown. Interestingly, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) centred its anger on institutional racism. This gave recognition to racism as constituting a key part of a system of repression and domination rather than amounting to an occasional outburst or something gone wrong in the country of opportunities and freedom. As the antiracist movements gained momentum in the midst of the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, they met with challenges that raised new and old questions. Drawing on the Afro-Pessimist claims that (US) civil society is inherently antithetical to all manifestations of Black social life (Hartman, 1997; Sexton, 2016; Sharpe, 2016; Wilderson, 2010), scholars Adam Bledsoe and Willie Jamaal Wright argue that global expressions of anti-Blackness are necessary for the perpetuation of global capitalism. They go on to argue that "regardless of the particular expression of capitalism, anti-Blackness conditions the possibility of capitalist reproduction across different global contexts" (Bledsoe and Wright, 2018). In contrast to this conception, several contributions to this special issue observe an emerging multiracial composition and diversity in the antiracist uprising during the pandemic.

Nevertheless, some of the challenges the BLM and the antiracist uprising faced related to inter-ethnic conflicts that historically obscured and now revealed ambiguities arising from racialized histories of social and class difference (Maya Bhardwaj), or to discussions of how to respond to systematic police violence arguing for abolition of the police as proposed by the abolitionist movement (California Economists Collective), protest tactics and approaches among white affluent students (Maravene Taylor-Heine), the place of colourism in the antiracist movement (Robert L. Reece) which could invite further debate, and the role of international solidarity and impacts of the Palestine Boycott, Sanctions, Divestment Movement (BDS) as a viable focus for anchoring global antiracist movements (Bill Mullen). These contributions shine a light on a section of pertinent debates and challenges that the BLM movement both faced and inspired.

But what was happening in the US's geopolitical 'backyard'? What was going on in Latin America? There is a plethora of structural, political and historical reasons for anti-racism to crystallize into countless issues of contention and articulate as a movement. For instance, there have been allegations and reports of racially motivated police abuses in several countries in the region, where poverty is also racialized (see for example: Grimson and Grimson 2017; Mondon and Winter 2019; Sears 2014; Hale 2005; Guano 2003; Gordillo 2016). Indeed, the rage underpinning the rising against racism is fueled also by the connected economic injustices. The pandemic also highlights that these marginalized groups pay disproportionately with more lives for a pandemic that they have not initially helped to spread across the globe, but for which they have fewer means for protective measures and treatment. Institutional racism, police brutality and racial profiling are well-known and documented issues right across the Americas, in many countries steeped in a history of state terror and/or exploitative, and frequently violent, Latifundista social relations.

Several authors in this issue contend that we are witnessing emerging antiracist movements and a construction of an antiracist language or grammar in Latin America. As activist scholars working on and in Latin America, we believe it is not only crucial to understand their historical and political particularities but also to enable movement learning and enhance political maturity through a multilogue between these diverse sectors across the Americas, in particular, between Black/ indigenous/ mestizo and others that resist these categorizations, but also between Anglo and Hispanic America which simultaneously then bridges a 'North' – 'South' dichotomy. There is much scope for mutual learning from the respective antiracist articulations in both hemispheres and differently racialized groups precisely to keep them apart since colonialism and continued by the subsequent national states (Wade 2018). This issue attempts to bridge these historically produced political separations, and understanding and respecting differences is necessary for identifying common grounds to help formulate a shared language of antiracism as a toolkit for social movements. So the authors in this issue dig beneath surface appearances and uncover specific and generalizable characteristics of institutional racism and contribute to articulating effective responses to it.

Challenges and limitations

There are limitations that this special issue cannot overcome. Firstly, the scope. Covering in one special issue such a large and diversified region as is the Americas and within a relatively short timeframe will necessarily lead to geopolitical gaps. The stronger presence of some regions reflects the editors' geographical specialism and reach. Among important regions that are unfortunately absent here, are, among others, the Caribbean. We are also mindful that the broad homogenizing label of "Latin America" can lead to inappropriate generalisations. We can only initiate this multilogue and hope that others will further extend such debates and dissections of this issue to regions, populations and countries in the Americas not covered here.

A second challenge as a not-for-profit journal with no financial support at our disposal for this issue is limited resources with various implications. To begin with, we are keen to make the publication accessible to activists who might not be fluent in Spanish or English respectively. For that reason and as a one-off occurrence for *Interface*, we have crowdfunded a small amount of cash to help with paying for translations (both ways, into Spanish and English) of a selection of the contributions, prioritising community spokespersons and antiracist activists.¹ The translations will be subsequently published as they are coming in, alongside the original text.

Another challenge was time in combination with pandemic related stress factors and work pressures. Given the potentially complex nature of the topic in the Americas, we had created an advisory group and are thankful for their contributions or their intentions to participate and their names are listed at the end of this editorial. Many people involved with this issue struggled to commit to it due to an array of conflicting personal and employment conditions that were compounded by the pandemic. The pandemic offered a focus for enquiry and for antiracism in the Americas, but in terms of logistics of producing this issue it had made everything a little more difficult: it was harder to find reviewers able to commit, or to engage activist scholars who were not already overbooked with tasks and demands on their time and energy; those engaged with university work found their free time dramatically reduced and their workloads increased, while others struggled with employment precarity, illness and loss. The latter is reflected, for example, in Elisabet Rasch' letters written posthumously to her friend who she had wanted to collaborate with to write for this issue but was conquered by Covid-19. He was a territorial defender of Ch'orti' territory in Guatemala, and Rasch explores the impacts of that loss on these kinds of struggles.

And, finally, we considered it was more important to initiate this bi-continental multilogue sooner rather than later, to benefit from the recent memory of the Black Lives Matter movement and how it resonated beyond the United States. Only a little more than a year on from the extrajudicial murder of Floyd George, the world has changed dramatically. Before having fully exited the pandemic a potentially nuclear conflict is knocking at the world's doors in Ukraine, an expression of the intensifying competition for world domination between the main superpowers. With Putin claiming to fight Ukrainian Nazis as a pretext for his aggression against ordinary people in the Ukraine, the anti-war protesters face the challenge to confront fascist and racist opportunism lurking from behind the flag of nationalism, without falling into Putin's trap. But reports and video footage of heart wrenching racist discrimination against none-white people fleeing the bombings that are beginning to break through the media corporations' partisan propaganda machine offer a stark reminder of the dangerous fault line of history, where war and racism are close allies. As the

¹ For details visit: https://www.gofundme.com/f/support-a-multilingual-conversation-about-racism?utm_campaign=p_cp+share-sheet&utm_medium=copy_link_all&utm_source=customer

world polarises between “good” and “evil”, not only truth but also antiracism is in danger of becoming the war’s first casualty (AMEJA 2022). It is thus paramount to keep antiracism at the forefront of any anti-war agenda today.

What has changed in the Americas since the pandemic began?

Today, at the pandemic’s exit door, political conditions are both combined and, characteristically of a general crisis, jarringly uneven across the Americas. While the newly elected president, Joe Biden, of the Democrats left Trump to battle out his list election challenge in Court, he has been vociferous, which appeared like talking up, war conflict over the Ukraine, and gradually, and in some areas such as oil imports, reluctantly, imposed more and more sanctions against Russia. In Brazil, Bolsonaro’s grip on power has significantly weakened following his mismanagement of the pandemic with devastating consequences for many Brazilians, while his government encouraged the burning of the Amazon forest, threatening indigenous lands and getting activists killed. In Argentina, indigenous families have been paying for that country’s economic crisis during the pandemic with their youngest children’s lives, more than half a dozen having died from malnutrition during the pandemic alone, while the government has agreed to repaying a highly contentious IMF loan that it had inherited from the former government, which is now the opposition.

At the same time there is hope, especially when looking to Latin America. In a historical move, the recently elected Argentine government has taken legal action against the superpowers of the police in Salta province for recurrent abuses of powers, including unlawful detentions (El Portal de Salta 2020). It is the first time for the national government to recognize the institutional nature of police violence targeted at the poor, indigenous peoples, and political adversaries such as Human Rights, social movements, and trade union actors.

Lula, after having his corruption convictions against him quashed by the High Court a year ago, has answered the popular calls by putting forward his candidacy. Bolivia’s right-wing coup and terror directed especially against the country’s large indigenous population, did not sustain itself beyond the year despite the initial US endorsement by the then Trump administration. The former MAS party, now led not by Evo Morales but by Luís Arce, was electorally restored.

Earlier expectations of a right-wing advance in Latin America following Bolsonaro’s rise to power and coup efforts in Bolivia and Venezuela, have been swiftly countered by popular and radicalised left-of-centre challenges to such a potential trend, delegitimising coup efforts, while elsewhere the Left made unprecedented electoral gains, the women’s movements have made important legislative gains on the right to abortion in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Colombia more recently, and LGBT in Chile has achieved legalisation of gay marriage. The election of the former radical student activist, Gabriel Boric as Chile’s youngest ever president, has raised both great expectations and at the same time, some disquiet that he panders to the centre perhaps unnecessarily

and too soon, especially when considering that the Left, working-class and social movements, have always tended to have an easier time advancing their demands at times when the US has engaged her attention away from Latin America, as is the case at present with the conflict between NATO states and Russia over her military invasion of the Ukraine. Thus, to some extent irrespective of Boric's efforts to appease the centre, taking on board that this is a country where the electorate had voted for a far-right, pinochetist, candidate who Boric defeated only in the ballotage run-off, despite these conflicting tendencies there may well be some opening for radical challenges to develop across Latin America, inclusive of antiracism as an integral and perhaps increasingly visible part.

As we had noted in the call for papers for this special issue, the Black Lives Matter uprising in the 'North' has put the struggle against institutional racism onto the global agendas, which prompts a variety of questions. Has the Black Lives Matter Movement, or more generally the antiracist uprising in the US, inspired forms of collective action against institutional racism in Latin America? In what ways would such movements re-shape the region's political landscape and could they re- invigorate the leftist social movements' agendas? Indeed, does the 'Black Lives Matter' movement offer an opportunity to unearth the institutional racism from the various origin myths and its historical legacies of slavery (Shilliam 2009)? In what ways have these legacies shaped national and ethnic identities across the Americas? How does the imaginary of a 'white' European colonial past still obscure and/or marginalise non-white collective identities? How has this been resisted? Have the nature and content of anti-racist resistance, or the conditions for such resistance changed? How does the racialisation of working-class poor articulate during the Covid-19 pandemic? What does this tell us about social, cultural and political conditions for confronting the ills of capitalism today?

We know from history that racism is a willing handmaiden of uncertainty and capitalist crisis. Antiracist movements need to grow stronger and mature to resist any racist turns as soon as racism rears its ugly head. Some useful lessons are explored here from fascinatingly diverse angles by the various contributors to this issue.

The contributions and logic behind the structure

This issue reveals the diversity of these articulations across the American continents. And while there is broad agreement that things regarding antiracist movements are stirring in Latin America as evidenced by the indigenous contributions in this issue from Argentina and Guatemala, so far large anti-racist movements as seen in the US have not emerged. The antiracist agenda is in part obscured by the history of ideas about *mestizaje* as Peter Wade and Mónica Moreno Figueroa observe, as well as, arguably, by an indigenous necessity to prioritise reclaiming ancestral lands and territories. Nevertheless, antiracism as with anti-sexism are beginning to be more clearly articulated

through the lens of territory, where the body is understood as territory, the integrity or dignity of the person, as well as the indigenous customs and practices, and more generally, rights and social justice (see the conversation between Nancy Lopez and Heike Schaumberg as well as the peer-reviewed contributions by Anja Habersang and Natalia Boffa in this issue). In short, from an indigenous perspective reclaiming territory underpins the struggle against all injustice in the post-colonial world. This is why we begin this Special Issue with the contributions exploring Latin America and conclude with those on North America.

Historically, the differences between a more feudal Spanish and Portuguese catholic colonialism and the more capitalistic protestant British colonialism play out in important ways even constitutionally, ideologically and conceptually in terms of the creation of nation states across the Americas and their respective structures of racism. Some of these historical particularities are explored comprehensively and comparatively for the case of Peru and Brazil by Luana Xavier Pinto Coelho. Moreover, there are many institutional differences, not least the experience of segregation in North America. Often, Latin American elites dismiss racism as not relevant to their countries because, generally, there was no formal segregation, some indigenous people might have played a role in the wars of independence as well as slaves who obtained their freedom through them if they survived those wars, in some countries the majority of the population are indigenous or at least mixed, and others hawk back to their own roots as migrants in ‘a country of immigrants’, albeit usually invoking implicitly (sometimes, of course, explicitly) “white” Europe as a place of origin. Any de-facto social segregation was naturalized through social stratification, private property and land ownership, where the upper echelons of the social hierarchy were always dominantly reserved for white people. The consolidation of the leading nation states in Latin America towards the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, was deeply embedded in a social Darwinist ideology that racialized notions of development and progress, leading to a preference by the governing elites of white northern European as opposed to southern European immigrants, which was strongly reflected in land distribution at that time. The penetration of this racist ideology was broad and subtle and was rarely explicitly challenged until more recently in our current century, where people of indigenous and African descent are more visibilised also in policies and census data (Tamagno and Mafia, M. 2011), but within the context of multicultural, neoliberal, narratives that also reproduce cultural essentialism, commercialisation and fetichization of traditional genres (Lamborghini and Martino 2020:81).

Several articles indeed look for answers in how racism played out in local historical formations of institutions such as national states, governance and legal frameworks, while others explore how, despite not being named, such institutional racism is weaved through the social fabric of society and finds articulated outlets through, for example, social media such as twitter (see Erika Heredia). We shall now introduce and connect up the various contributions to this special issue one by one.

Latin America

Peter Wade and Mónica Moreno Figueroa open this special issue setting out a broad and general framework for drawing out similarities and differences between Anglo-America and Hispanic America. Informed by ethnographic research with black and indigenous organisations such as Chao Racismo, the Rede Contra a Violência in Rio de Janeiro in Brasil against police killings, the Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI) in Mexico, and the community of Wimbí in Ecuador, the authors observe a disconnection between explicit talk of racism and radical notions of its institutional dimensions, which leads them to question whether a clearly antiracist language is necessary as there are alternative ways of articulating antiracist struggles and movements in Latin America. While the situation is uneven between countries and organisations and communities, many of these struggles are broadly themed. While some are centred on police violence, others on racism related to land and environmental issues, while yet others are engaged in struggles for political power more generally, antiracist language might be more obscured, but their politics and objectives tackle structural racism more head on. This contribution scopes various aspects and observations from writings on Latin America, where a language of antiracism and antiracist movements appears to be in the making but is embedded more strongly in a language of class inequality and discrimination, mediated by *mestizaje*. By treating racialised dimensions implicitly, they tend to be seen as an *integral* part of inequality and hierarchy and can thus “be implicated in any challenge to the inequality, injustice and hierarchy that exist in a racialised social order”. Their main contentions are “that struggles that address structural dimensions of injustice and inequality without explicitly centring racism - but without eliding it entirely - can also be powerful anti-racist interventions” and “that naming racism without understanding it as structural can sometimes make a useful - even if limited - contribution and should not be automatically dismissed as not being radical enough or a mere distraction.” In this regard, Wade and Moreno Figueroa also connect with the closing paper of this special issue by Bill Mullen who makes the case for the Boycott and Sanctions, Divestment Movement (BDS) launched by Palestinian civil society in 2005 as offering a focus for international antiracism, even though dressed more in the language of national liberation and sovereignty and against territorial occupation, structural antiracism is an integral part of that struggle.

Luana Xavier Pinto Coelho shows in her contribution how important history is to understand these constellations. She presents a legal-historical analysis of discourses of nation and citizenship in Brazil and Peru that reveals the persistence of racial normativity during post-independence that still informs contemporary forms of racism as the afterlife of racial slavery (Hartman 1997). In so doing, she contends that class was indeed racialized in Latin America. By discussing both the cases of Peru and Brazil she shows that colonial technologies of conquest were always shared, and that racism was/is an efficient colonial tool to guarantee forced labour, expropriation, and exploitation.

Omar Acha's contribution also highlights the importance of history to understand the intersections of class, gender and racialized hierarchisations during the COVID-19 pandemic in contemporary Argentina. He shows how the quarantine imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic visibilized domestic workers as symbols of a racialized social difference. Class, culture, gender and colourism and how they played out during the pandemic centered on female domestic workers employed in middle-and-upper class neighborhoods. During the twentieth century female domestic workers became one of the most oppressed, exploited and despised sectors of the working class. Yet, during the first Peronist governments (1945-1955) which inaugurated Argentina's model of a socially inclusive state, domestic workers played an important role in the social and political life and embodied race and class struggles. Nevertheless, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the conditions of stigma, exploitation and racism that female domestic workers endure at the historical intersection of class, gender and race, undermining the (also academic) condescending dreams of social inclusion and progressive modernization in a class society.

Erika Heredia's approach to this topic explores expressions of racism among twitter users. Using a twitter data scraping tool to sample from the bigdata collected by Twitter, she employs a qualitative analysis of these exchanges presumably by white authors and she could identify in these tweets suggestive leads (such as the possession of an iPhone) that indicate a certain purchasing-power of these authors. These tweets were inspired by first, prison revolts protesting the potentially fatal conditions in the prisons as Covid-19 began to take lives, and second, the government announcing in response that it would transfer some prison inmates to house-arrest in an effort to relieve notoriously over-crowded prisons in poor conditions and limit the fatal consequences of Covid-19 outbreaks there. Many of the affected inmates were imprisoned for minor offences or still awaiting trial for them, not, as the political opposition in Congress would have it, that they were murderers and rapists. Heredia uncovers a deep-seeded racism towards, and racialisation of, essentially the poor, which she contends is a form of dehumanization, eliminationism, and white supremacy. In a sense, the author explores not only racism but how whiteness is constructed in opposition to a racialized, criminalised and dehumanised "other" that disregards any basic human rights notion of "innocent until proven guilty". Instead, they desire the death penalty for "*los negros de mierda*" associated with living in shanty-towns, the true colour of their skin which may well be what in the US or in Europe would be classified as 'white' is in fact irrelevant; for this section of the Argentine population they are black because they are poor. This has of course been a building block in Argentina's artificially and misleadingly constructed national identity as white European immigrants in Latin America 'who had descended from the boats'; an aphorism that reproduces the social Darwinist perspective that identified non-white people with backwardness who thus had to be eliminated from the national imaginary. Just how pervasive this notion is, for example in Argentina, was revealed by that country's current president, Alberto Fernández's misfortunate reproduction of this phrase. Heike Schaumberg explores some of the fallout from this with indigenous

communities in the Chaco region in her contextualisation of conversations and exchanges she has conducted about racism and antiracism for this issue with two indigenous community.

But first, based on detailed ethnographic examples from her research in the Argentine Chaco, Natalia Boffa closely traces various articulations of institutional racism in areas such as health, education and resource distribution in relation to indigenous Wichí communities. She identifies the covert nature of racism in Argentina, noting that ‘in general, the problem didn’t appear in these terms; nevertheless, the Wichí women and men denounced that “we don’t exist in this regulation”’, with reference to the alleged racial discrimination against an indigenous teacher who was not appointed as director in a local school serving indigenous communities. In other words, the racial discrimination was not only felt to be against this teacher, but by implication against the entire indigenous community. It reveals the lack of any notion of positive discrimination in Argentina’s policies and administration, or at least some stipulations that acknowledge racial discrimination, as implementing regulations to the letter facilitates precisely that, or, in Boffa’s words and similar to Heredia’s observations, a politics of elimination of this segment of the population, for example in state educational policies. The consequence is the reproduction of historical racism in subtle ways. She further explores astutely how the denial of racism that also Peter Wade and Monica Moreno Figueroa observe in the opening article, leads to some horrific treatment and inadequacies in the local health service that are clear-cut cases of unacknowledged and rampant racism, and that, importantly, the Wichí understand them precisely in these terms, as racism. She also clarifies that these are institutional structures and that not everyone working within them is necessarily racist, and some employees and professionals indeed are dedicated to fighting racism from within these institutions, but they are as of yet largely navigating uncharted waters. She further observes how resource distribution efforts favour NGOs working with, or on behalf of, these communities instead of channelling resources directly to the indigenous communities themselves. As with other indigenous groups, for the Wichí these are territorial domains of indigenous understandings, practices and customs, as well as struggles that articulate antiracism as part of a complex makeup of a collective subjectivity constructed by and simultaneously against diverse forms of discrimination. Ultimately, this pluridimensional character of racism, as the author usefully refers to it, informs the production of national identity.

Nancy Lopez, in conversation with Heike Schaumberg, explores the intersections between racism, gender and highlights the importance of understanding the history of colonial in understanding racism. Nancy, a *caciqua* (female community head) and community activist from a Wehneyek-Wichí community from the Argentine Chaco in Salta province, unearths how racism penetrates and is reproduced by groups who themselves are targeted by racism, as institutional racism goes unchallenged. She also notes changes in how groups align over the recent years. The conversation to some extent reflects how the language of racism, and analysing expressions of racism in those terms, would

benefit from clearer definition, albeit, interestingly, it centres on “difference”, not only colour but also speech and culture or customs. Such clarity, however, gets into sharper focus when a racist event involving government leaders becomes national headlines, as anonymous WhatsApp messages by indigenous protesters reveal, which were forwarded to Heike Schaumberg by a Guaraní contact who received these messages from another part of the Chaco region where protests against the racism had erupted. It is testimony to the role of social media, in particular WhatsApp, in generating a shared language and understanding of antiracism. The intention here is to offer space to these testimonies by those who are the agents of these transformations and will be shaping the emerging antiracism on the ground.

In indigenous peoples’ struggles that are directly or indirectly framed as anti-racist, ‘the territory’ plays an important role. Anja Habersang presents an in-depth case study of the ‘Indigenous Women’s Movement for Buen Vivir’ who operate on the intersection of gender and indigeneity. These Indigenous women position themselves as ‘body-territories’, which links their struggles to defend territories against extractivist resource exploitation with the struggle against intersectional discrimination, racism, and the historic violation of their bodies. They position themselves as anti-patriarchal rather than as feminists, framing the struggle against prevailing ‘capitalist-coloniality’ as one against the patriarchy. As body-territories, their resistance targets the triggers of systemic racism: capitalist, extractivist, patriarchal exploitation, and exclusion.

This importance of the territory in rising up against the discrimination and exploitation of indigenous peoples, also comes to the fore in Elisabet Dueholm Rasch’ article, in which she explores how COVID-19 shapes the defense of territory in Latin America, and especially in Guatemala, and at the same time reveals and deepens the axes of exclusion and inequality that territory defenders are struggling to transform. Although the defense of territory as a movement is not firmly rooted in an anti-racist discourse, it questions structures that are rooted in the racism that came to the continent when it was colonized by Europeans, and it often builds on an indigenous identity that is constructed vis-à-vis a ladino or mestizo identity. The article explores how the defense of territory is rooted in a past characterized by racism, colonialization and exploitation, the different forms of violence that territory defenders face, and how these issues have become even more manifest during the pandemic. Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, in a conversation with Elisabet Dueholm Rasch also makes the point that the colonial past is still very active in the present and becomes manifest through institutional racism. The pandemic, he argues, affects the indigenous population more, because of its marginalized position and, as consequences, deepens structures of exploitation and racism.

North America and beyond

While configurations of class seem to feature more prominently in understandings of racism and antiracism in Latin America than they do

particularly in black antiracism in North America, Maya Bhardwaj nevertheless shows how none-white racial intersections during the antiracist movements in the midst of the pandemic of 2020 bring to the fore underlying class constructs. This author homes in on how South Asian Americans in general, and South Asian Queers in particular, related to, and integrated with, the Black uprisings in 2020 and the ways in which the conformist “model minority myth” was contested. She skilfully unpicks historical and cultural facets that underpin her discussion of “transformative solidarity” and “allyship”, as well as the contradictions that South Asian Queer and working-class activists end up confronting in their political lives and identities, struggles that inform their antiracist activism and interactions with radical Black queer and feminist politics. Contrasting the Afro-pessimist view regarding the inevitability of anti-Blackness, Bhardwaj concludes that this current of South Asian political radicalism holds hope for mounting truly multiracial challenges to structural violence and oppression “to usher in abolitionist futures”.

The California Economists Collective (CEC) consisting of Ian Ross Baran, Kenton Card, Grecila Perez, and James Sirigotis, explored through interviews with Brianna Byrd, Camilla Hawthorne, and Dylan Rodriguez the 2020 events in the US. Part of a larger multimedia project, the CEC presents here the interviews that evolved around six overarching questions but largely centred on the abolition movement. They explore the experience with, and role of, police and state surveillance as a way of maintaining a racial capitalist hegemony. The conversations pick up on the importance of 2020 because it highlighted the anti-blackness focus of policing and questioned not only the police or police violence but the entire logic of policing, and enabled new visions of organising communities. While Hawthorne highlights the police’s relationship to the protection of private property, Rodriguez, suggests that the institutional role of policing is in response to a kind of “domestic war” that should be recognized as such in order to better inform activist and community organising, and that war needs to be abolished. The interviewees note that the idea of abolition has gone mainstream during the 2020 uprising and opened up new horizons of imagining different futures. Nevertheless, this also calls for a close analysis and problematisation of what is meant by abolition, what are the objectives. The critical explorations of abolishing the logic of policing does not stop with prisons and police but extends to other institutions in society. It is proposed to imagine abolition as a “collective creative pedagogical tendency”. Questioning what space there is within a university institution for radicalism, whether pedagogy can still be transgressive and radical, Hawthorne emphasizes the importance of political education for the antiracist movement and activism in general, but notes the idealisation of that radicalism and the contradictions that arise when students are met with violent crackdowns when they attempt to enact some of these ideas. Exploring various connections and intersections between gender, race and politics, the historical legacies of colonialism and slavery, neoliberalism and protest, the interviewees conclude that abolition is not only about reparations but also about liberation, and that disruption as method is necessary in order to denaturalize, for example, racism and other structures of

oppression. These interviews offer a sense of the various debates that the 2020 antiracist uprising had harnessed in the US.

Maravene Taylor-Heine explores the ambiguities of what came to be known as the opt-out movement, where high school students opted out of tests. Their liberal egalitarian intentions, however, are questioned as the opt-out movement is largely located in “figured worlds” that reveal backgrounds of white privilege. Instead of furthering equity and egalitarianism, the movement ends up creating obstacles for the collection of vital statistical information, and poorer, non-white parents do not have the same ability to have their children opt out from tests because they will be facing quite different consequences for doing so in the long run. Based on a close analysis of protest data, the author explores “emerging identities of privileged students engaged in a protest for education reforms”. She discerns the pervasiveness of ideologies of whiteness even in protests such as these that consider themselves as antiracist because of the racism implicit in these tests. The author explores the contradictions that emerge from these “figured worlds” of relatively white privileged persons and the change they are able to effect but also the limitations especially with regards to racism and class.

Robert L. Reece argues that colour stratification in black American communities buttresses racial inequality and therefore it merits considerably more attention by racial justice organizations and anti-discrimination policy makers than it has been receiving. The author traces differences between light and dark skinned to the history of colourism stratifications from the times of slavery to the early census categorisations that differentiated between Blacks and Mulattos. He contends that the elimination of the category of “mulatto” from the census, the consequence of a political prioritisation of race over colour in the early twentieth century, finally helped facilitate racial stratification. It was underpinned by white people experiencing a racial crisis after the “mulatto”, which previously acted as a buffer category in a rigid and, thus secure, racial hierarchy, was removed following emancipation and black people gaining more political power. He takes issue with WEB DuBois from an exchange with Marcus Garvey, showing that colourism indeed has played a historical role in the US, and thus sides with the latter against what subsequently came to be known as “strategic essentialism”, the flattening of identity differences in pursuit of shared collective goals. Arguably, Reece draws our attention to the penetration of the history and institutionalisation of colourism in society and how it impacts on legislations, policies, subjectivities and identities and racial justice movements and organisations.

Nevertheless, such a focus on colourism especially when making the case for it to be included for data collection for policies and legislations to combat racial discrimination, could be a hostage to fortune that ends up reproducing instead of challenging the paradigms upon which racism rests. This author’s main tenet is contrasted in this special issue by Bhardwaj’s opening paper of this section that centres on unravelling hidden class attributes that underpin social, historical and identity difference in relation to Blackness and their relationship

to the anti-racist movements of our time. These discussions reflect the spirit of this special issue, which is to generate a platform for discussion and learning from the diverse topics from strata from diverse ancestral backgrounds targeted by racism, and that influence the conditions in which we shape our antiracist movements, a diversity from which we can learn and shape a shared language of struggle.

In this regard, Bill V. Mullen concludes this special issue with an exploration of the Boycott and Sanctions, Divestment Movement (BDS) launched by Palestinian civil society in 2005. The author contends that by naming Israel as a white supremacist state, Palestinians qualified for recognition as a racialized subaltern population with important consequences for antiracist movements in the West. Based on examples in the US such as the USACBI (The United States Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel), boycotts by several academic professional bodies but also solidarity by indigenous groups because Palestine brings into view the settler-colonial contexts of the past but also the present. Mullen thus makes the case for BDS as offering an organising principle and a political focus for Afro-Palestinian and Afro-Arab unity as well as for a global antiracist and anti-imperialist movement, inclusive of campaigns such as Jewish Voices for Peace. The article demonstrates how BDS, following the anti-apartheid campaign model in South Africa, insisting on grassroots organization, self-determination struggle, and internationalism, has become an effective weapon against racism, police violence, and imperialism in the world. The author identifies the discursive challenges that BDS faces in a world that has returned to classical Zionism and ethnonationalist states. Yet, he also demonstrates that BDS has been quite effective in denting popular support for Israel in opinion polls in the US. As Mullen concludes, “the Palestinian BDS movement has helped to foster and regenerate a new global antiracism still seeking its final expression in the defeat of Israeli settler-colonialism, Occupation, and Apartheid.”

The current climate of a renewed threat of nuclear warfare and an exodus of Ukrainian refugees, with fascists exploiting broad sympathy for an ethnic-nationalist turn, the importance of the BDS movement and the centrality of international antiracism are very clear. The white skin tone of these refugees is uncomfortable, according to many Western media outlets, ‘they look just like us’, but the point they were inadvertently making was that they *were not* like us even though they were white. Arguably, Eastern Europeans have always been Europe’s “Blacks” just as were the Irish to England for generations, or as were white Jews to Fascism, or, as we have seen in this issue, the working-class poor to the upper strata in Argentina. Racism goes beyond skin-colour as difference racializes the social hierarchy of capitalist exploitation and oppression. As uncertainty, conflicts and systemic crises advance in the world, so do opportunities to change it, but that can only be done if international antiracism leads our movements.

Acknowledgements

The editors are grateful for the support and guidance offered by the anonymous reviewers, and the especially created Advisory Collective. The latter consists of diverse activists and activist-scholars or professionals who act as representatives of, or are involved with, or are spokespersons for, indigenous and Black community or social movement activism from different regions in the Americas, some of whom have also contributed with articles in this issue (in alphabetical order):

Natalia Boffa, Ajamu Dillahunt-Holloway, Bill Mullen, Irma Alicia Velazquez Nimatuj, Mara Puntano, Vitor Queiroz, and Samuel Urbina, in addition to the Special Issue editors.

General pieces

As always, this issue of *Interface* also contains general pieces from and about social movements around the world.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Mapuche regions of Chile, Rogelio Luque-Lora's piece explores the extent to which the process begun by the 2019 uprising engages other-than-human beings and processes, in struggles over issues like water and land but also in complex debates over the rights of nature, indigenous worldviews and law. Méliissa Blais' article discusses the impact of masculinist anti-feminism on the women's movement in Quebec, and how this counter-framing has impacted feminists' framing work around the identification of violence, the solutions proposed and the deradicalisation of feminist discourse.

In his contribution, Mark Halley looks at how the experiences of American Sign Language / English interpreters in a key 1988 protest has affected their perspectives on interpreters and deaf people, as well as the personal and professional benefits gained through protest participation. Talia Velez' article discusses the struggle of the General Assembly in Coyocoán, Mexico City, to protect a local aquifer, and how netnography made it possible to bridge the distance between academia and subjugated groups. Silvano de la Lata's piece explores the "square movements" of 2021-2 in five cities and the importance of going beyond reactivity and outrage to creative resistance.

Cleovi C. Mosuela's article discusses the collective resistance of Temporary Protected Status migrants in the US against the threat of this status being removed, highlighting how this mobilization made connections between non-citizens and citizens. Jeff Yaremko and Kevin Walby's piece covers social movement groups in 21 countries using freedom of information legislation and discusses the range of frames and techniques used by these groups. Janna Klostermann and Chris Hurl's practice note looks at what can be learned from the history of AIDS activism in Toronto for contemporary struggles around essential services, drawing on the work of the late activist George W. Smith.

Lastly, we have a wide range of book reviews about popular struggles around the globe. Benjamin S. Case reviews Judith Butler's *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, while Chuck Morse reviews Benjamin Heim Shepard's *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action: Case Studies in Dialectical Activism*.

Irmgard Emmelhainz reviews Thea Riofrancos' *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador* and Isaac K. Oommen reviews Pankaj Mishra's *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond*.

Maria Vasile reviews Susana Narotzky's *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe*, while Jeremiah Gaster reviews three recent books on Venezuelan social movements: Dario Azzellini's *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*; Geo Maher's *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* and Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert's *Venezuela, the Present as Struggle: Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution*.

Interface issues

Apologies for the late publication of this issue, due to issues beyond our control. Our next call for papers (deadline 1 July 2022) is for an open issue.

Finally, we are happy to welcome Rose Brewer, Genevieve Ritchie and Peter Funke to our editorial spokescouncil. They are joining Lesley Wood and Todd Wolfson with particular responsibilities for movements in the USA and Canada.

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About the issue editors

Heike Schaumberg (PhD, University of Manchester) is a Latin Americanist and Social Anthropologist with extensive fieldwork based research on the neoliberal crisis and its discontents, as well as on economic and environmental impacts on various communities in the Argentine Chaco region. She has argued for politically engaged and committed research in some publications, benefitting from varied experiences as an activist on the Left and having worked with various social movements both in South America and in Europe. She is currently affiliated to the Instituto Ravignani (UBA, Argentina) and co-edits *Interface's* Latin American section.

Elisabet Dueholm Rasch is associate professor at Wageningen University. Her research topics include (indigenous) mobilization toward neoliberal policies and extractive projects, and energy production in Latin America (Guatemala) and the Netherlands. Her contemporary fieldwork in Guatemala focuses on how territory defenders experience violence and criminalization.

Dr. Layla Brown-Vincent, an Assistant Professor of Africana Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Boston and Assistant Professor of Cultural Anthropology and African Studies at Northeastern University, has joined us as Guest Editor for this Special Issue. She is an activist-scholar of the Pan-African Social Movements in the Americas with a particular focus on the Black Lives Matter movement. As an anthropologist, she has been working and publishing on popular resistance to racism's manifold expressions that she both observes and experiences, and on emerging collective challenges to racism not only in the US, but also in Venezuela and Cuba among others (see her list of publications: <https://laylabrownvincentphd.academia.edu/>)

Call for papers volume 14 issue 2 (November - December 2022) Open issue

Learning from each other's struggles

Are you involved in thinking about your own movement's practice – as activist, theorist, militant researcher, writer? Or an engaged university researcher, activist/academic, or otherwise trying to develop research and theory from and for movements? *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/>) is an open-access, global, multilingual space for dialogue between social movements, activists, communities in struggle in different countries, around different issues, across different theoretical traditions, and between activists and researchers. What works, what doesn't work, what makes a difference, how can we know, how can we do it better? We're looking for short stories of struggle, notes on practice, formal research pieces, interviews, book reviews and anything else that helps further this dialogue.

Our November - December 2022 issue will be open-themed. We hope to receive submissions on any aspect of social movement research and practice that fits within the journal's mission statement (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/who-we-are/mission-statement/>). Submissions should contribute to the journal's purpose as a tool to help our movements learn from each other's struggles, by developing analyses from specific movement processes and experiences that can be translated into a form useful for other movements.

Interface is a journal of practitioner research, meaning that we welcome work by movement activists as well as activist scholars, and work in a variety of formats which suit these different kinds of writing as well as our very varied readership – which includes activists and researchers across the world, connected to many different movements and working within very different intellectual, theoretical and political traditions. In addition to studies of contemporary experiences and practices, we encourage analysis of historical social movements as a means of learning from the past and better understanding contemporary struggles.

Our goal is to include material that can be used in a range of ways by movements – in terms of its content, its language, its purpose and its form. We thus seek work in a very wide range of different formats, such as conventional (refereed) articles, stories of struggles, review essays, facilitated discussions and interviews, action notes, teaching notes, key documents and analysis, book reviews – and beyond. Both activist and academic peers review research contributions, and other material is sympathetically edited by peers. The editorial process generally is geared towards assisting authors to find ways of

expressing their understanding, so that we all can be heard across geographical, social and political distances.

All contributions should go to the appropriate regional editors by the deadline of 1 July 2022. Please see the guidelines for contributors (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/>) for more indications on content and style. We can accept material in Bengali, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Slovak and Spanish.

Deadline and contact details

The deadline for initial submissions to this issue, to be published in November - December 2022, is 1 July 2022. All manuscripts should be sent to the appropriate regional editor, listed on our contacts page (<https://www.interfacejournal.net/contact-us/>).

Submission templates are available online via the guidelines page (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/>) and should be used to ensure correct formatting. *Interface* is a completely voluntary effort, without the resources of commercial journals, so we have to do all the layout and typesetting ourselves. The only way we can manage this is to ask authors to use these templates when preparing submissions.

Interface is entirely open-access and non-commercial, relying on its editors', contributors' and reviewers' political commitments to develop learning and dialogue between social movements for a better world. We are keeping it running during a global pandemic and with many editors unable to participate fully due to caring commitments, sickness and other: please be patient if you don't get an immediate reply.

Thanks!

Alternative grammars of anti-racism in Latin America

Peter Wade and Mónica Moreno Figueroa

Abstract

Naming racism has been usually seen as a necessary step for understanding racism and undertaking anti-racist action. However, the explicit naming of racism does not immediately tell us what kind of understanding of racism is at stake nor what kinds of action will follow. In the context of an incipient turn to antiracism in Latin America we conducted a project looking at antiracist activities in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico. It became apparent that different organisations varied markedly in their approaches to the concept and language of racism. Some explicitly use the language of racism, other organisations do not, even though they are engaged in struggles for land, rights, etc., which clearly have a racialised dimension. This difference revealed variations in the awareness of racism, which came in and out of focus in their practice. With examples from Colombia, Brazil, Mexico and Ecuador, we discuss the antiracist effects of what we call “alternative grammars of anti-racism” and the “racially-aware class consciousness” they imply. We end by questioning the assumption that the explicit naming of racism as such is necessary to advance antiracist work, and suggest that employment of more indirect ways of evoking racism, which imply an awareness of structural racism, have some advantages for antiracist practice.

Keywords: racism, anti-racism, alternative grammars, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador

Introduction

Against the background of a “turn towards anti-racism” in Latin America, which gained momentum from about 2010 and has been characterized by the expansion of anti-racist policies, laws and organizations, we undertook a project to explore the anti-racist discourse and strategies of a range of Indigenous and Black organisations, groups and networks - mostly grass-roots, but also governmental - in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico.¹ A key interest, at the

¹ The project Latin American Anti-Racism in a ‘Post-Racial’ Age, LAPORA (<https://www.lapora.sociology.cam.ac.uk>) carried out comparative research exploring anti-racist action in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico. It ran from 2017 to 2019, with a team of 31 people, mostly academics and activists, including Indigenous, Black, mestizo and white people. We conducted nine months of ethnographic fieldwork, using a collaborative methodology for the analysis of the data. The project explored 24 cases in detail and a wider set of contextual cases looking at Indigenous and Black social grassroots movements, non-governmental organisations, legal cases and state institutions.

start of the research, was in the way different sets of people talk or do not talk about racism as a reality and an experience, and about anti-racism as an agenda and project for their organisation or campaign. This led us to interrogate how people's understandings of racism were linked (or not) to explicit talk about or naming of racism; we soon realised there were alternative articulations in which racism was not front and centre of the organisation's agenda and was moving in and out of focus in interesting ways. We recognised that there can be many struggles, such as those for ethnic, women's and human rights, for land, for justice, for life and for safety and well-being. In Latin America, many such struggles take place in a context in which inequalities and injustices align in significant ways with racialised differences, due to a profound and deep-rooted correlation between racial and class hierarchies. So the question arises of what difference it makes, in terms of anti-racist strategies, to think of racism as a key issue in any particular struggle and to explicitly and openly use the language of racism and antiracism to define and organise activities and struggles around equality, justice, fairness and rights.

In this article, we question the assumption that the explicit naming of racism *per se* is a sign of advancing antiracist work. We suggest that there may be distinct advantages for antiracist practice in the employment of strategic language, what we call "alternative grammars of anti-racism", which do not explicitly put racism at the centre of the agenda, but instead show an awareness of broader structural inequalities, in which the role of racial difference is indirectly acknowledged. We also suggest that the possibilities of using or not using alternative grammars are tied to specific racial formations rooted in particular contexts: in these Latin American cases, an overarching context is formed by the ideology of *mestizaje* (racial and cultural mixture).

Our use of "alternative grammars" is mindful of the many possible connotations of the term "grammar", which has been used in linguistics and literary theory - for example, Noam Chomsky's (1966) "generative grammar" or Jacques Derrida's (1974) "grammatology" - and in the social sciences, ranging from Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich's (2004) concept of "grammars of identity/alterity" all the way to decolonial theorists such as Walter Dignolo (2007) who talks of "grammars of decoloniality" or Vicente Rafael (1992, 2016) who analyses grammar as a colonial tool of domination and control.

We did not, however, opt for this term in a particular conversation with such texts. We arrived at the concept of alternative grammars of anti-racism in the face of a challenging empirical site that was not acting as we had supposed it would. While wanting to follow the term "racism" in the work of activists and grass-roots organisers, we were confronted with the very uneven use of the term in the midst of clearly racialised struggles. On the one hand, the term was barely used by some. On the other hand, we encountered explicit and expressive uses of the term racism, accompanied by uncritical and superficial understandings of the phenomenon. The overall picture was one of varying degrees of use and varied depths of understanding; we saw talk and use of the terminology of racism coming in and out of focus. So a focus on how a word was being used

revealed interesting contradictions. In line with Baumann and Gingrich's perspective, we agree that the term grammar "seems to echo so well with the most varied forms of our desire to see 'sense' or 'order' in people's capacities and failures to deal with their worlds (...) We use the word as a simple shorthand for certain simple classificatory structures or classificatory schemata" (2007: p.ix). Like them, we are interested in classificatory structures as a way to make sense of the content of anti-racist practice, but also the "doing" of such particular structure. If using the term "racism" is not a defining feature of anti-racist work, what are other cues that can allow us to map anti-racist work? Moreover, how then can we identify actions that might produce deep and radical transformation?

This connects to another question - that of how people conceived of racism as a process and, in particular, what kind of understanding of racism was behind explicit or implicit "racism talk". In some cases, we found that people would think about racism in individualistic terms, as a matter of the aberrant, perhaps anachronistic, attitudes and behaviours of a few misguided or ignorant people; it was seen as a question of people treating others badly and stigmatising them, and of excluding them from certain opportunities because of prejudicial attitudes. In other cases, racism was seen as a whole set of historically embedded processes and structures that functioned through multiple habits, practices and ideologies (whether in formal institutions or outside them) to create and maintain racialised inequalities in society. Challenging racism as a matter of individual prejudices is necessary and worthwhile, but a structural approach to racism holds out the promise of deeper and more radical social change.

In thinking about such structural approaches and what they might look like in practice, a key theme that emerged was in relation to the strong class-race nexus that is at the core of many struggles against inequality in Latin America. Given the particular regional context of *mestizaje*, its racial ambiguities and pervasive disavowal of racism, the racialised dimensions of hierarchical social relations are often seen as merely class differences, which can supposedly be surpassed through social mobility in a "meritocratic" society. We argue that some of the activists with whom we worked bring back a racialised reading of struggles for dignity, equality and justice in a stratified society by means of a "racially-aware class consciousness". In this article, we focus on this class-race nexus, but we are very aware of the gender and sexist implications of many of the issues that we explore; here, however, we just note them without going in depth. In a different publication, one of us has used three of the cases explored here to analyse in depth the gendered implications of anti-racist intersectional action (Moreno Figueroa and Viveros Vigoya, 2022).

In what follows, we briefly outline the turn to anti-racism, before discussing the theoretical context for the questions outlined above. We then give some examples of different ways in which racism figured in the discourse and activities of Black and Indigenous organisations and struggles.

The turn to anti-racism in Latin America

Gaining impetus from about 2010, there has been a turn towards an agenda of anti-racism in Latin America. This is not to say that, prior to this time, anti-racism was not a feature of the social movement landscape in the region: there is a long history of challenges to racialised inequality and racism by Indigenous, Black and Brown people (Andrews, 2004; Gonzalez, 1985; Nascimento, 1980; Wade, 2010). Brazil was a forerunner on the Latin American scene insofar as racial prejudice, discrimination, hatred and inequality were explicitly named and were centre stage in black social movements from the 1930s, as they were in Cuba in the early twentieth century: these expressions came from urban Black populations, trying to compete in educational, employment and housing markets (Alberto, 2011; De la Fuente, 2001). Racism was also an explicit focus in other countries where Black protests mobilised, usually from the 1960s, in light of events in the United States and South Africa (Rahier, 2012; Wade, 1995). Among Indigenous peoples, while there were concerted struggles to defend land - including, in late nineteenth-century south-western Colombia, from the “ambition of the whites” (Sanders, 2004, p.85) - the language of racial discrimination was less obvious than a discourse of culture (De la Cadena, 2000; Rappaport, 2005).

From the late 1980s, official multiculturalism began to spread across Latin America, linked to regional trends of democratisation and the global rise of identity politics. In Latin America, this gave rise to constitutional changes, creating regimes of recognition and rights for “minorities” usually defined in terms of cultural difference.² A focus on culture, however, meant that the issue of racism and racialised inequalities tended to move to the back burner. A partial exception here is Brazil, where the urban Black population continued to highlight racism as a problem and where even some Indigenous leaders were fluent in the language of racism in the 1990s (Warren, 2001, pp.267-274). Multiculturalism opened up significant avenues for progress, which included at least the possibility of addressing the structural inequalities that afflicted the people whose cultures and rights were being recognised. Some of these people used the new regimes to press radical claims, as did the Zapatistas in southern Mexico in the 1990s, for whom racism figured explicitly as an issue, although ambivalently, as we will see (Mora, 2007, p.66). However, the limitations of multiculturalist regimes soon became apparent. As with official multiculturalism everywhere, it was wide open to tokenism and cooptative politics (Rahier, 2012). It proved to be a worryingly comfortable bedfellow for neoliberal agendas doing business as usual in pursuit of development in the region (Gros, 1997; Hale, 2002, 2019). And, as land-intensive and extractivist enterprises continued to flourish and encroach on newly-minted land rights, provoking vigorous reactions from Indigenous and Black organisations, there was a racist and violent backlash that targeted such organisations, which served

² For an analysis of the multiculturalist turn and its causes, see Wade (2010) and Hale (2005, 2019).

to push the issue of racism to the fore (Hooker, 2020; Martínez Novo and Shlossberg, 2018).

An early spur to this turn was the 2001 Durban Conference on Racism. Anti-racist legislation developed in many countries, banning and sometimes criminalising racist acts. Some high-profile legal cases have set precedents by highlighting the presence of racism (Hernández, 2013). In Ecuador, for example, constitutional reform in 2008 and the Plan Plurinacional para Eliminar la Discriminación Racial y la Exclusión Étnica y Cultural (2009-2012) created a basis for laws against racism and for affirmative action policies for the employment of Indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian and other ethnic minority people in state institutions. Institutions dedicated to dealing with issues of racial discrimination were established, such as Mexico's Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED in 2003). In Colombia, the state promoted various campaigns: Campaña Nacional Contra el Racismo (2009), Hora Contra el Racismo and Ponga la Cara al Racismo (both 2015). In his 2018 inaugural speech Mexico's new president, Andres Manuel López Obrador, explicitly mentioned racism when outlining his new government's commitments. In the realm of census practice and government statistics, most countries in Latin America are now "counting race" in some form and Black people are featuring more frequently than ever before (Loveman, 2014). Finally, there has also been a burgeoning of academic studies (and comparative research projects) that are establishing how racism exists and developing theoretical approaches to it (Barbary and Urrea, 2004; Hooker, 2020; Martínez Novo and Shlossberg, 2018; Telles, Flores, and Urrea-Giraldo, 2015; Viáfara López and Urrea Giraldo, 2006).

Naming and defining racism

In the context of this turn to anti-racism, how important it is to explicitly name racism and what are the implications of more and less structural understandings of racism? It is often assumed in anti-racist circles that, on the one hand, it is a necessary first step to call racism by its name, identify and label it publicly in all its manifestations and - almost self-evidently - to put it at the centre of the anti-racist agenda; and, on the other hand, that it is necessary to conceive of racism as structural, systemic processes, rather than individual ignorance and bad attitudes. The assumption is that these two elements, naming racism and understanding it as structural, should operate together to create effective anti-racism and, when they are pulled apart, it creates problems. For example, it is recognised that, all too often, we see the public naming of racism along with tokenistic interventions that do little to address structural issues (Bonnett, 2000; Lentin, 2016; Rahier, 2012). And it seems evident that tackling structural issues without explicitly acknowledging racism, hardly constitutes an anti-racist strategy. In Latin America, in particular, simply revealing and naming racism has been an arduous and necessary struggle (Wade, 2010), due to the region's long history of denying and minimising racism, rooted in part in dominant narratives of national identity that foreground mestizaje as the key

process leading to nationhood (De la Cadena, 2007; Gall, 2004; Leal and Langebaek, 2010; Moreno Figueroa, 2012; Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar, 2016; Wade, 2017).

However, our main contention in this article is that struggles that address structural dimensions of injustice and inequality without explicitly centring racism - but without eliding it entirely - can also be powerful anti-racist interventions. A secondary contention we advance is that naming racism without understanding it as structural can sometimes make a useful - even if limited - contribution and should not be automatically dismissed as not being radical enough or a mere distraction.

These two contentions are embedded in broader debates about how to best tackle inequality and injustice and to associated theoretical questions about the role of racism in constituting inequality and injustice in stratified societies. In broad terms, there is a continuum of positions (Lentin, 2004, pp.2-4). One pole is represented by views that see racism an *addition* to, an overlay onto, the basic class dynamics of capitalism. Because race has no biological reality and is “nothing but” a “social construction”, it is therefore not inherent to class, which is constitutive of the social order. This has implications for how to deal with racism, which may as a result be understood as an aberrant psychological state, a superficial deviation that needs correcting or an anachronism that will be superseded by means of, for example, the recognition of “cultural difference” or the promotion of greater public awareness of racism.

At the other end of the spectrum are positions that see racism as *constitutive of* the structures of capitalism and liberal governance, or more generally “modernity” (as feminists and especially Marxist feminists might argue is the case for gender difference). This is the line taken by diverse theorists: post-colonial theorists such as Paul Gilroy (1993), critical race theorists such as David Goldberg (Goldberg, 2008), coloniality theorists such as Walter Dignolo and Anibal Quijano (Dignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007), Afro-pessimists such as Frank Wilderson (2010) and Hortense Spillers (2003) (who draw inspiration from Frantz Fanon), and thinkers in the traditions of black radicalism, such as Cedric J. Robinson (1983), Stokely Carmichael (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967), Angela Davis (1983) and more recently Kehinde Andrews (2018). In this approach, the changes in the overtness of racism and racial discourse over the last 100 years or so - leading, in the period since World War II, to “cultural racism” (Taguieff, 1990), “raceless racism” (Goldberg, 2008) or “racism without racists” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) - are surface variations of an underlying reality of racial oppression. This line of argument suggests that racism is integral to modernity not principally because it helps to naturalise social stratification (although it does play this role), but rather because of the historical role played by colonialism - principally its European variant - which integrated racial difference into the fabric of capitalism and liberalism and made them possible as actually existing and on-going political-economic realities. That is, although *logically* both capitalism and liberalism could exist without racial difference, *in*

historical fact, both have been constituted with and by such difference, which has therefore become essential to them.

The implications of this position are that combatting racism and racial inequality means changing some of the basic structures of capitalism and the institutions of governance that facilitate it. Recognition of identity and culture is not enough, even though, if taken far enough, recognition can imply some structural change in the distribution of resources (Tomasi, 2012, ch. 5). How much has to be changed is an open question: Afro-pessimists and some black radicals like Andrews (2018) would say that ultimately *everything* has to change, which means the total dismantling of capitalism (and perhaps liberal democracy); others envisage more reformist changes that can be radical without requiring total system transformation (e.g. affirmative action, reparations, differentialist social policy, etc.).

But radicals such as Andrews recognise that requiring total change can be a recipe for passivity, as it sets the bar for worthwhile action impossibly high. In the meantime, we have to proceed in the present and everyday world and the question is: how do we evaluate which anti-racist strategies are worthwhile? In our project, we encountered Latin American organisations that worked in many different ways, underpinned by very varied understandings of what racism is, how it relates to projects of social transformation, and how necessary it is to name racism in order to challenge it. We argue for an inclusive approach that sees this variety as potentially positive and that pays attention to how a radically critical stance may lead us to evaluate many of these diverse ways of working in an overly negative or even dismissive fashion. At the same time, we argue that it is useful and productive to maintain a radically critical stance as a kind of *vision* or *horizon* that is alive to the limitations of reformist policies and culturalist actions, recognizes the challenges of structural change, and bears in mind Audré Lorde's words that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 1984, pp.110-114). This balance between pragmatism and radicalism echoes Carolyn Pedwell's idea of approaching "progressive social change through an understanding of the *imbrication* of the revolutionary and the routine" (Pedwell, 2017, p.95).³

For example, the first example we present of the Colombian organisation, Chao Racismo, shows that explicit talk about racism by Latin American Black and Indigenous organisations does not necessarily translate to a radical view of its structural dimensions - i.e. they explicitly name racism without fully conceiving it as structural and systemic. Their strategies may be limited to culturalism, and/or conditional recognition politics, and/or combatting racism as individual acts or habits of discrimination and stigmatisation. But this does not mean such discourse and actions have no useful effects. On the other hand, in the other examples we discuss - the Rede Contra a Violencia in Rio de Janeiro, which

³ Developing a "politics of habit", Pedwell (2017, p.95) proposes that engagement with habit can "furnish a renewed pragmatist politics" that does not "dismiss the importance of radical imagination and praxis".

mobilises protest against police killings, the Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI) in Mexico, which launched a struggle for political power, and the community of Wimbí, Ecuador, where Black people struggle for land and against environmental racism - we encountered struggles that did not always, or did not comfortably, name racism explicitly and would thus be judged to fall short by many standards of anti-racism. Yet we suggest that these struggles can have effects that are not only anti-racist, but also structurally so. These can also make a useful contribution.

Alternative grammars of anti-racism and racially-aware class consciousness

We propose that such struggles and organisations use alternative grammars of anti-racism, i.e. logics of addressing issues of inequality and injustice using a language that forms statements that are not fully legible from an anti-racist standpoint. As our examples will show, these alternative grammars may foreground a language of anti-violence, political power or land rights, allowing a degree of fluidity and flexibility around the explicit naming of racism, alongside varying levels of awareness of the structural dimensions of inequality. These alternative grammars emerge in part from Latin America's history of *mestizaje* as a process and an ideology of nationhood, which have created many racial formations in which prototypical identities or social locations of "Black", "Indigenous" and "white" are supplemented by a large - often majority - "mestizo" middle ground, which, although racially ambiguous, is also powerfully structured by racialised hierarchies that value whiteness. This racial ambiguity - and the appearance of racial conviviality it creates - together afford many chances not to acknowledge racism and even racial difference (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar, 2016; Segato, 2010; Sheriff, 2001). *Mestizaje* also has the potential to depoliticise practices of social transformation by eroding alliances between racialised groups, as the aspiration to move up through the racial hierarchy, and apparent possibility of actually doing so, disorients the possibility of solidarity. This has the effect of normalising the attacks on dignity and justice that the logics of inequality bring about.

However, while the denial of racism and the undermining of solidarity are clearly major problems, we contend that it is not always necessary to place racism at the very centre of one's struggle and that alternative grammars can play an important role. If we recognise that *mestizaje* is a silencing, distracting and delegitimising racial project, then it makes sense that alternative grammars emerge that can address racism alongside other social exclusions. In Latin America, these alternative grammars of anti-racism are often rooted in a racially-aware class consciousness, a sense of dignity, equality and justice in a stratified society, which is racially aware without racism being at the front and centre of consciousness. This racially-aware class consciousness is a particularly (although not exclusively) Latin American phenomenon, also noted for Brazil by some scholars (Burdick, 2008; Perry, 2013). This form of awareness is due in part to the influence of *mestizaje*, just noted, but its main cause is the region's

specific history of colonialism - originally of a white conquistador rather than white settler variety - which has created a fairly close coincidence of racial and class difference. In simple terms, the closer a person is to Blackness and Indigeneity, as racialised social locations, the further down the class hierarchy they are likely to be; and the closer they are to whiteness, the higher up they are likely to be (Telles and Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America, 2014). This is different from the US and Europe, where the correlation between class and race is not so close and many working class people are white.

One result of this race-class correlation, combined with the racial ambiguities created by *mestizaje*, is that the racialised dimensions of hierarchy are readable as simply class difference or at best as the anachronistic legacy of past racial disadvantage (e.g. slavery). These racialised features may even be read as actually *countering* racial hierarchy: for example, the limited possibility of social ascent for a few racialised subalterns has been read as a sign of racial conviviality and as evidence of the existence of a meritocracy. Historically, this has been a major trend in Latin America and has been part and parcel of the denial and minimisation of racism in the region. However, these readings do not entirely erase the racialised dimensions of the social order, which can still sometimes take starkly visible form. These racialised dimensions can therefore be addressed in an indirect or implicit fashion: by seeing them as an *integral* part of inequality and hierarchy, they can be implicated in any challenge to the inequality, injustice and hierarchy that exist in a racialised social order.

On the basis of the examples we explore below, we argue that there are a number of advantages to these alternative grammars. First, they work with a potentially productive intersection between race and class, which necessarily addresses structural issues of inequality. Second, this intersectional approach addresses racial inequality in a way that does not alienate groups who prefer to avoid an explicitly racial idiom - some Indigenous organisations, for example the CNI, see reference to racism as involving an outdated concept of race, which they want to distance themselves from; they may refer to ethnic discrimination and other forms of injustice, as distinct from racism as such. The race/class intersection creates a basis for building alliances and opens the way to including other intersections (e.g. with gender). Third, such grammars still allow room for the strategic use of explicit language about racism; that is, racism is by no means denied; it is consistently present, but not always in the foreground.

We also acknowledge that these alternative grammars carry some risks. The key danger is that, while groups using these grammars may have a radical approach to social change, this approach might not be framed by a radical perspective on *racism*, or at least not consistently. Thus these perspectives may underestimate the integral role racism plays in structuring inequality, especially in terms of naturalising hierarchy and dehumanising racialised subalterns. In that sense, they may align rather too comfortably with dominant denials and minimisations of racism.

Given this risk, we argue that it can be productive to be more aware of, and perhaps also more explicit about, the structural dimensions of *racial* inequality

and *racism* as a system for distributing disadvantage and privilege, as envisaged by a radical critique. There can be benefits to sharpening up the focus on the racialised dimensions of inequality, to demonstrate just how much racism is integral to the class system, and the role played by the affordances for naturalisation that racism offers.

In what follows, we offer four examples which show different ways in which racism features in the political agenda of a given organisation and how explicitly racism is named and not named. First, we give an example from Colombia of an explicit awareness of racism and explicit use of the language of racism. Then we give examples of alternative grammars of anti-racism from Brazil, Mexico and Ecuador. We end by questioning the assumption that the explicit naming of racism as such is necessary to advance anti-racist work, and suggest that employment of more indirect ways of evoking racism, which imply an awareness of structural racism, have some advantages for anti-racist practice.

Chao Racismo: explicit language of (anti-)racism

The organization Chao Racismo was created in 2011 in Cali, Colombia, by Black lawyer Ray Charrupí, who filed a lawsuit against the gossip magazine *Hola* for publishing a cover photo that was widely deemed racist in its depiction of Black women in demeaning roles (as domestic servants catering to a family of rich white women). At the time of our research in 2017, Chao Racismo was made up of about a dozen women and men (mestizo and Black) who organise campaigns and actions to raise awareness of racism in Cali, Bogotá and Cartagena.⁴

Racism was very explicitly at the front and centre of their actions (Figure 1). Their definition of racism encompasses individual, but also structural dimensions of racial inequality. The key goal for Charrupí was to challenge the equation between *negro* and *pobre* (Black and poor): “If what you are going to do – be it act, process, project of political strategy – doesn’t lead you to say that *n* [*negro*] is different from *p* [*pobre*], then just don’t do it” (interview). He also challenged *blanqueamiento* (whitening, i.e. the process by which some Black, Indigenous and mestizo people, in an ideological context that gives supreme value to whiteness, are motivated to try to distance themselves from Blackness and Indigeneity). The idea of whitening is driven by the *negro* = *pobre* equation, which assumes that upward social mobility is also a move towards whiteness and discounts the possibility of being both Black and middle or upper class. In line with these goals, Chao Racismo had, amongst others, programmes that addressed employment issues. For example, the organisation created the Certificate of Inclusion which it awards to companies that meet certain standards specified by Chao Racismo in terms of employment policies that are inclusive of Afro-Colombians. It promoted meetings and congresses on Inclusive Marketing and Advertising, in order to sensitize PR people and

⁴ Data about Chao Racismo come from fieldwork conducted by Krisna Ruetten-Orihuela under the aegis of the LAPORA project.

businessmen to the issue of racism. Chao Racismo also addressed the violence that disproportionately affects young Black men in Colombia (Urrea Giraldo, 2012, p.156), by organising urban parties in Cali and talent shows in Buenaventura (a city on the Pacific coast) to provide non-violent venues for young Black people, backing these up with workshops about racism, sexism and violence. Furthermore, Chao Racismo integrated gender issues into their work, aiming to actively include women and men in their programmes, campaigning to promote the use of natural Afro hair in the Miss Colombia beauty contest, protesting against use of sexist lyrics and images in the events they organised in Buenaventura, and raising awareness about gender violence in the workshops they ran as part of this.



Figure 1. The Facebook logo of Chao Racismo.

These actions are addressing structural issues in some sense, and, it could be argued, they also work to humanise Black people, privileging a portrayal that is different from the common association of Blackness with poverty, and supporting a variety of interests, from employment to beauty pageants. However, the way these programmes were articulated was ultimately about middle-class entrisism; the principal aim was to create a well-heeled Black middle class that was “*fashion, sexy y chic*” (fashionable, sexy and chic), in the words of Charrupí. For example, well-publicised activities included promoting a Chao Racismo T-shirt at Miss Colombia beauty pageants. In addition to not challenging the basic structures of capitalist hierarchy, Chao Racismo was celebrating them in their neoliberal version, by focusing on entrepreneurialism, valorising consumerism and making blackness into a fashionable product that middle-class white and mestizo people would want to buy. The main item on Chao Racismo’s agenda was an equation that stereotyped *all* Black people as poor, so the organisation challenged the equation by trying to make *some* Black people rich, and the focus on Black people (excluding non-Black poor people) could be justified because the equation itself was about *Black people*.

But this also meant that their programmes, apart from aiming to inspire individually based social mobility, did not question that fact that most Black people stayed poor, leaving intact the basic class hierarchy. If poverty in general had been addressed, then the issue would have arisen of how to justify a focus only on poor *Black* people. This could have been addressed by showing that, among the poor, Black people in Colombia are even poorer than others (as some statistics indicate, although the comparison is usually made between Black and non-Black people, without controlling for class).⁵ But Chao Racismo’s focus was not on this kind of approach, which is about degrees of poverty, even though it is of great relevance to most Afro-Colombians.

In relation to gender, Chao Racismo’s emphasis was on promoting an image of wealthy and conventionally attractive Black women and, as we have seen, making Blackness seem “*fashion, sexy y chic*”. This strategy challenges overt expressions of sexism (in lyrics, music videos, domestic violence), leaving intact sexist and class-based divisions of labour and the intersection of race and gender in the structuring of the labour market - as seen, for example, in the disproportionate presence of Black women in domestic service (Wade, 2013).

In this case, we can see that some elements of a structural focus (on racial inequality, overt sexism and Black poverty) can proceed without requiring a radical rejection of class hierarchy, sexism and capitalism *in toto*. As noted above, some authors claim that to eradicate racism and racial inequality, it would be necessary to get rid of capitalism and/or the liberal social order, because racism is historically constitutive of these social orders. Chao Racismo, does not address the full spectrum of racial inequality: its entrepreneurial anti-racism embraces capitalism and, in shying away from radical change, leaves the

⁵ E.g. among Colombians below the poverty line, Afro-Colombians are over-represented among those below the absolute poverty line. See Urrea-Giraldo et al. (2007).

majority of poor black people untouched. A radical vision or horizon is useful to analyse the anti-racist work of this organisation because it alerts us to the shortcomings of entrepreneurial anti-racism and directs us towards proposing alternatives that address structural issues of poverty and inequality with a differentialist, Black-oriented slant.

However, all of this critique - motivated by a radical horizon - does not mean that activities like those of Chao Racismo are not useful in some ways or should be dismissed. It does attend to a certain population; it does have access and reach within established routes of dissemination of information; and it does valuable anti-racist work. Moreover, it raises the possibility that activities that may seem to others to be superficial, trivial or unimportant can also have useful anti-racist potential. An inclusive approach to anti-racist strategies does not mean being uncritical; it does mean valuing diverse contributions. In the case of Chao Racismo this includes their explicit naming of racism. However, the examples we now present used alternative grammars that made racism less explicit while also having a structural focus, to varying degrees.

Rede de Comunidades e Movimentos Contra a Violência: an alternative anti-racist grammar of violence and security

The Network of Communities and Movements Against Violence is based in Rio de Janeiro, where it started in about 2003 as a reaction to four police massacres in the city's favelas.⁶ At the time of our research in 2017, it had about 60 members, most of whom were favela-dwelling mothers who self-identified as *negras*; of these, about twenty regularly attended meetings and participated actively in street protests and demonstrations (Figure 2), attending court cases, registering official complaints and interacting with their main government interlocutor, the Defensoria Pública (public ombudsman or defender) of the state of Rio. The network also had several allies and supporters, who were mainly students, researchers and other activists.

⁶ Data about this network come from fieldwork conducted by Luciane Rocha under the aegis of the LAPORA project. See also Rocha (2012).



Figure 2. A street demonstration by the Rede de Comunidades e Movimentos Contra a Violência, Rio de Janeiro, May 2017 (photograph by Luciane Rocha).

In their public statements and demonstrations, the Rede (network) members denounced “genocide” and challenge mainstream “drug war” narratives, the criminalisation of protest and mass incarceration practices. They denounced racism in the justice system, drawing on data that shows 71 percent of homicides in Brazil are of Black people; that there has been a 40 percent rise in Black deaths (not just police killings) in the decade to 2014; that, controlling for age, sex, education and place of residence, Black people in Rio city are 24 percent more often victims of homicide than white people; and that in São Paulo state in 2011, Black people were 3 times more likely than white people to be killed by police, taking into account their demographic weight.⁷

In all this, exactly how central was “racism” in their discourse and agenda? There are some factors indicating that it occupied a relatively marginal location. While the women in the network tended to identify as *negras*, for example, this was rarely a matter of open discussion or explicit affirmation. The mothers’ protest against police violence frequently referred to the victims as being young

⁷ Saenz (2015), Cerqueira and Coelho (2017). For São Paulo data, see Sinhoretto, Silvestre, and Schlittler (2014).

male favela-dwellers and the favelas themselves as spaces in the city. Another factor is that although many of murdered victims, identified as Black, this was not insistently made explicit by their mothers in the Rede, and was usually adduced alongside being a *favelado* and being poor, as an intersectional whole. Mother's calls were made for "justice" and against "extermination by the state", but "racism" was not explicitly named in the banners and posters that the network used in public protests. Overall, there was explicit recognition that police violence in favelas has an impact that crosses racial difference (and indeed includes some white victims). As a network slogan put it: "We are Mothers. We are Black Mothers, Indigenous Mothers, Working Mothers, Poor Mothers, Slum Mothers, Peripheral Mothers: We are Warrior Mothers!"⁸

Yet, at the same time, the underlying racialised character of the killings and the protesters was ever present. We see this in the photos of the victims – all young black men, albeit of varied skin tones – forming a central part of the visual aspect of these demonstrations and making the racialized character of the killing tacitly but abundantly clear, as did the bodies of the mothers themselves. In some demonstrations, home-made mannequins representing young black bodies were daubed with red paint and strewn about the pavements. This was a strategic use of bodies and images to highlight suffering and emotion (but also to question the spectacle and voyeurism around damaged bodies), and the bodies were clearly racialised. The racialised character of the Rede's struggle is also palpable in the mother's public speeches, where they occasionally reiterated the racial bias of the violence and talked of favelas as black territories.

In interviews, mothers quite often used a language of lethal racism. One said: "My children died at the hands of a racist police force because they were in racialized territory [the favela]"; another said: "Here in Brazil, you do not need to be guilty or involved [in crime] to be killed, just be Black, poor and live in the favela to be in the sights of the police" – although a second later she said only "poor and from the favela," reinforcing the absent-present quality of racialised identifications. The word "genocide" appeared occasionally on the banners displayed in public demonstrations and, while the word is defined by the UN in terms of threats to a particular "national, ethnic, racial or religious group", it arguably has strongly racialised connotations and some authors explicitly talk about "black genocide" (Nascimento, 1989; Rocha, 2012; Alves, 2014; Smith, 2017).

In addition, the data on violence in Brazil are nowadays often collected and analysed according to age, sex and colour (opposing "blacks" to "whites"), rather than class. The correlations between class, neighbourhood and violence are complex and it is not as easy to find clear and simple data on them. This shaping of the availability of data obeys the Brazilian state's orientation towards anti-racism and the dominant tendency to take census and survey data, which use four colour categories - white, brown, black and yellow (meant to capture people

⁸ "Nós somos Mães. Nós somos Mães Negras, Mães Indígenas, Mães Trabalhadoras, Mães Pobres, Mães de Favelas, Mães Periféricas: Nós somos Mães Guerreiras!"

of Asian ancestry) - and simplify these into Black-white comparisons. This tends to highlight racial factors, especially in activist and mainstream press reports, which do not always control closely for class (Amnesty International, 2015).

The case of the Rede is a rich illustration of an anti-racist motherhood and its dealing with state violence and young black male's death. In terms of our argument, the Rede illustrates how the naming of racism came into and out of focus, being explicit in some contexts (e.g. ethnographic interviews) and more implicit in others (e.g. public protests). There was clearly an awareness of the structural dimensions of the violence, but not necessarily a consistent centring of the role racism played in these structures nor a consistent strategic use of explicit reference to racism. Alongside a clear gendered position of the women as mothers, there was ambiguity about the intersection of race and class: the mothers appreciated that they did not coincide completely ("we" included "Indigenous mothers"), but they were clearly very aware that the categories of favela dweller and non-white overlapped a great deal. This race-class intersection and the racially-aware class consciousness that goes with it is also evident in the next two cases.

Congreso Nacional Indígena: an alternative anti-racist grammar of political power

The Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI) is a well-established and consolidated organisation in Mexico with national scope.⁹ Its origins are closely linked to the 1994 uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and it has convened five national congresses since 1996 bringing together representatives of all indigenous peoples around the country. As befits its origins, it is politically radical and it fights for Indigenous autonomy, with capitalism and the Mexican state clearly identified as adversaries in the struggle. In 2016, the CNI created the Concejo Indígena de Gobierno (CIG) to support an attempt to get an Indigenous candidate on to the slate for the presidential elections and in 2017 the CGI promoted the (unsuccessful) candidacy of María de Jesús Patricio (aka "Marichuy"), a female Nahuatl leader and healer. This was one of the most radical propositions of the CNI, counteracting a strong gendered and racialised stereotype of Indigenous men as ill-treating their women and of Indigenous people overall as incapable of leadership.

In terms of how the concept of racism figures in the CNI's discourse and agenda, there is, as in the case of the Rio mothers' network, a good deal of ambivalence. On the one hand, adhering to a basically Marxist perspective, CNI activists express a strong desire to speak on behalf of "*los de abajo*" (those from below) and they recognise the common oppression of many people. Their website lists the Indigenous peoples that make up CNI and then at the end adds "Afro-mestizo y Mestizo". One declaration says "We hear the pain of all the

⁹ Data about the CNI come from fieldwork conducted by Gisela Carlos Fregoso under the aegis of the LAPORA project.

colours that make up the Mexico of below” and “It is not only the racism of the political structure that did not let our proposal [of a presidential candidacy of Marichuy] appear on the ballot, because if those who oppose the capitalist destruction of the world were to have slanted, blue or red eyes, public policies and the supposed democracy would still be made to exclude them”.¹⁰ In this sense, for the CNI, racism is but one ideological weapon used in pursuit of exploitation.¹¹

In keeping with this, CNI public declarations only occasionally mention racism. For example, their website postings sometimes refer to “conditions of marginality, racism and discrimination” or talk about “the examples of racism from the Mexican government”.¹² But in four years of CNI website posts, “*racismo*” appeared only nine times, and “*discriminación*” fourteen. In addition, female solidarity (and female victimisation by violence) was sometimes seen to overcome both class and racial difference: in interview, Marichuy and some fellow activists talked about the possibility of urban, mestiza and white women identifying with and participating in the CNI women’s project.

On the other hand, there is a constant and powerful affirmation of Indigeneity, which is evident in the organisation’s name, in the visual materials and iconography used in its website, demonstrations and meetings, which overwhelmingly comprise Indigenous people, often dressed in traditional attire (Figure 3). This emphasis is also made explicit in CNI declarations about the struggles of resistance of “*los pueblos indígenas*” (Indigenous peoples) and their quest for autonomy based on Indigenous life-ways and practices - on “*el espacio de los indios que somos*” (the space of the Indians that we are). Overall, the discourse of the CNI is shaped by various approximately overlapping structural binaries: urban/rural, white/non-white, privileged/poor (and to some extent north/south within Mexico). Each binary connotes the other two: thus any talk of poverty (as in *los de abajo*) automatically evokes an image of Indigenous people (or dark-skinned mestizos), and vice versa. The precise boundaries and categorisations do not necessarily matter that much. Instead, the deep historical roots of the structural intersection between being Indigenous (or dark-skinned mestizo) and being poor was what drove the agenda. In this sense, while there was muted direct reference to racism, there was a powerful sense of a structural racialised subalternity.

¹⁰ “Escuchamos el dolor de todos los colores que somos el México de abajo” and “No es solo el racismo de la estructura política lo que no dejó que nuestra propuesta figure en la boleta electoral, pues si quienes se oponen a la destrucción capitalista del mundo compartieran entre si los ojos rasgados, azules o rojos, las políticas públicas y la supuesta democracia estarían hechas para excluirlos a ellos” <https://www.congresonacionalindigena.org/2018/05/02/falta-lo-falta/>.

¹¹ <https://www.congresonacionalindigena.org/2017/04/12/escuchar-el-dolor-que-hay-en-mexico/>.

¹² “condiciones de marginalidad, racismo y discriminación”; “las muestras de racismo del Gobierno mexicano”.



Figure 3. Marichuy (second from left) at a meeting in Palenque, Chiapas state, October 2017 (photograph by Gisela Carlos Fregoso).

This scenario was given a tweak by the CIG and Marichuy's electoral campaign, when her attempt to enter the national political arena as the candidate of *los de abajo*, but with a clearly racialised and gendered dimension, produced a highly racialised and sexist backlash that brutally revealed the racial and gendered aspects of the power hierarchy. Social media posts appeared, ridiculing Marichuy and likening her to a domestic worker: "she looks like the woman who cleans my house"; "why isn't she making *pozole*? [a Mexican corn-based stew]; "I would vote for #MaryChuy. You can see she has experience in cleaning Mexico".¹³ These were widely reported in the press, usually with the appropriate hand-wringing. The racist and sexist social media reaction was limited but potent and it made all the clearer that Marichuy's candidacy was in effect an anti-racist intervention.

In addition, its anti-racist appeal was intersectional and invoked a racially-aware class consciousness: the reference in social media posts to domestic service touches on a very potent articulation of race, class and gender in Latin America (Saldaña-Tejeda, 2014; Wade, 2013). A woman would not have to self-identify as Indigenous to feel the racism and sexism in these comments; any dark-skinned, lower-class mestiza could angrily identify with Marichuy on this issue.

¹³ "Esa Marichuy se parece a la que limpia mi casa"; "¿Quién es Marichuy y por qué no está haciendo pozole?"; "Yo sí votaría por Marichuy. Se ve que tiene experiencia en limpiar a México" (Hernández Navarro, 2018; Marini, 2018).

In the case of the CNI, then, we see an awareness of structural racism mediated by an ambivalent approach to directly naming racism, which enters in and out of focus in a way perhaps even more ambiguous than the case of the Rio mothers' network. When racism is mentioned, however, it is done with precision and poignancy. There is a strong awareness of Indigenous peoples' negatively racialised and gendered condition, while the anti-capitalist stance of the CNI also invites their members - and others - to think about racialised and gendered inequality in structural ways and consider the whole racialised power structure of Mexico.

Wimbí and an alternative anti-racist grammar of environment and land

Wimbí is a small community in the Esmeraldas province of the Pacific coastal region of Ecuador, ancestrally occupied by Black (and some Indigenous) people (Figure 4).¹⁴ For centuries, but increasingly in the last few decades, the area has been subject to exploitation by outside interests, coming from the white/mestizo regions of the interior and from international companies, extracting natural resources (minerals, timber) and engaging in agro-industrial production (mainly of palm-oil and shrimp) (Antón Sánchez, 2015). Local community people are often involved in these enterprises as labour in different modalities (e.g. employees, day labourers); they may also be small entrepreneurs, linked to the incoming businesses as sub-contractors; and they may sell land and rights to resources or concede them in exchange for other benefits (e.g. road construction). As of 2012, about 25 percent of the land in northern Esmeraldas had been sold to outside capitalist interests. Transactions have sometimes been made willingly, but have often been coerced in some way, whether with threats or other less overt pressuring. In formal terms, such sales are often illegal, as these collective land titles do not permit sale; nevertheless, judicial cases sometimes decide in favor of private companies. Some of the land has also been invaded (Antón Sánchez, 2015, pp.99-102). Conflicts emerge over land and over environmental degradation (mainly the use and contamination of water and the destruction of the forest). Resistance by local communities is thus focused principally on land use and ownership and on environmental issues, but also on violence as leaders may be subject to threats and also murder, crimes that are frequently committed with impunity.

¹⁴ Data about Wimbí come from fieldwork conducted by María Moreno Parra under the aegis of the LAPORA project. See also Moreno Parra 2019.



Figure 4. The community of Wimbí, Esmeraldas province, September 2017 (photograph by María Moreno Parra).

At the time of our research in 2017, local activists in Wimbí were making use of legal instruments, including rights to titles for ancestral lands (*tierras de posesión ancestral*), accorded to them as Afro-Ecuadorian communities in the Law of Agrarian Development (1994) and in the 1998 Constitution. They also solicited the support of Ecuador's Defensoría del Pueblo (ombudsman, public defender) and they mobilised their alliances with the Catholic Church's Pastoral Social (Social Ministry) and environmentalist NGOs (e.g. Acción Ecológica).

In all this - as in the previous examples - racism was not often mentioned explicitly. The overriding frame for claims and protests was state multiculturalism and its rights regime, in which, as we have noted, is a context in which racism and racial inequality tends to get sidelined. Press reports on environmental issues and land conflicts - a specific conflict that arose in 2015 and is on-going has attracted some attention in the media - almost never mentioned racism and do not always even note that the local people are Black (and Indigenous). The website of the local community council (Junta Parroquial) notes that local people are descended from dark-skinned "Congos", but does not refer to racism or discrimination and claims that slavery was never

present in this particular community.¹⁵ Public statements by local leaders and allies (e.g. from the Church, NGOs and universities) may strike the same tone: the transcript of a meeting held in 2017 involving such stakeholders is full of denunciations of the situation, but does not refer to racism and mentions only once “the discrimination of the courts of justice against Black peoples,” in relation to obstacles to securing legal title to ancestral territories.¹⁶ Even a document prepared for the United Nations’ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) by community organizations in Esmeraldas, Church spokespeople and local academics only refers three times to “racial discrimination” and “systematic discrimination” against Black and Indigenous communities in the region.¹⁷

Yet there was an underlying awareness among locals of structural issues linked to their racialised condition. Tellingly, this emerged in ethnographic interviews with local leaders, activists, teachers and Black church people, when the matter of racism was raised explicitly in the conversation by the researcher. Then people often responded by showing an acute awareness of racism, both direct and structural, as the following examples show:

We will not go back to being slaves. (local Black leader)

First they [the community] were owners [of the land] and now they are slaves [of the palm-oil companies] ... because they were slaves in the past, people want them to go back to being slaves. (Black teacher)

It seems they want to get rid of us, because it is only in the Afro communities and the indigenous communities that you can see so many abuses of our rights. (A mestizo official in the Church Pastoral Social, citing what a local black man had said to him)

The [palm-oil] company says “We have beaten high-powered people. Can’t we beat these *negritos* [demeaning diminutive form: ‘little black people’].” (President of the local community council)

I am fighting alongside them, alongside the community, so that we are not crushed because we as Black people have the same rights that all communities have. [...] Let the government see that these are ancestral territories that belong

¹⁵ <http://5dejunio.gob.ec/>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

¹⁶ <https://verdadparalavida.org/audiencia-del-choco/>. Accessed 13 May 2021.

¹⁷ The document is an “alternative report” to the normal country-level reports submitted to CERD. See https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/ECU/INT_CERD_NGO_ECU_28317_S.pdf. Accessed 13 May 2021.

to us because we are black. [...] This is how they want to crush us [*amoratarnos*] as Black people, “these *negritos* are going to be crushed with this because we have the [land] titles”. [...] They should not discriminate against us for being Black.” (member of the local community council)

As a Black person, you cannot get ahead: you know this already; it’s no surprise ... if you want the Black race to get ahead, they’ll kill you. (member of the local community council)

They screw us over because we are poor and because we are Black. (member of the local community council)

It has been said that the State does not care about the lives of the Black people in the area, not at all. [...] in the class of poor people where there are Black, white, mestizo, the most fucked up of all is the Black; there is a racial problem, I believe it is a racial struggle, not a class struggle. (local priest)

They keep looking at us here in [the region of] Esmeraldas, as an area, a province of Black people, and that also means that they did not act. [...] What is happening in San Lorenzo [regional capital city] and in Wimbí is a sign that the fight for racism has not ended. (priest in Pastoral Social Esmeraldas)¹⁸

These quotations reveal how Blackness (and thus also racism) is embedded in wider issues, linked to land, territory and the nation-state. Land can legally be claimed as the ancestral lands of an “Afro-Ecuadorian community” and, while this legal figure is framed in a multiculturalist rights regime, it still foregrounds a category for which racialised difference is implicitly present and can be made explicitly present, as we can see. This racialised difference is in turn embedded in a broader narrative about the development of the Ecuadorean nation, in which the northern Pacific region (and the Amazon region) are portrayed in the dominant discourse as inferior (underdeveloped, uncivilised), because of its

¹⁸ “Esto nos pasa porque somos negros”. “Al parecer nos quieren eliminar, porque solo en las poblaciones afro y las poblaciones indígenas es donde se ve tanto atropello a nuestros derechos”. “La empresa dice ‘hemos vencido a gente de gran calaña. ¿No vamos a vencer a estos negritos?’”. “Estoy luchando con ellos, con la comunidad para que no seamos aplastados porque nosotros como negros tenemos el mismo derecho que tienen todas las comunidades”; “Que el gobierno mire que esos son territorios ancestrales que nos pertenecen por ser negros”; “Así nos quieren amoratar como negros, ‘a estos negritos los amoratamos con esto porque tenemos las escritura’”; “Que no nos discriminen a nosotros por ser negros, debemos salir”. “Está dicho que al Estado no le importa la vida de los negros de la zona, para nada;” “en una clase de pobres que hay negros, blancos, mestizos el más jodido de todos es el negro, hay problema racial yo voy por la lucha racial, no la lucha de clases”. “A nosotros nos siguen mirando acá en Esmeraldas, como una zona, una provincia de negros, y que eso también hace que no se actúe”; “lo que se está dando en San Lorenzo y en Wimbí es una muestra de que no se ha terminado la lucha por el racismo”.

Black (and Indigenous) population (Rahier, 2014; Whitten, 1986; Whitten, 1981). There is an underlying racialisation linked to the historical geography and moral topography of the country, which created and sustains a structural link between underdevelopment and Blackness (and Indigeneity), and constructs an image of the region as a place open to exploitation by any means necessary in order to make a profit.¹⁹

Thus, the struggles for land and against environmental destruction are also implicitly anti-racist struggles, not just from our point of view as analysts, making an argument about the operation of structural racism, but from the point of view of many local people too. As with the Rede and the CNI, racism came into and out of focus, although in this case it was arguably less publicly in focus than in the Rede and the CNI and tended to become explicit mainly in interview contexts where the issue was put on the table. For Wimbí inhabitants, this reluctance to talk publicly about racism existed alongside great clarity about the unequal exploitation of land and environmental consequences, a clarity that was strongly inflected with a sense that the racialised position of the area's inhabitants is inherently involved in this inequality - i.e. Wimbí people revealed a racially-aware class consciousness. Notable for Wimbí, as for the CNI, is that when racism is adduced in this context it leads directly to a structural perspective, going beyond individual discriminations and stigmatisations. As with the CNI, it shows an awareness of - and invites others to consider - the whole racialised power structure of Ecuador.

Conclusion

In all the three cases of anti-racist struggles using alternative grammars, presented above, racism as an idea is present in varying degrees, but in all cases it is imbricated with a wider concern with class (and gender), reflected in concerns about reduced access to safety/life, to political power, and to resources (land, water, forest).

In Latin America this has often been seen as a problem for anti-racism: race and class strongly overlap and mestizaje blurs lines of racial difference such that racism can be mistaken for - or purposely read as - classism, and racial inequality for class inequality. The anti-racist strategy has been to try to make lines of racial difference sharper, in order to highlight racism and racial inequality. This has been very useful politically in drawing attention to racism and to marginalised groups, but there are limits to this strategy. For example, this way of focusing on racism has often led to anti-discrimination legislation and initiatives. These are notable for the way they embrace a wide variety of differences, but they rarely address class difference, because doing so immediately raises structural issues that these laws cannot easily address. A 2010 Bolivian law against racism and discrimination and the 2008 constitution

¹⁹ For a parallel argument about Colombia, see Wade (1993).

of Ecuador both list numerous forms difference²⁰ and unusually they include class elements (socio-economic condition, level of education). Yet it remains to be seen what might happen if people tried to denounce the “discrimination” they suffered in the job market because of their low levels of education, or in the housing market because they didn’t have enough money to buy or rent the house they wanted. These are structural issues, which can’t be addressed by anti-discrimination legislation, which targets specific acts by individuals, even if legal action against such acts can have great symbolic power.

Our data suggest that a different approach is also possible, as a complementary strategy. The struggles of the Rede, the CNI and the Wimbí community all address class/race intersections that (like race/gender ones) invite a more complex approach, which wants to address the two dimensions together, but at a *structural* level. Through the use of alternative grammars of anti-racism, these organisations address basic structures of class and power inequality and, at the same time, show an awareness of how these structures are inflected by racism, while not affecting only a specific racialised category.

This complex approach to anti-racism is potentially productive for anti-racist work that seeks to address racial inequality, rather than just discrimination and stigmatisation as individual acts; it directs attention to basic structural issues but in a racially aware way. This can be a useful foothold or point of entry for anti-racist work especially in a predominantly mestizo society where many people have difficulty in empathising with the idea of racism - frequently understood in mainstream Latin American society solely in terms of hatred and violence, often individualised - but can more easily understand “unfairness” as a legitimate concern. An alternative grammar of anti-racism may be an effective tactic for maximising the legitimacy of claims and struggles in the eyes of others and avoiding the threat of delegitimation that a more unequivocally racialised demand may attract. This might appear to be catering to white-mestizo fragility, but, because the racialised dimensions of the struggle are never absent, alternative grammars actually manage to keep them in the frame in the form of a racially-aware sense of justice.

The racially-aware structural focus that is not narrowly attentive to specific racialised identities can also be an important way of building alliances, not only between Black and Indigenous peoples, but also potentially with dark-skinned mestizos - and in Argentina, with people pejoratively labelled *negro* who are not dark-skinned (Geler, 2016) - who are all implicated in a racialised category of *los de abajo*, but some of whom may not always want to acknowledge their racialised condition.

²⁰ Bolivia’s Ley contra el racismo y toda forma de discriminación, Article 5, lists the following types of discrimination: “sex, age, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, cultural identity, family background, nationality, citizenship, language, religious creed, ideology, political or philosophical opinion, civil status, economic or social condition, illness, type of occupation, grade of instruction, physical, intellectual or sensory handicap or alternate capacity, pregnancy, regional origin, physical appearance, clothing, surname and others”. Ecuador’s 2008 constitution, Article 11, has a similar list.

However, there are of course risks here of underestimating the importance of the integral role racism and racialised inequality plays in structuring hierarchy and inequality as a whole. Wimbí locals and mothers in the Rede are unevenly aware of the historical intersections of race and class via colonialism, which have over the centuries produced the durable and often inflexible accretions and accumulations that constitute today's social structures. Even CNI people, who often deploy a discourse that is explicitly aware of these issues, often also put them in a Marxist frame that reduces racism to an ideological tool at the service of capitalism, rather than seeing it as historically constitutive of capitalism and liberal political orders. But the racist and sexist reaction to Marichuy's electoral campaign suggests that it might be necessary, at some point, to talk more explicitly about racism alongside sexism, as it is not only used as means of attacking Indigenous organising, but is also a key element in the mechanisms that reproduce inequality more widely in Mexico.

In this sense, while alternative grammars of anti-racism have distinct advantages in the landscape of anti-racist strategies, we argue it is worth exploiting the current "turn to anti-racism" in Latin America and working with a politically radical horizon in view to highlight, on the one hand, just how much racism has been and still is integral to the fabric of the class system (which is predicated on inequality and which political orders work to reproduce); and, on the other, the affordances racism offers for processes of naturalisation and dehumanisation.

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Law and race in Amefrica: Brazil and Peru in an echo of two stories

Luana Xavier Pinto Coelho

Abstract

This study presents a legal-historical analysis on discourses of nation and citizenship in Brazil and Peru, in order to demonstrate the persistence of racial normativity during post-independence that still informs contemporary forms of racism as the afterlife of racial slavery (Hartman 1997). The choice to undertake this historical analysis is to confront the recurrent argument that racism was not institutionalised in Latin America. Looking at how race was mobilised on theoretical and legal-political debates over time unveils racist presumptions and reflects on their modulation of institutional practice and theory, challenging the supposed “innocence” of the law (Hernández 2013). Based on literature review and analysis of legal frameworks produced during colonial rule and the beginning of the Republic, my intent is to relate Brazil and Peru as echoes of two stories of shared experience of Amefricanos (Gonzalez 1988). To study race and racism as “constitutive of the colonial condition” (Goldberg 2014) implies an effort to broaden our analysis from just states’ circumscriptions. Consequently, in transcending the artificiality of state borders, it is possible to conclude that colonial technologies of conquest were always shared, and that racism was/is an efficient colonial tool to guarantee forced labour, expropriation and exploitation.

Keywords: racial slavery; racial rule; Law; racism; Latin America; Brazil and Peru

Making connections beyond borders: an introduction

The legal discourse in Latin America is permeated by a supposed “innocence” (Hernández 2013) with the recurrent argument that law have not institutionalize racism based on comparisons to the Jim Crow segregation in the United States. Even critical studies on racism in Latin America has tend to repeat this formula: “the country did not adopt a law on racial segregation (in contrast to the United States and South Africa), and therefore a legal definition of racial belonging was not established” (Silva and Rosemberg 2009, 59), or “it is true that there has been no regime of apartheid in the region, it is true that no racist legislation has ever existed in the regional either” (Dulitzky 2001, 101). Or even the argument that the *type* of racism experienced was reproduced within a formal citizenship for all “in the absence of institutionalised racial discrimination” (Guimarães 1999, 59). This essay presents a short historical overview of racial regulation and discourses over nation, race and racism in Brazil and Peru to demonstrate the persistence of a racial rule in post-

independence as the afterlife of racial slavery (Hartman 1997). Focusing on the black experience in *Améfrica* (Gonzalez 1988), I undertake a literature review on studies on racial slavery, law and justice from the colonial rule to the beginning of the republic. I also analyse the main normative framework from both periods to reveal the continuities of the racial legality, interrogating assumptions of neutrality of law and the faux innocence of liberal republican values (Fitzpatrick 1990).¹

The racial State has resort to various normative frameworks and policies have directly governed and controlled the racialised peoples, “reproducing the racialized regime of legality in postcolonial Latin American societies” (Alves 2016, 231). Besides, formal equality on law is not the only aspect of State regulation, as the system put into practice to implement and interpret this regulation should also be taken into consideration. Thus, legal opinion, jurisprudence, regulation at local and regional levels, denied access to rights or services are all aspects of a legal regime seems in broader terms (Bertúlio 1994). Hernández (2013) criticizes the focus on criminalization of racism within legal studies, instead of looking at a broader institutional form of systemic discrimination that guarantees the maintenance of the racial hierarchy. In *Amefrica*, a legal-historical approach is central to understand current trends of racism as a structural oppression that was institutionalised. Following Saidiya Hartman stand, I consider that the “effort to reconstruct the past is, as well, an attempt to describe obliquely the forms of violence licensed in the present, that is, the forms of death unleashed in the name of freedom, security, civilization, and God/the good” (2008, 13). Thus, looking at the colonial history and the continuities in legal reasoning and national narratives in the Republic is possible to assess how racial slavery imprinted in the legal common-sense presumptions associated to whiteness “by racializing rights and entitlements” (Hartman 1997, 24) for the benefit of white lives.

The creation of “the indian” and “the black” are entangled with the creation of the *human* as the *white man* (Wynter 2003). This reflects on national discourses around progress, citizenship, and rulership. The “indian problem” in Peru (Drinot 2016), and the “black problem” in Brazil (Ramos 1954) were constitutive of the colonial/imperial rule, and the national/republican rule. The effort to demonstrate the racist trajectory of Law in the Brazilian case has been undertaken by some authors within the legal field (cf. Bertúlio 2019; Flauzina 2006; Góes 2016; Pires 2013). In the case of Peru this literature is present in the fields of history and sociology (cf. Carazas 2019; Barrantes 2018; Aguirre 2005; Velázquez Castro 2005; O’Toole 2012). Building on their work, I aim to expand this debate to Latin America by relating Brazil and Peru as echoes of two stories of a shared experience of *Amefricanos* (Gonzalez 1988). Exploring how

¹ This article results from the research project POLITICS - The politics of anti-racism in Europe and Latin America: knowledge production, political decision-making and collective struggles. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No ERC-2016-COG-725402).

theoretical constructions and political decisions over time resort to racial legal-political argumentation can help to unveil racist presumptions and reflect on their modulation of institutional practice and theory, particularly the concepts of citizenship and morality. The choice of putting two contexts in relation – Brazil and Peru – in an echo of two stories, forces us to be attentive to see beyond State boundaries, to put anti-black racism in relation to theories, ideas and practices that circulates globally and are locally put into action. Lélia Gonzalez articulated the concept of *amefricanidade* as a claim to overcome barrier – territorial, linguistic, ideological -, to understand the historical process of black diaspora in the Americas through its shared experience and its intense cultural dynamic (adaptation, resistance, reinterpretation). For that reason, I am using relationality as a model of enquiry for its prospect to reveal the global trends of exclusion beyond reaffirming existing hierarchies and for questioning exceptionalities of national-limited approaches (Lentin 2017). To study race and racism as “constitutive of the colonial condition” (Goldberg 2014) imply an effort also to broaden our analysis from just States circumscriptions. Ideas, practices, forms of racial rule might have local contours, but they interact with racial ideas and experimentations that are tested or designed elsewhere. In accordance with David Goldberg proposition on the relational method, comparative studies “fails to account for the interactive relation between repressive racial ideas and exclusionary or humiliating racist practices across place and time, unbounded by the presumptive divides of state boundaries” (2014, 1274).

For this work I focus on the black diaspora experience. Nonetheless, this is a methodological choice, as anti-indigeneity is in the core of Latin American nation-states fiction, even if historically indigenous peoples were differently regulated and, thus, produced different imaginaries (O’Toole 2012). The text is divided in three parts, the first echo explores the Peruvian discourses on nation against black and indigenous peoples, highlighting the racial rule in racial slavery and later, in the post-independence as the new Republic is created. In the second part, the Brazilian racial rule is present as a second echo, from the colonial forms of control to the racist continuities in the new-born Republic. As I present the echoes of the two stories, I propose an echo that transcends borders to reveal the different mechanisms that have naturalised racism as part of the normal function of our societies (Almeida 2019).

First echo: The Peruvian nation against black and indigenous peoples

From the beginning colonialism functioned through race and racism. The Iberian model of colonialism implemented social-racial division to control labour, land and power under racial rule in the Americas. The Spanish crown adapted in the colonies a similar regime to that deployed on European soil, the “*limpieza de sangre*” or cleanliness of blood concept, used to hierarchise and control non-Christians, such as Roma communities, Jews, and Moors (Gonzalez 1988). This hierarchisation relied on differentiated legal regimes for the various

peoples living in the Peruvian territory: one system for the whites, the Republic; another system, called “*Pueblos de Indios*” or “*Republica de Indios*” to regulate the lives and territories of indigenous peoples; and enslaved African peoples, ruled as objects outside the “*res publica*” (Cotler 2009, 30). As a Catholic State², the Spanish crown was invested in a powerful weapon to racially divide and legitimately control the conquered peoples: the Catholic church and its Cristian morality.

The forced labour of indigenous peoples and blacks was also differently regulated. As the indigenous people were considered *vassal* to the Spanish Crown, a tax was imposed so to be granted the “king’s protection”. The ‘indigenous tax’ or *mita*, guaranteed indigenous labour, but also, enabled the de-centralisation of the colonial administration, as this practice relied on regional authorities (Cotler 2009, 53). The *mita* rendered various communities’ dependent on landowners – *gamonales* - and organised the oligarchical power structure. The use of black enslaved was a factor of social distinction, they were employed mostly in the urban setting, such as in the capital of the Vice-kingdom, Lima, but also by large plantation farms mostly in the Coastal areas of the country (Aguirre 2005; Barrantes 2018). Considering my intent to dialogue with the black diaspora experience, I give more emphasis on black peoples in racial slavery, as the indigenous experience has been extensively studied (cf. Drinot 2016; Cadena 2004; Cotler 2009; Restrepo and Rojas 2010; Degregori 2014).

White fear in Peru was driven by both indigenous and black insurrection. Racial regulation was proportional to the need to control the population and guarantee their submission. The Regulation of the occupied Spanish territory, known as “*La recopilación de las Leyes de Indias*” (1680)³ regulated the different “peoples”, demarcated by racial codes. The 7th law forbids relations between blacks and indigenous (both sexual and labour), prescribing penalties for the white ‘masters’ that employed them simultaneously. The fear of a black and indigenous alliance transferred to a rigid control of both groups’ socialisation. For example, blacks were forbidden to drink *chicha* or to go to “*rancherías de indios*”, regulated by the “*Siete Partidas del rey Alfonso el Sabio, Partida IV, Título VI*” (Barrantes 2018, 83). In the colonial discourse indigenous peoples were taken as under constant threat, in need of protection or guidance, including “protection from the black”. As Rachel O’toole suggested, “official discourse contrasted the qualities of blacks and Indians to justify Spanish colonialism” (2012, 18), the constructed antagonism as Indian-black hostility

² The “natural” superiority of the European invaders was constructed under racist assumptions, properly illustrated by the debate known as Valladolid, between Bartolomeu de las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda, 1600-1601, “as to whether or not the New World Indians were equally ‘men’ (Las Casas) or ‘slaves-by-nature’ (Sepúlveda)” (Wynter 2003, 332).

³ Available at: <http://www.gabrielbernat.es/espana/leyes/rldi/indice/indice.html> , accessed on the 15th September 2020.

“was more visible in official language when contrasted with local realities” (2012, 23).

In the case of Lima, the presence of both freed and enslaved Africans fostered the white fear of “losing control over that population, seen as disordered, immoral and incapable of decent behaviour” (Barrantes 2018, 23). Lima had a high number of black populations, that could be up to 44,6% by the XVIII century, from those, 19% were freed, which raised the need to exercise constant control (2018, 65). In Peru, the Catholic Church was key to the colonisation process, holding juridical power in the Ecclesiastic Tribunal. If we take into consideration that the church was responsible for birth and death certification, marriage and the moral control of society, its power over the space in the name of “public morality” was relevant. Civil and criminal cases were taken to the Royal Audience (Real Audiencia). The Brazilian case is slightly different, because in most of the colonial period, “justice” was left in the hands of private landowners (Flauzina 2006). Even though the Church played a key role in the moral control of society, it was not directly administrating justice as extensively as in the Peruvian case.

Such forms of racialised legality assured control of the black body, stipulating rights and duties through racial lines. The free blacks were a source of great fear, and in seeking to reduce them to their ‘proper place’, as non-humans, their lives were extensive regulated. According to the *Ley de Indias*, the freed “negros y mullatos” were to pay tax to the Spanish Crown (Libro VII, titulo V, ley primera). To enforce this command, the 3rd law prescribed that freed blacks had to live with known ‘masters’, so it could be possible to collect the payment. According to the regulation, freed blacks were not recognised as having a fixed residence - “no tiene asiento”, so they were not allowed to move from the “master’s” house without a license of the ordinary justice. If any freed black was found outside their “master’s” home, they were to be arrested and made to learn how to “live accountably and with reason”. Besides, the ‘idle freed’ were to be sent to work in the mines (4th law). At that time, vagrancy was also a crime, leaving little room for a free black to determine the fate of their lives in a racial slavery system.

The black enslaved were also regulated by the *Ley de Indias*, which defined severe penalties for rebellion and *cimarronaje*. If an enslaved person was away from their duties for more than 8 days, they would be whipped 100 times. However, in the case of committing a felony (as *cimarronaje*, for instance), the penalty was the death in the gallows. The leaders of the rebellion were to be made examples of and the 26th law removed the requirement of a judicial trial. As Aguirre (2005, 25) narrates, the *bandoleros* or *cimarrones* captured were immediately executed and their bodies publicly exhibited. The Plaza Mayor was the centre of Lima and the colonial domain, where the colonial power was enforced and the public punishment took place. As described by Arrelucea Barrantes,

people would go to the plaza and observe the punishment of bandits, maroons, petty thieves and other criminals. In this space, the exercise of authority was highlighted and their representatives were granted the natural right to inflict severe punishments. In addition, the show had its doses of persuasion and intimidation: after seeing the dismemberment of a person, more than one looked for another alternative to their problems. (2018, 64).⁴

Blacks were more severely punished, as they occupied the lowest place in the racial hierarchy. Such public demonstrations of violence were necessary for the naturalisation of identity and place, of different bodies and their different geographies (McKittrick 2006, 13). The performance ratified racial hierarchies and maintained a constant atmosphere of terror.

Despite a colour-coded differentiation in the regulations⁵, which were mobilised mostly for the freed, this form of racialised legality did not guarantee privileges. Even the supposedly advantage of *morenos* was precarious. As a result, those who was freed or enslaved were not drawn in contrast by a colour-code from black to *moreno*, but from black to white. As the 6th law reveals, “the son of a Spanish and a black woman were to be preferred in the purchase by their father”, “colour” variation was therefore deemed secondary to determining control over the racialised body. The use of various these racial categories by the law (*negros*, *mulatos*, *zambaigos*, *morenos*) was intended to make humanity/fungibility indisputable and not open to interpretation.

The work of Maribel Arrelucea (2018) and Rachel O’Toole (2012) have demonstrated how racial regulations were permeated by constant negotiation. Black people struggled for freedom in various ways, and sometimes by mobilising the system in their favour. There were many motivations to go to trial as plaintiffs, such as: claiming the validity of a freedom letter; demanding a fair price for one’s own freedom; accusing one’s “master” of abuse; and claiming the right to marry, as Carlos Aguirre exemplifies (2005, 27). Nonetheless, the racialised legality, even if exceptionally negotiated, still set the hierarchies of control and vigilance that all black people, freed or not, were subject to. The simple fact that the regulation existed, even if not fully enforced, was enough to work as an instrument of constant threat and coercion, because the power to negotiate was not in the hands of the blacks, but in the hands of the whites and their institutions. Consequently, the regime regulated specific peoples as

⁴ Author’s free translations from the Spanish original.

⁵ One interesting note in the *Leyes de Indias* relates to the use of different racial categories (*negros*, *mulatos*, *zambaigos*, *morenos*) that were not necessarily related to the enslaved-freed dichotomy. The use of “black” indistinctively, for instance, could encompass both freed and enslaved. As seen in the example of the 12th law, which stated that blacks could not be outside their “master’s house” at night. Or the 5th law, that determined blacks ought only to marry other blacks, whether freed or enslaved. The only differentiation declared by the law was to *morenos*, and according to the 10th law, freed *morenos* should be properly treated and should not be disturbed, if living peaceful (19th law). *Mulatos* and *Zambaigos*, on the other hand, were equal to the *negros*, in that they could not carry weapons (24th law).

fungible and thus, they could never set the terms of the negotiation. It is not by chance that black women and men were trying to prove they were good Christians, or that they were honest or good workers, they could only mobilise the values conceived as valid by those white institutions. In addition, there was also a blatant gender differentiation in racial slavery, where black women were seen as sources of sin and moral corruption (Barrantes 2018, 89) and were overly sexualised. For women, to demonstrate their “honour” was of vital importance, and that is why they often petitioned for a catholic marriage, since the “illegitimacy” of their unions or children were sources of dishonour.

In the case of Peru, women were also relegated to jobs of lower social esteem, such as butchering animals or selling in the streets. These were perceived as violent and dirty jobs (Barrantes 2018, 91). Such racial gendered differentiations are important in racial slavery, and conversely, the immorality of black women set contours of white women’s femininity. Sexuality and race were constantly mobilised to draw racial lines to build both the black (men and women) and the white (men and women). According to Katherine McKittrick, “spatial differentiation communicates sexually promiscuous, immoral, perpetually pregnant, inferior stereotypes; it reaffirms the places and spaces available within the racist patriarchy through the unfree body” (2006, 82). These constructions were also made about the black body, even when “freed”. Whereas, for white bodies in this same construction, “white femininity, white masculinity, and white corporeality are, for the most part, rendered protected and protectable”. Whiteness had to be protected from the dangers of the oversexualised and immoral body, and particularly in specific geographies of whiteness, “slave quarters, plantation homes, fields, kitchens are, for black women, unprotected—it is in the material landscape, at work, in the home, and within the community, where the body is rightfully retranslated as inferior, captive, and accessible to violences” (McKittrick 2006, 82).

The Republican/ national (racial) rule

The work of Marcel Velásquez Castro (2005) explores the “cultural construction” of the Afro-Peruvian by the Criollo elite during 1775-1895, providing important accounts on the legal-political tensions during the transition to the Republican State. Debates prior to the Constitution of 1823 revealed the tension around liberal values, being property right – over enslaved people - and the claim of equality for all. While some abolitionists defended the gradual abolition of slavery, enslavers argued that the economy would collapse without enslaved labour force for the plantation system (Castro 2005, 202). As a result, the first Republican Constitution approved the end of the transatlantic slave trade, but legal commerce within the Americas was later legalised by decrees⁶, in a victory of enslavers requests. The independence of Peru (1821) changed little the lives of the black and indigenous people. The regime of black

⁶ According to Castro, in 1835 General Salaverry issued a decree allowing the slave commerce within the Americas. (Velásquez Castro 2005, 205)

enslavement remained, and only residual legislation was signed by San Martín in 1821⁷, providing freedom for the children of an enslaved person and of those blacks who fought in the independence war (those who were still alive). Abolition was only formally stated in 1854, when slave owners were financially compensated by the State for their “property losses”.⁸

The liberal principles enunciated by the Constitution of 1823 regulated who was considered *citizen*. Article 17 stipulated the requirements, which included literacy and ownership of land or a recognised profession. This last requirement has been pointed out as a liberal opening to citizenship that could encompass indigenous and free blacks (Velasco and Rojas 2013). Nonetheless, the condition of citizen could be suspended, according to Article 24 due to the following: being *morality* inept for free labour; the condition of domestic labour; the lack of job or other form of employment; those criminally processed; and those whose scandalous form of life offended the public morality.⁹ The motifs for the suspension are illustrative of the racial line of citizenship delineated by the Republican era. If we consider who was in domestic labour and who were constantly described as immoral, is not forced to conclude that black people were outside the limits of citizenship.

A letter addressing the Constituency of 1834 by the politician José María de Pando¹⁰ evidenced the white fear of black freedom, but also the incompatibility of the “slave” with Peruvian citizenship. Pando argues that a “slave” is not a full Man because he “requires long civil and moral training to enter society as a citizen” (Castro 2005, 204). Pando also refers to the experience of Santo Domingo to say that freedom from slavery would be dangerous, as “*la gente de color*” are prone to barbarism and horrible crimes. The juridical-political arguments defining the boundaries of citizenship were racialised, where morality and civility were inherent to whiteness and antagonist to blackness. The association of blackness to criminality during the debates at the beginning of the Republic shows that white fear perpetuated colonial ideas to guarantee constant control and white privileges. In addition, the constant reference to *morality* is significant, since it was attached to the condition of whiteness or *blancura*, as Christian morality, as argued by Castro-Gómez (2005). After all, the first Constitution declared Peru a Catholic nation, forbidding the exercise of any other religion (Articles 8 and 9). The constitutional rank of the Catholic religion lasted until 1979, when Peru becomes a secular State. This constitution

⁷ Carlos Aguirre (2005, 17) tells an interesting fact on how Bolívar has promised black slavery abolition when he was in a meeting with Alexander Petión in free Haiti but broke this promise as he relied on economic elites to support his political project.

⁸ According to Julio Cotler (2009, 109), the government paid six million pesos to compensate the losses of enslavers.

⁹ This list has slightly changed in the new Constitutions of 1828 and 1860, but the censitary vote remained until the constitution of 1928.

¹⁰ The letter is entitled “Reclamación sobre los vulnerados derechos de los hacendados de las provincias litorales del departamento de Lima en 1833” (Velázquez Castro 2005)

recognised the Catholic Church's importance to the historical, cultural and moral formation of Peru, that remains in the current Constitution of 1993 (Article 50).

After the independence, San Martín stated that Spanish criminal legislation was to remain in force, being *Las Siete Partidas* and *La recopilación de las Leyes de Indias*. Despite previous attempts to promote a codification of the disperse Spanish regulation, Peru has its first Penal Code only in 1863. This Code is illustrative of the continuum role of the Catholic Church in stating the boundaries of morality, thus criminalizing blacks and indigenous non-submissiveness. Articles 99 to 107 describe the crimes against religion, including the celebration of any cult that was not the Catholic Religion to be sentenced with imprisonment and even expatriation; besides any immoral act was to be severely punished. Articles 372 and 373 proscribe offenses against the Catholic Church, such as blasphemy or any act of "irreverence". Articles 374 to 379 describes the offences against "morality", including any public offense such as intoxication. Articles 380 and 382 proscribe offenses to public order, such as gatherings and spectacles causing noise and disturbance. Thus, being "moral" was a condition for citizenship that draw racial lines of control over public spaces, public practices of spirituality, with a particular emphasis on embodied/engendered behavioural codes and sexuality.

It is within this specific "moral compass" that the Peruvian academia engaged with eugenic European theories, applying the scientific method to describe the different races in the late XIX century and begging of the XX. The "indian problem" was seen through different perspectives, but overall, it went hand-in-hand with the racial construction of other major groups, categorised as "inferior races", including the blacks and the Chinese. Carazas (2019) and Hilario (2019) have debated how Peruvian intellectuals and academia invested in the ideologies of race improvement and nation formation, but ultimately defended the elimination of non-white races. One of the "solutions" for the problem was the *blanqueamiento* through mestizaje. There were two different mestizaje projects in the political debate, one proposed by the scientific racism to "improve the race" by mixing the indigenous and the black with whites, leading to whitening of the population. The other, as presented by the Mexican José Vasconcelos "*la raza cósmica*", mestizo is the perfect race. Milagros Carazas argues that even those intellectuals critical to eugenic approaches to mestizaje have also defended the mestizo as being "a new social type that assimilates more rapidly to western culture, although it is uprooted in the process", as the socialist José Carlos Mariátegui¹¹ (2019, 5).

These national projects need to be understood in relation to the regionalization of race in the country. The dichotomy of Lima-Cuzco is relevant to this debate as the *indigenistas* composed an important intellectual and political movement in

¹¹ Mariátegui discussed in the *Seven Essays*, Vasconcelos' idea of the mestizo as the 'cosmic race'. For him, Vasconcelos was a utopist because "el chino y el negro complican el mestizaje costeño. Ninguno de estos dos elementos ha aportado aún a la formación de la nacionalidad valores culturales ni energías progresivas" (Mariátegui 2005, 305).

Peru, which sustained mestizaje as a national project. As Marisol de la Cadena has studied, by the beginning of the 20th century, half of the theses defended at the University of Cuzco were concerned with how to suppress the “deficiencies” of the indigenous personality, in order to avoid the negative consequences of their “degenerate race” to the construction of civilisation (2004, 103).

Differently from Lima intellectuals, Cuzco’s *indigenistas* revitalised the Inca Empire as the great civilisation, so as to build a sense of nationalist pride based on a glorified past. They advocated against the eugenic mestizaje project, as the corruption of the ‘pure Indian race’, and supported education as the way to ‘civilise’ the indigenous. In De La Cadena’s argument, the *indigenistas* represented an alternative project to Lima, considered by them anti-indigenous and pro-Spanish, yet still embedded in racist conceptions of progress as desindianization.

As the violence in rural areas and land expropriation were a constant source of tension, the racial construction of the *gamonales*, to differentiate them from the *hacendados* (the “good” landowners), was politically relevant. Demonising the *gamonales* and relying on anti-black stereotypes demonstrates how humanity was depicted resorting to anti-blackness. Anti-blackness was mobilised by Cuzco intellectuals, so to contrast both the *hacendados* (the white and owners) and the indigenous peoples (“pure and submissive” race) to the *gamonales*. This newspaper article from 1922 is illustrative:

Chopped off pox, with sunken eyes and very small, with thin and frizzy hair, [skin color] pulling black, with a flat nose, thick lips, thick mustaches, no beard, to look cannibalistic [...] talking stuttering, always wearing a black suit and red or green tie, [...] affection to steal the lands of the defenseless indigenous people, of criminal tendencies. (55. El Sol, 31 de junio de 1922, p. 3. apud¹² de la Cadena, p. 99)

Arguing to be morally superior to the Criollos from Lima, the *indigenistas* had also to differentiate themselves from the *gamonales*, but how this was done reinforced racial lines across social places of superiority/ inferiority. Even though *gamonales* could be seen as mestizos, as an economic elite, they were reproducing whiteness. Wilber Hilario emphasises that “the gamonal was also recognised in the *imagery of whiteness*, although it did not share the *habitus* of the Lima elite. However, the *misti* constructed a reality in which he recognised himself as superior to the Indian, with whom he established ambivalent relationships”. (Hilario 2019, 95)

¹² Translated from the original Spanish: “Picado de viruelas, de ojos hundidos y bien pequeños, de cabellos ralos y crespos, [de color de piel] tirando al negro, de nariz chata, de labios gruesos, de bigotes gruesos, barba ninguna, de mirar canibalesco [...] de hablar tartamudeando, siempre terno negro i corbata roja o verde [...] afecto a robar las tierras de los indefensos indígenas, de tendencias criminales. 55. El Sol, 31 de junio de 1922, p. 3”. (de la Cadena, 2004, 99)

The country's elite saw the Peruvian population as an obstacle for progress because they were racially inferior (Drinot 2016, 29). Nonetheless, a nationalist thought was constructed against the idea of the 'white Lima', extracting elements of indigenous culture to build the *peruanidad* or national identity. The pro-indigenous narrative created a controlled indigenous identity, close to folklore and far from autonomy during President Leguía government (1908–12; 1919–30). His racial rule was delineated in a bill for the criminal code sent to the parliament in 1916, and finally approved in 1924. The bill prescribed that degrees of indigenous civilisation would dictate their criminal responsibility, applying concepts of *savages* and *semi-civilised* (Núñez 2019, paras. 42–43). Influenced by trends in criminology, the thesis behind the bill defended indigenous criminality as a result of their social environment, as “the centuries-old educational postponement of the indigenous and the devastating psychological and neurological effects of alcoholism would also constitute the columns of his thesis on the crime of the aborigines” (Núñez 2019, para. 18). These theoretical constructions reaffirm David Goldberg's (2002) argument that historicism supersede naturalism as the core argument of inherent inferiority, replaced by that of the “not yet developed” or still uneducated, updating racist assumptions. Peru's legal system therefore entered the Republican era solidifying anti-indigeneity.

Even though black people were not the main concern of Peruvian criminology, the episode in 1957 which led to the death sentence of Jorge Villanueva Torres is very illustrative how antiblack racism conformed the racial rule. A white child was found dead and one single witness placed a black man close to the where the body was found. Soon enough, the defendant was named “Monstruo de Armendáriz”, with details of a sexual crime described by local media. The only piece of evidence necessary for Torre's conviction was the witness statement that Torres was seen in the vicinity, so Torres was presumed guilty. This case illustrates how a black man is not entitled to subjectivity and does not need to be definitively placed at the scene of the crime. This case also teaches us that blackness was synonymous with criminality, where fungibility worked as *in dubio against black*. More recent analysis of the case has shown that the child might not have been victim of murder at all, bearing injuries consistent with an accident¹³. Torres was the last person to be sentenced to death before capital penalty was abolished in Peru for this type of crime¹⁴, and this is the only reason we know about Torres's fate. The last person to be legally executed by the Peruvian State was a black man.

¹³ See more about the case in <<https://lpderecho.pe/conmemoran-60-anos-ejecucion-monstruo-armendariz/>>, accessed on the 1st September 2020.

¹⁴ The death sentence is still valid in Peru for cases of terrorism and crimes against the nation (Constitution Article 140).

Second echo: The 'black problem' in Brazilian racial democracy

In Brazil, the construction of a national identity that should include black ex-enslaved people as a constituent part of nationality was incompatible with the naturalisation of their inhumanity, perpetuated in the white elites' mind, as Kabengele Munanga (1999) points out. Besides, a "promising Brazil must be formed by a people also promising: a white nation" (Bertúlio 1994, 14). Accordingly, the Brazilian State has relied on the idea of "race" to build a narrative of Brazilianness (*brasilidade*), which is transformed according to the geopolitical conveniences sustaining nationalism, especially evident, but not limited to, authoritarian governments, as we can see continuities during democratic periods (Flauzina 2006).

The Portuguese colonial venture in Brazil was engineered to guarantee that settlers were profitable to the crown, and to do so, there was the need to encourage settlers to undertake the colonial project. The solution was to implement, in the conquered territory, an old solution that have served the Portuguese before, during the Christian conquest over the Moors in the Iberian Peninsula. The institute of *sesmaria* was created in 1375 to establish Christian settlers in Moorish areas, obliging those entitled, to make the land productive (Prioste 2017). A similar logic was used to occupy land in the Americas, with the distribution of *sesmaria* titles for those Portuguese willing to make the colony productive. This allowed for a great accumulation of power in the hands of landowners, the *sesmeiros*, who exercised control with great jurisdictional, political and military power, as intermediaries to the Portuguese Crown. During this period, there was control over land, but also control over people - moral codes, religion, and production - was privately organised. Ana Flauzina explicates that from 1500 to 1822 a colonial-mercantilist system was built on private relationships, "where punitivism materiality takes place" (2006, 46). On the other hand, evangelisation was the "super structural support of que conquest" functioning "through the pedagogy of sin, death and guilt", Vera Malaguti describes (2003, 30).

The enslavement of African peoples was authorised in 1549, extending until 1888 when it is officially abolished. During these more than 300 years, Brazil becomes the biggest destination for enslaved people, with an estimated 5,8 million people forcedly brought from various African regions, a number that is only an estimation considering both illegal traffic and unaccounted trips¹⁵. The scale of racial slavery, the need to control the black body and how white fear is exercised, shaped our history and built the racist foundation of the country (Flauzina 2006, 44). Central to that was the exercise of disciplinary violence, as "rigid hierarchical societies need the death ceremonial as a spectacle of law and order" (Batista 2003, 32).

¹⁵ The Project Voyages has examined 34.948 records of Slaveships, building an extensive databased on the history of the transatlantic trade, showing how Brazil/ Portugal ships have been majorly responsible for the biggest forced migration in history. Available at <http://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>, accessed on 28.05.2018.

The high number of black peoples in Brazil has also mobilised a constant fear of the black insurrection. The regulation was targeting the need to control and exemplarily punish any attempt of black non-submissiveness that questioned the racial slavery system. Thus, the *quilombos* were the main target to be annihilated, and the *quilombolas* erased from people's memories or hopes, physically or spirituality. By the time gold was finally "found" in the Americas and the wealth of the colonisers increased, the need to enhance the control of their domains also risen, and the regulation become more deadly for those who challenged the system. Luciano Góes describes that in 1669, the murder of a *quilombola* or a runaway enslaved was not considered a crime; and in 1701 those who have killed a *quilombola* were to be awarded with "six gold octaves per head of black *aquilombado* dead in combat". White fear was quite evident in a provision of 1741, stipulating that any gathering of five or more black people was considered a *quilombo* (Góes 2016, 175). This *alvará* also established that runaways should be marked on their flesh, burned, the message of the regime against black freedom (Cotta, n.d., 2). In those provisions, we also see the privatisation of "justice" through an award system, creating a generally harsh environment of constant terror, mistrust and violence.

Regardless the increase in colonial violence, to run away from captivity to live in the quilombos was a lived experience in Brazil, perpetuating *quilombismo* as both practice and utopia (Nascimento 1980). The renowned Quilombo dos Palmares (1580-1716) is an example of the fear caused in the Portuguese and the white elites of the black insurrection. Palmares came to be a Republic in itself, formed by many cities and with a complex political structure that guaranteed its survival in the centre of the Portuguese "colonial Empire" for more than 100 years. According to Luciano Goes, in 1630 Palmares accounted for 3000 inhabitants, but by 1654 there were 23,000 to 30,000 *quilombolas*, which represented around 13% of Brazil's population at the time (2016, 175).

The white fear of black freedom

Within this ambience of constant instability, the formal independence of the country was seen by the elites as a solution to guarantee the continuity of the slavery system and avoid changes in power. Independence was triggered by the fear of what was happening in the Spanish controlled territories, but especially by the need to avoid the Haiti effect, or the black people taking power (Queiroz 2018). The Búzios uprising in Bahia (1798-1799) and the Pernambuco revolution (1817-1818), and so many other popular revolutions throughout the country, shared in common the large participation of 'people of colour' and the claim for equality (Queiroz 2018). Many enslaved fled captivity and even enlisted as troops in the fight for independence, because for them, independence meant their freedom from slavery. However, white elites neutralised their internal divisions enabling also to neutralize black aspirations to freedom. The son of the Portuguese king 'declared' the country's independence in 1822, installing a monarchy that lasted 67 years, perpetuating relations with Portugal, but on different terms. The monarchy endured as long

as the slavery system, representing the greatest national “narcissistic pact” (Bento 2002) of whiteness to remain in power¹⁶.

The discourses of freedom present during the constituent Assembly of 1823 show how legal-political debates managed to assert the supremacy of the right to property for political stability – including ownership over the black body. For instance, Deputy Almeida argued that freedom from slavery could not presume political rights, as these were tied to whiteness-Christianity-civilisation-morality, while blackness meant quite the opposite:

How is it possible that, simply by obtaining the freedom letter, the citizenship is acquired? It is not said in Article 14 ch. 2 who will enjoy political rights in the Empire who profess Christian communions? And doesn't Article 15 say that religions other than Christianity inhibit the exercise of political rights? And how will it be understood by the article under discussion that slaves by the simple fact of obtaining the freedom letter become citizens? Will the article also talk about slaves who come from the coast of Africa? Won't they hinder them from being pagans and other idolaters? (apud Queiroz 2018, 161–62)¹⁷

Even those liberals who saw slavery as an odious system that the nation had inherited, proposed a slow process of emancipation to avoid the “cancer of captivity” bursting out with violence against “vital parts of the civil body”. Then, the differentiation of civil rights and political rights marks the legal arrangement to sustain racial lines within the ‘free men’, between blacks and whites. The Constitution of 1824 established property and racialised *morality* as tenets of citizenship, whereas the elites “offered” a horizon of “improvement” and “civilization” to Africans (Queiroz 2018, 176). Part of this “civilizational path” was the transition from enslavement to free labour, the discipline and control of labour as a means to access citizenship. This argument sustained a central policy of the Empire: the incentive of white European immigration, seen as providing more suitable workers necessary to the modernisation of the country. While the white European was the salvation of the nation, control of the black body reflected the lineation of a punitive system and public security policies. The penal code of 1830 prescribed the insurrection against enslavement with capital punishment (Articles 113 to 115), reflecting white fear of black rebellion.

The wide use of African enslaved labour had a side effect that the elites were now struggling to reverse: the Africanisation of the country. By 1834 around

¹⁶ It is interesting to highlight that one of the discussed topics in the Assembly of 1823 was the amnesties of those regional elites who took part in dissents with the Empire or with the Portuguese monarchy. The Constitution was part of the pact of white elites to guarantee a ‘smooth’ transition, meaning an independence that did not affect the racial-social structured hierarchies, despite political disagreement within the white elites. Thus, the white narcissistic part was fulfilled. (Queiroz, 2018)

¹⁷ Author’s free translation from Portuguese original.

44% of Brazil's population was composed of enslaved people (Batista 2003, 129). Main cities such as Salvador, Rio de Janeiro and Ouro Preto were formed by a large majority black population, both freed and enslaved. In the census of 1849, the capital city of Rio de Janeiro had the largest urban black population of all the Americas, raising the concern with public space and security (Batista 2003). The Malés uprising in 1835, organised by Muslim Africans through the exchange of notes in Arabic in a time where most of the Portuguese were illiterate, together with the constant fear of the Haiti effect, caused the criminal regulation to harden. In 1835 a law decreed the death penalty to any enslaved that committed a felony against their "masters" or their families. (Batista 2003)

Control over the use of public space in the urban centres became mandatory to contain the large number of enslaved and freed black populations. According to Ana Flauzina, the need to regulate the freed blacks led to the formulation of vagrancy as wrongdoing, they were not allowed to exercise "freedom without the bonds of surveillance", so the offense meant "the criminalization of freedom" for blacks. Regulations at the local level replicated the need to control public space. Flauzina argues that "the proliferation of municipal laws regulating this type of matter [circulation and practice of religious worship] illustrates the interference of public power in the daily life of the black segment, as a way of delimiting the spaces for circulation and occupation of the city, as well as the social rise of the freed" (2006, 57).

Clovis Moura explores how discourses over labour also changed to justify the import of white immigrants, whilst the blacks were depreciated as free labour. In his argument, the work organised through slavery for the leisure of the white, placed the enslaved black in various skilled occupations, particularly in the urban context. With the inevitability of the abolishment of black enslavement¹⁸, blacks are then stereotyped as unfit for work, lazy and alcoholic, while whites are seen as honest and more skilled. In Moura's words, "in order to modernize and develop Brazil, there was only one way: to put the immigrant worker in the place of the black, to discard the country from this passive, exotic, fetishist and dangerous burden by a Christian, European and demigodised population"¹⁹ (2019, 109). Still according to Moura, it is then that the "myth of the incapacity of the black" is created, precluding the paid job for the huge contingency of free blacks.

Slavery was gradually abolished: first the slave trade was forbidden (1850) and then the children of an enslaved woman declared born free (1871). Clovis Moura demonstrates the relationship between the decomposition of the slavery system and the number of European immigrants entering in the country. Once the transatlantic trade was forbidden, and restrictions to internal trade were imposed, a new business opportunity opened up with European immigration, in

¹⁸ This occurs at a time when there was great pressure to end slavery on the part of the world powers, represented by a series of treaties between Portugal / Brazil and England, which made the move to a wage labour regime. Examples are the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 1818 and the Anglo-Brazilian Treaty of 1826, as well as the Law of 7 November 1831 (Duarte et al., 2015).

¹⁹ Author's free translation from original in Portuguese.

what Moura called the ‘second trade’. A series of arrangements, theories, public policies, and regulations were in place to guarantee the control and surveillance of black life (when it was not death), while investing in wealth and power for whites. The examples are countless, as we have exposed, but one law is particularly illustrative due to its consequences to current unequal conditions, the Land Law of 1850. This legal instrument both interdicted black access to land and regulated the policy of *whitening* by stimulating white immigration, to be paid for by the national treasury, for whom agricultural land was granted (Article 18). The law granted land to white Europeans through public policies that benefited landowners, who could access governmental funds by adhering to the programme²⁰. “Colonizing companies” were open and became a lucrative business, as Moura demonstrates (2019). Moura criticises how some Brazilian sociologists²¹ while analysing this historical process, had reinforced racist ideologies, such as the supposed unfitness of blacks to work, but justifying it as due to the “trauma of slavery” (2019, p. 130). Finding the answer to the “black problem” became one of the greatest academic efforts in sociological and anthropological academia. This obsession was termed by Guerreiro Ramos as the “pathology of the white Brazilian” (1954).

The republican project: black criminalization and whitening

The Republic was founded in the post-abolition period (1889) and a series of norms were reissued to inaugurate this new legal regime within the framework of political liberalism (Bertúlio 2019). Positivism was the theoretical foundation, demonstrated in the national flag inscription: order and progress. In 1891, the first Republican Constitution declared that “all are equal before the law”. Liberal aspirations are also found in the Constitution, with all the promises of modernity. As Dora Bertúlio has demonstrated, the legal diplomas are articulated differently, in order to promote the universality of the main liberal principles, but still guarantee control of “racialised” peoples. The devaluation of blacks in legal texts was exposed without making reference to “race”, and this is evident in the 1891 Constitution in the enunciation of civil and political rights (Bertúlio 1994, 16). In Article 70, it excluded “beggars and illiterates” from voting²². Thus, citizenship is limited to a restricted group of literate whites,

²⁰ Decree no. 528 of 1890 that regulated immigration, stipulated the public policy of access to agricultural properties for European immigrants, through prizes and bonuses granted to landowners who joined the program.

²¹ Moura (2019, 112–13) criticises in particular the work of Celso Furtado, an eminent political economist, for reproducing the racist ideologies of the elites that the white immigrant was more skilled and fit for the work, while blacks were lazy and indolent.

²² The denial of voter status for “illiterates and beggars” is maintained in the 1934 Constitution (Art. 108), curiously removed in the 1937 Constitution (which inaugurates an authoritarian regime, then without free elections), but which reappears for the illiterate in the Constitution of 1946, and then maintained in the Constitution of 1967. Those who cannot express themselves in national language did not have political rights, marking a relationship between nationalism

where the presence of one or two blacks could be tolerated to prove that equality is fulfilled, while the entire black population were excluded and pushed to the margins of citizenship. Flauzina (2006) also demonstrates how, at the beginning of the Republic, the exclusion of citizenship meant entry into the punitive system. The decrees of 1893 and 1899 ordered the correctional imprisonment of beggars, vagrants and ‘strayers’, whilst simultaneously denying bail to the homeless. According to the author, “the punitive republican architecture of that first period, which fundamentally aims at incorporating the urban mass and the spoils of slavery into the industrial and productive development project, carries a basic racial dimension” (2006, 71).

The debates between intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries concerned a need to overcome the “demographic problem” of the country, as the majority of the population was comprised of blacks, mestizos and indigenous peoples. The new Republic needed the new and modern man to leave behind the backwardness and horrors of slavery, and so the ideology of whitening was reinforced, now with a scientific basis. Vera Bastista debates how this period saw the growth of scientific positivism alongside a pathologising process, with the relation of medical knowledge to criminology, that structured together the juridical-criminal apparatus (2003, 162). The scientific positivism that founds the Republic legitimises the knowledge produced only by “science”, thus criminalising knowledge produced and practiced outside of this rationality, for their potential of contamination and public immorality²³. For instance, healing practices by various herbs, transmitted by ancestral knowledge and, often, central to the sacred practices of African-based religions, were brutally criminalised to guarantee “public order”, but also, “public health”. The penal code of 1890 criminalised the curative practices of indigenous peoples and black communities, inscribed as crimes of quackery and *curandeirismo*. Under Article 158, the penal code of the Republic prohibited what was referred to as “ministering, or simply prescribing, as a curative means for internal or external use, and under any prepared form, substance from any of the kingdoms of nature, making, or exercising thus, the officer's so-called healer”.

Meanwhile, some eugenic intellectuals saw the potential of miscegenation to assure the future of the country. For instance, Sylvio Romero (1851- 1914) believed that miscegenation was a transitory and intermediary phase for a presumably white nation (Munanga 1999, 52–53). Oliveira Viana (1883-1917)

(colonial nation-state - Portuguese) and citizenship. Those restriction were only removed by the current Constitution of 1988.

²³ The same penal code, Article 157, criminalised the “practicing spiritism, magic and its sorceries”, which was used to criminalise afro-Brazilian religions. Thus, inscribed in the field of “magic”, capable of breaking through with “public credulity”, the *terreiros* were seen as places of criminal practice (Barbosa 2010, 4). Afro-Brazilian religions represented a strong expression of black resistance to colonial assimilationist impositions (Saad 2013, 116) and, therefore, they were the target of harsh persecution and criminalisation. Always represented through negative constructions based on the white-Christian framework, their practices were not recognised in the context of ‘religion’ deserving of state protection, but in the field of mysticism and immoral fetishism.

also argued that miscegenation was good because it could provide a gradual ‘whitening’ of the population and should be encouraged. His demographic projections showed that the progressive racial mix would lead to the growing of the percentage of ‘Aryan’ blood and European features – being superior - would prevail (Costa 2001, 145). The Decree 528 of 1890, for instance, declared free entrance to the country for individuals fit for work, however, entrance of those “indigenous from Asia and Africa” would depend on approval by the National Congress²⁴.

Gilberto Freyre’s *Casa Grande e Senzala* (The Master and the Slaves, 1933) represented a paradigmatic change in Brazilian social thinking, describing racial relations as harmonious, stating that blacks and indigenous people had contributed positively to Brazilian culture and portraying the *mestizo* as a positive element lacking in the national identity (Munanga 2003). Munanga concludes that it is through Freyre’s work that the founding myth of the nation is created – the harmonious union of the three races as a product of the Portuguese character that would have favoured “miscegenation” and did not have an “idea of race”. The government of President Getúlio Vargas (1934-1945; 1951-1954) was the first to guarantee the articulation of nationality around a genuine ‘Brazilian culture’, while instituting numerous racist policies. Elements of black culture served the Brazilian nationality - or the idea of Brazilianness - and were valued and encouraged, such as *samba* and *capoeira*. The separation between religiosity (which will continue to be pursued as magic or charlatanism) and “popular culture” is evidenced in projects from the 40’s and 50’s, with the cataloguing and promotion of various manifestations within the scope of national “folklore”. A growing intellectual movement started to value *popular culture*, in addition to the institutionalisation of organisations around *folklore* (Tsezanas 2010). On the other hand, the Constitution of 1934 provided federal states with the authority to “stimulate eugenic education” (Art. 138).

The first legislation to criminalise racial discrimination in Brazil was signed in 1951 under n. 1390, known as ‘Afonso Arinos’s Law’. Afonso Arinos himself was a conservative white deputy, that surprised many for being the one proposing a bill on anti-discrimination to congress (Grin and Maio 2013). Even though racism remained on the political agenda since the debates for a new democratic constitution of 1946, and the black movement was prominent in its mobilisation,²⁵ Arinos was not functioning as their spokesperson. Grin and Maio

²⁴ The term ‘indigenous’ is used here to delimit a racial differentiation in African and Asian populations. Those continents were mostly under the colonial rule of several European nations, and so there were white settlers. The racial regulation differentiated the population in colonial territories dividing them into “indigenous” and “assimilated”. In Portugal, the Indigenato Statute was in force until 1961 and provided, for example, that the “indigenous” could be subjected to forced labour. (Tjipilica and Valério 2014)

²⁵ In 1950 the 1st Congress of the Black Brazilian took place. Earlier, in 1945 the TEN (the Black Experimental Theatre) had organised the Black National Convention, which ended with a demand to convert racism into a constitutional *lesa-patria* crime, or ‘against the nation’ (Grin and Maio 2013). In the 50’s the UNESCO project started to assess the ‘racial relations’ in Brazil, which first results were already contradicting the dominant narrative of racial democracy (Pereira 2008).

suggest that the project represented a rescue of “the genuine atmosphere of racial harmony present in the trajectory of racial relations in Brazil since abolition” (2013, 45). It puts racism in a moral place, as a need to “elaborate a moral pedagogy”, especially since the public debate was triggered by a particular event²⁶. Then, criminalising racial discrimination (even as a minor offense) “would mean the emptying of the potential conflict present in the racial question in the name of its moral normalization” (2013, 45). Relating racism to exceptional events was also convenient to avoiding debates on structural inequalities and the deep roots of the racial State. In the Manifesto of the Black National Convention of 1945, concern is expressed with the social inequality between blacks and whites in Brazil. Among the demands, there were also several related to urgent improvements in economic and educational areas.

The echoes transcend borders: racialised legalities

As we hear the echoes of two histories, we transcend the artificiality of States’ borders to grasp how colonial technologies of conquest were shared. We can also confirm that racism was the most efficient colonial tool used to guarantee forced labour, expropriation, and exploitation, regulated by racial rule. A “tool” that was refined throughout the years and utilised in the “independent territories” during the Republican era as the normal way of distributing privileges, titles and conforming citizenship to whiteness. We also observe the perpetuation of Christianity as an ideological tool used to draw the line between human and non-human, legitimising conquest at first, then later, to control social behaviour through the State punitive apparatus, as racialised morality.

In the post-independence period, the elites’ ideal nation-state model was sustained by European standards. Consequently, those new Latin American States would not be “considered nations unless it was admitted that a minority of colonizers in charge were genuinely representatives of the entire population” (Quijano 2000, 565). In this perspective, the ideology of *mestizaje* supported the desired national unity or homogeneity, after all “we are all mestizos”. The ideology of *mestizaje* enabled the articulation of the ‘three races’ or “*todas las sangres*” to become the foundational myth of most Latin American countries. Both Brazil and Peru have claimed the exceptionality of their national context, either using *mestizaje* ideologies or racial democracy to deny racism. They also have a majority of non-white population, but are governed by predominantly white elites, reproducing whiteness as a system of privilege, thus, institutionalised racist practices at structural levels.

The region has also used *mestizaje* and racial democracy ideologies to sustain its legal innocence, as supported by the alleged non-institutionality of the racial order. Homogeneity of nation-states in Latin America occurred in the discursive field, even though they were created and “conceptualised by whites, through

²⁶ A US black dancer was prohibited from staying in a hotel in Sao Paulo, gaining headlines and exposing racism in Brazil (Grin and Maio 2013).

whites, for whites” (Nascimento 1980, 15), and against blacks and indigenous, as Quijano has suggested. This legal-historical overview exposes the continuities of legal-political regimes of white supremacy, drawing the lines of the human in the racialised legal regime. Restricting the use of direct racial expressions in the legislation did not remove the racial content that remained in the liberal formulations of citizenship during the Republican era. Legal reasoning and juridical-political debates over the nation that framed rights and entitlements as racial conceptions, articulated in the ideas of progress, development and civilisation. In addition, the constant mobilisation of the moral as an element for citizenship, as a racialised morality, delimited the boundaries of humanity to whiteness (which mestizos can often occupy in the ‘passing’²⁷, but in a precarious way).

Looking at what Saidiya Hartman calls the ‘afterlife of slavery’, we see how black fungibility – the objectification of black identity as equal to a slave, a dispensable thing, killable, stripped of humanity/ subjectivity - still informs the logics of anti-black racism. Racial slavery was imprinted in the legal common-sense presumptions of ownership, subjectivity and morality to *whiteness*. At the same time, anti-blackness activates presumptions through the principle of fungibility. As the author elaborates: “law of slavery subjected the enslaved to the absolute control and authority of any and every member of the dominant race. At the very least, the relations of chattel slavery served to enhance whiteness by racializing rights and entitlements, designating inferior and superior races, granting whites’ domination over blacks.” (1997, 24)

The need to control bodies in relation to space highlights the spatial dynamics of racism. The construction of blackness as something dangerous and, at the same time, the exposure of black bodies in public spaces, public torture and subjugation, were/are central to the construction of society as a whole, and not marginal, as suggested by McKittrick (2006). If we look at Brazilian and Peruvian cities, we can see that the torture of black non-submissiveness had to be public. Moreover, the definition of vagrancy and the exercise of any form of spirituality other than Christianity as wrongdoing meant “the criminalization of freedom” for blacks. The message about the ‘place’ of blacks in society was central to the formation of hierarchies of power; it is how racialised power relations were reproduced. Therefore, to comprehend the continuities of the colonial-racial-modern State in legal discourse is crucial to unveiling how race is still central to power relations in Latin American countries.

The dehumanisation of the racialised is reproduced in the routines of the State, as institutional racism encompasses “discriminatory legislation and policies endorsed and put into place by the state, and patterns of racist routine governmentalities sustained by public and private (in)actions and affecting the

²⁷ Monica Figueroa argues that being mestizo is a privilege that offers a safer, albeit precarious, place that is closer to whiteness. The privilege position of the mestizo is deeply connected with his/her position in the class structure. The wealthy mestizo is ‘tolerated’ in higher social circles, whereas the poor mestizo is not. So, the ‘passing’ is not so much a matter of colour, but a more complex set of ‘characteristics’ that can pull the mestizo up from ‘the other side’ (2010, p. 398).

key life spheres such as education or housing” (Maeso 2018, 13). The racialised regime of legality is not only written codes and rules, but also legal reasoning, jurisprudence, and knowledge. Anti-black racism has supported presumptions that update black fungibility, as lacking entitlement to subjectivity or morality, thus prone to criminality. Whiteness has supported presumptions that value white lives, white property, and white rule.

These reflections push the need for more academic effort in unveiling how the afterlife of slavery impacts current legal theory and practice in *Amefrica*. Racial slavery and its legal constructions persist in differentiating the weight of “justice” through racial lines. It also sustains discourses over development and progress which are anti-black and, in different accounts, anti-indigenous. To recognise that racism exists, confronting the existing regimes of denial of racism in the region is not enough, if one does not make an effort to reconstruct the past to question current forms of violence (Hartman 2008, 13), and how they are legitimated by racialised regimes of legality (Alves 2016).

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Las trabajadoras domésticas entre clase, género y jerarquías de color en la Argentina contemporánea

Omar Acha

Abstract

This paper aims to reveal the intersections between class relations, gender performances and racialised hierarchisations in contemporary Argentina. The quarantine imposed in order to restrain the Covid-19 pandemic made evident, once more (likewise happened in previous critical situations), the relevance of domestic workers as symbols of social difference within the landscape of social and cultural inequalities. To fully understand this requires a historical perspective to shed light on the current situation because it is embedded in larger temporal contexts. Since the beginning of 20th century, but especially since the middle of that century, female domestic workers had a symbolic importance in representing the feminine workers within the Argentine working-class. As one of the most oppressed, exploited and despised sectors of the whole class, mostly coloured female domestic workers were far from being simply victims of their social experiences and oppressions. The first part of the paper is articulated in two segments. The first segment synthesises the historical transformation of domestic workers' labor force during the period 1900-1945. The second segment reconstructs the class and racialised conflicts during the so-called Peronist age (1945-1955) when domestic workers played an important role in social life. In these situations class struggle, violence and harsh conflictivity underpinned the reconstruction of class relations in Argentina. The second part of the paper deals with contemporary debates about class, culture, gender and coloured hierarchies and how they played out during the pandemic centred on female domestic workers employed in middle-and-upper class neighborhoods. The historical legacies of female domestic workers' actions are reframed in the current situation, undermining the (also academic) condescending dreams of social inclusion and progressive modernization in a class society.

Keywords: domestic workers; social class; racialization; gender; colour hierarchies; Argentina

El tema de este artículo involucra una cuestión que parece resistir, sin por eso dejar de modificarse a veces dramáticamente, el paso del tiempo: la persistente conexión entre relación de clase social, género, racialización y cultura en el trabajo doméstico remunerado. Su lugar y tiempo es, en la primera parte, la Argentina del siglo XX, especialmente en el periodo del “primer peronismo” (1945-1955), y en la segunda parte, las primeras décadas del siglo XXI. ¿Por qué es relevante enfocar en el primer peronismo? Porque entonces se generó una

conexión sistemática entre clase, color de piel y cultura que ha perdurado durante décadas, hasta llegar a la actualidad cuando el peronismo -el fenómeno único del populismo latinoamericano más duradero- se ha transformado a la luz de las modificaciones estructurales de la Argentina. La mencionada conexión se ha revelado especialmente vigente para las experiencias de las trabajadoras domésticas asalariadas.

La segunda parte estudia algunos episodios de los antagonismos de clase y cultura suscitados en el escenario de la reciente cuarentena por la pandemia del Covid-19. En una Argentina social y económicamente muy distinta a la de mediados del siglo XX, en una época en que la identidad peronista en la clase trabajadora ya no es lo que era, sin embargo las asociaciones entre trabajadoras domésticas, inflexión etnizada de la condición de género y cultura se revelan perdurables.

En materia teórica el artículo procura plantear reflexiones a propósito de los relatos progresistas y modernizantes de la historia. Según esos enfoques la sociedad argentina integra a la “gente de trabajo” en un país que carecería de “problemas raciales”. Desde luego, las dificultades de la inclusión y el progreso, los obstáculos a la modernización, son los temas predilectos de una concepción optimista del cambio histórico. La ampliación de derechos, la transmisión de valores de clase media, el pluralismo en materia cultural, constituirían rasgos de la sociabilidad nacional, especialmente después del fin de la última dictadura militar (1983). La historia de las trabajadoras domésticas es difícilmente incorporable en esas narraciones confiadas.

1. “Sirvientas”, racialización y lucha de clases entre los siglos XIX y XX

El trabajo doméstico remunerado constituyó un sector significativo de la clase trabajadora en formación en la Argentina de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX. Tras la consolidación del Estado nacional y el fin de las guerras civiles que habían asolado al nuevo país después de su independencia de la corona española (1816), se fue configurando un mercado de trabajo capitalista que hacia el año 1900 tenía un perfil definido. Por un lado se encontraba el sector más dinámico de la economía, orientado a la agroexportación. Por otro lado, la urbanización y la llegada masiva de trabajadores y trabajadoras, principalmente de Europa del sur y del este, configuraron una clase obrera regida de una periodicidad estacional en faenas rurales y las asociadas a la exportación, y una minoritaria pero no insignificante fracción dedicada al trabajo manufacturero y los inicios de la industria. El comercio también demandaba fuerza laboral. A menudo había una circulación entre estos sectores laborales. Un último rasgo de la migración trasatlántica fue su alta tasa de masculinidad (Adelman 1992; Poy 2014; Ben 2009).

El trabajo doméstico hacia el 1900 estaba compuesto por varones y mujeres en una variedad de ocupaciones cuyas denominaciones eran inestables: sirvientas,

choferes, amas de llave, mucamas, peón de cocina, mayordomo, niñeras, cocineras, criadas, entre otras. La información del rubro siempre ha sido deficiente por su carácter informal (Allemandi 2017). En todo caso, los estudios sobre el tema calculan que, según datos provistos por los censos nacionales, el número de empleos domésticos fue de 100 mil en 1914, 470 mil en 1947, y se ha mantenido en alrededor de un millón de trabajadoras desde 1960 hasta alcanzar a 1,4 millones en la actualidad. Por supuesto, las cifras deben ser contextualizadas con el aumento poblacional que pasó de 7,8 millones en 1914 a 25 millones en 1960 y 45 millones en la actualidad.

La composición y rasgos del trabajo doméstico se modificó a lo largo del siglo XX. El cambio más notorio se dio en su distribución por género. Si hacia el 1900 el total de las especializaciones se dividían entre un 70% de mujeres y 30% de varones, un siglo más tarde, más del 99% del trabajo doméstico remunerado es femenino (más adelante ofreceré datos más precisos sobre la situación actual). Por otra parte, el desarrollo tecnológico en los hogares -como el reemplazo de la cocina a carbón por equipos alimentados a gas envasado o natural y la extensión de los sistemas de cloacas y agua potable- trasladaron a las “amas de casa” de las familias “clase media” tareas antes realizadas por el empleo doméstico. Esta transición se realizó entre 1930 y 1970. En el mismo periodo se consolidó una nueva estructura de clases con el surgimiento de la llamada clase media que amplió la demanda del trabajo doméstico antes casi un privilegio de los sectores acomodados. Esto no significa que las nuevas capas en ascenso estuvieran al margen de emplear al trabajo doméstico o al menos desear tenerlo. Por eso tangos con letra de Pascual Contursi como *Champagne tango* (1914) y *Flor de fango* (1916) señalaban la elevación de estatus para las mujeres que significaba “tener sirvienta”. Hacia 1950 también se modificó el sistema habitacional, en el que se desplegó la “propiedad horizontal”: casas particulares o en edificios de departamentos se multiplicaron a lo largo de la década de 1960, que en el marco de una economía de pleno empleo prolongada hasta 1980, redujo los espacios de los hogares y favoreció el pasaje del trabajo doméstico con residencia (denominado “con cama adentro”) al “con retiro” según el cual las empleadas volvían a dormir a sus propios hogares y también a la modalidad “por horas”. Esta última forma -ampliamente dominante en las primeras décadas del siglo XXI- permite circular entre varias casas realizando tareas por un tiempo limitado.

La precariedad ha sido un rasgo perdurable del empleo doméstico. La primera ley parlamentaria de regulación de este tipo de trabajo data del año 2013. Hasta entonces regía una norma laboral establecida por decreto-ley por el gobierno militar *de facto* vigente en 1956, el que dejaba amplios sectores de la actividad desregulada en parte reconociendo las dificultades crónicas para formalizar al sector (Pérez 2015a). La informalidad del empleo y la circulación entre diferentes lugares de labor hicieron muy difícil la construcción de organizaciones sindicales para la defensa de los intereses sectoriales. Fueron numerosos los intentos organizativos desde el 1900, principalmente por activistas socialistas y del catolicismo social, que no obstante fracasaron en

permanecer activos. Recién con el peronismo en el poder, desde 1946, y gracias al impulso de la Confederación General del Trabajo, pudieron construirse representaciones gremiales con capacidad de durar. No obstante, los sindicatos fueron siempre débiles en razón de los problemas técnicos para asegurarse ingresos en una actividad de altísima informalidad incluso en el día de hoy.

A lo largo de este más de un siglo aquí tan sintéticamente resumido se produjo un proceso de racialización del trabajo doméstico. Esta racialización del trabajo doméstico puede rastrearse desde los tiempos coloniales, que en gran medida estaba sometido a principios de diferenciación por castas más que por clases y obedecía más al trabajo servil que al asalariado. Personas negras e indígenas, esclavizadas o sometidas a servidumbre, eran utilizadas para el servicio en las casas de criollos y españoles. Desde entonces se consolidaron referencias culturales de larga duración respecto de la inferioridad individual, de color de piel y cultura, la creencia de poder disponer de esos cuerpos de menor valor, situados en una posición de minoría de edad. Durante el tardío siglo XIX, con el desarrollo de los discursos racialistas, esas referencias se traducirían al tratamiento racista, como explicaré luego, rearticulado desde mediados del siglo XX. Hacia el 1900, renombrados científicos argentinos como José Ingenieros y Carlos Octavio Bunge asumieron, incluso desde una orientación progresista (Ingenieros era socialista) un racismo abierto (Terán 2000).

En este lugar quisiera señalar una primera consideración teórica respecto de los estudios históricos y sociales tal como se suelen desarrollar en la Argentina respecto del trabajo doméstico.

El desprecio del personal doméstico perduró luego de la Independencia y está presente en el día de hoy como una marca indeleble, al que se suma la cuestión de género debido a la feminización de la fuerza laboral. Es interesante interrelacionar ese rasgo con el discurso y las prácticas de la afectividad, del ser “como de la familia”, que constituye un aspecto de la sociabilidad interclasista en el sector. Si bien este último tema no será abordado en el presente artículo, entiendo que un estudio en términos del *emotional turn* se torna apologético si olvida las opresiones de clase, cultura, género y color de piel.

Un concepto organizador de las investigaciones sobre el trabajo doméstico en la Argentina ha sido el de “modernización”, muy difundido en las ciencias sociales entre las décadas de 1960 y 1970, y retomado por los estudios históricos posteriores al retorno a la legalidad democrática en 1983. El paradigma de la modernización, aunque posee variantes y usos peculiares, remite a la imagen de un proceso de cambios estructurales y actitudinales que conducen de las formas tradicionales a las modernas. Este fenómeno sería económico pero también social y cultural. De tal manera, las antiguas costumbres son reemplazadas por formas más secularizadas e igualitarias. Con todas sus contradicciones, la modernización supondría márgenes crecientes de libertad, capacidad de acción y reconocimiento. Es un enfoque historiográfico y sociológico optimista. Una preocupación recurrente de las investigaciones basadas en la modernización es que identifica los obstáculos para el progreso social. En el caso del trabajo

doméstico, el problema son las dificultades para el acceso del personal doméstico a los hábitos de los sectores medios, hábitos que a menudo son considerados como índices de modernidad: autonomía, maternidad, amor romántico, etc. No siempre es claro si esos valores son evidentes en las trabajadoras domésticas, si son parte del repertorio de agencia de clase, o si son prejuicios de los y las investigadores académicos de clase medio que no raramente son patrones del servicio doméstico.

La dimensión racialista que ha acompañado al trabajo doméstico desde la colonia hasta la actualidad de un país inserto en el escenario global problematiza el paradigma modernizante, o más bien lo revela como una visión apologética (no siempre conscientemente voluntaria) donde se olvidan las formas cristalizadas del desprecio y la opresión que acompañan al sector. La noción de la Argentina como “crisol de razas” es equivalente a la de “democracia racial” en Brasil, ideologemas superpuestos a una profunda y compleja historia de racismo. Por supuesto, las figuras de la opresión de clase y racialista tienen su propia historia. No constituyen un rasgo culturalista. Lo importante para este estudio es que afectaron al trabajo doméstico como a ningún otro sector de la clase obrera en la Argentina “moderna”.

Entre 1880 y 1930 el grueso del trabajo doméstico estaba compartido por personas nacidas en el país e inmigrantes provenientes de las grandes corrientes transatlánticas llegadas principalmente de Europa meridional y oriental para desilusión de las élites argentinas que deseaban habitantes nórdicos. La imagen del servicio doméstico, sobre todo en las grandes ciudades (Buenos Aires, Rosario, Córdoba, ya avanzado el siglo XX se suman Mendoza, La Plata y Mar del Plata) estuvo identificada con las españolas (“gallegas”) y francesas especialmente estas últimas como niñeras. El racialismo estuvo presente en los atributos culturales, por ejemplo respecto de la brutalidad y estupidez atribuida a las *gallegas*. Todo cambió desde 1930. Entonces se hizo más presente la oferta de mano de obra de trabajadoras domésticas de orígenes locales, del llamado “interior del país” o “las provincias”, usualmente de tonos de piel más oscuros que la considerada obvia para una población auto-representada como europea y blanca (Devoto 2003: 361-395).

En este lugar es preciso aclarar que en la Argentina la categoría de color como marcación racializante tiene una ambigüedad constitutiva. Una persona de tez oscura pero con dinero o cultura puede ser considerada “blanca”, del mismo modo que un individuo de piel pálida, en ciertas circunstancias, puede ser visto como un “negro”. Estas construcciones del color y de la jerarquía son rastreables hasta tiempo coloniales en las colonias españolas donde la pigmentocracia podía ser matizada de acuerdo a múltiples circunstancias y escalas (Martínez 2008; Stolke 2009; Twinam 2009).

Las concepciones intelectuales que en el periodo postcolonial plantearon la construcción de una nueva nación desearon reemplazar la población originaria y criolla por inmigración europea, preferentemente del norte del continente. Hacia el 1900 el nuevo racismo de rasgos biologicistas declaraba en la población

de rasgos indígenas o mestizos un obstáculo a la “modernidad”. La cuestión racial y de color de piel tuvo particular importancia en la historia de la fuerza laboral del trabajo doméstico remunerado.

Tras la llegada de la democracia de masas, desde 1916 con la presidencia del radical Hipólito Yrigoyen, los epítetos ligados a jeraquización de color se mezcló con el discurso racista y las transformaciones sociales ocasionadas por la urbanización, las migraciones hacia las ciudades, la industrialización y dinámicas de ascenso social (Nállim 2014). Desde 1945, con el naciente peronismo, la intersecciones de clase, color de piel y cultura fueron identificadas con los seguidores de Juan Perón, aunque esa conexión no siempre fuera unívoca. El propio peronismo en el gobierno tuvo una actitud ambivalente hacia el mito de la “Argentina blanca” que afirmaba ser “Europa en América del Sur”.

La presencia de domésticas indígenas o mestizas fue, como ya he indicado, perdurable en la supuesta modernidad argentina. De hecho, uno de los acontecimientos que jalaron la consolidación de la Argentina “moderna”, la ocupación violenta de los territorios de la región patagónica norte, la llamada “Conquista del desierto” (1878-1885) tuvo como uno de sus corolarios la distribución de niñas y niños de las comunidades originarias vencidas. Lo fueron calidad de “criados” u otras ocupaciones que debían trabajar gratuitamente para las familias ricas a cambio de “civilización” (Allemandi 2019). Sus procedencias e historias fueron borradas como incompatibles con el país en construcción (Escolar & Saldi 2018). De todas maneras, la utilización de mano de obra doméstica de sectores originarios fue perdiendo relevancia en las grandes ciudades, perdurando en las zonas rurales y en poblados menores. No obstante, durante la subsiguiente historia argentina las simbologías revelaron temporalidades ajenas al lapso breve de los acontecimientos inmediatos. Las imágenes de los *malones* indígenas proveyeron, como el carnaval de personas negras, un archivo de representaciones racializantes para aludir a esos cuerpos inferiorizados ajenos a la utopía de la blanquitud europea occidental con que se edificó la autoimagen estatal e ideológica por parte de las clases dominantes locales.

La dimensión racializante se reconfiguró con la mutación ocurrida cuando la Primera Guerra Mundial y luego las repercusiones de la crisis económica de 1929 generaron las condiciones para una dinámica de industrialización y mayor urbanización, las que ampliaron la demanda de fuerza de trabajo. Las grandes migraciones europeas disminuyeron significativamente dando paso a las migraciones desde las provincias a las ciudades litorales. Ese movimiento demográfico silencioso pero indetenible fue una de las precondiciones del peronismo que desde 1945 alteró la vida política, social y cultural argentina.

Los estudios sociales e históricos discutieron la tesis del sociólogo Gino Germani que propuso en 1956 una explicación del surgimiento del peronismo en los términos de la teoría de la modernización asociada a las migraciones internas. Germani (1956) sostuvo que el peronismo tuvo éxito en obtener el consenso activo de las mayorías populares argentinas porque éstas, provenientes en

buena medida de zonas rurales y con caracteres culturales tradicionales (sin experiencias de autonomía de clase, sea sindical o política) comprendieron el discurso reivindicador de derechos sociales de Juan D. Perón y aceptaron el verticalismo político afín a las prácticas caudillistas en que se habían formado. El problema de la modernización argentina consistía, siempre según Germani, en que había avanzado en términos económicos pero no en términos político-culturales. Las realizaciones sociales del peronismo, la “justicia social”, eran adecuadas a las exigencias de la modernización, pero no así las formas políticas y la heteronomía que Perón imponía a la clase trabajadora. Esta explicación fue cuestionada en varios aspectos (Murmis y Portantiero 1971, sobre la importancia de las organizaciones de clase; Halperin Donghi 1975, sobre las experiencias complejas de la población migrante). Entre ellos fue fundamental señalar la problemática distinción entre tradicionalismo y modernidad, como también los problemas empíricos de atribuir un origen rural a las grandes masas migrantes posteriores a 1930. Desde 1980 se difundieron explicaciones del peronismo basadas, sobre todo, en el plano político-discursivo y el económico-social, abandonándose la cuestión de la modernización (aunque este término, según he señalado, es de uso habitual en la investigación en historia y ciencias sociales, sin exceptuar los estudios sobre el trabajo doméstico remunerado).

Había en el asunto planteado por Germani un enigma que su propio planteo no podía resolver y que permanece abierto: el de una diferencia cultural profunda en la vida pública del periodo 1945-1955. Este es precisamente uno de los temas vigentes en la investigación del peronismo: las tensiones que suscitó e involucró inaugurando una confrontación cultural perdurable, a pesar de las numerosas peripecias políticas del movimiento identificado con Perón. Se trata de una asociación entre peronismo y los llamados “cabecitas negra”, una composición de dimensiones de clase, cultura y color de piel donde por un lado se encuentra la población blanca, cultura y liberal, y por otro lado los negros, pobres, violentos y populistas. De esa escisión pareciera no haber modernización ni progreso. Fracasa la idea histórica de un país democrático y abierto, sin problemas raciales, pues su población sería mayoritariamente blanca y bien educada, dispuesta a integrar a quienes demuestren los méritos para el ascenso social.

Mi investigación sobre el primer peronismo y la clase obrera insistió en otorgarle un lugar eminente en la reconstrucción de la época a las trabajadoras domésticas (Acha 2014), en base a dos razones. La primera es que si bien la imagen del “cabecita negra” fue tradicionalmente masculina, las informaciones demográficas están de acuerdo en que la mayoría de quienes llegaron a las grandes ciudades entre 1930 y 1960 fueron mujeres. No obstante esa evidencia constatada por estudios demográficos hace varias décadas (Lattes y Recchini de Lattes 1969), aún dentro del propio discurso peronista o filoperonista el *cabecita* fue casi siempre un varón (Ratier 1971). El estudio de Marcela Gené (2005) sobre la iconografía de los trabajadores durante el primer peronismo provee evidencia de que para la propaganda peronista y estatal el modelo del

trabajador varón adulto y en general “blanco” coexistía con el trabajador de tez oscura previamente invisibilizado. Menos habitual en la gráfica peronista fue encontrar imágenes de mujeres trabajadoras pues su lugar era pensando sobre todo en el hogar cuidando a los niños. En los últimos años han aparecido numerosos estudios que trabajan la construcción del mito de la “blanquitud” argentina y el lugar del peronismo en las dimensiones representacionales, afectivas y políticas del fenómeno (amplias bibliografías en Grimson 2016; Gordillo 2020; Adamovsky 2016), en las que en mi opinión el enfoque de género requiere un mayor desarrollo.

Las informaciones recogidas en mi trabajo sugerían, justamente, que debía repensarse la dimensión de género en el mito social del “cabecita negra” para incorporar la diferenciación sexual y las representaciones a ella asociadas. La segunda razón es que la investigación histórica me permitió analizar que las mujeres trabajadoras jóvenes, especialmente en el rubro del servicio doméstico, suscitaron inquietudes asociadas con la amenaza del peronismo a las jerarquías sociales de clase y de cultura. La conflictividad de clase en el sector se expresó de diversas maneras, con las características dificultades de esta fracción de la clase trabajadora para organizarse sindicalmente (Acha 2012-2013). Esta conflictividad coexistía con discursos de larga duración que negaban la diferencia de clase porque las domésticas eran “como de la familia”, había un vínculo afectivo entre trabajadores y patrones por cuanto en numerosas ocasiones éstos habían “ayudado”, “criado” o “educado” -todo términos encubridores de la explotación laboral aunque no necesariamente insinceros- a aquellos desde la infancia.



Imagen 1. Representantes del Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Casas Particulares visitan el diario Democracia para difundir sus demandas. Democracia, 4 de octubre de 1946.

La identidad de clase se expresó en el reclamo de un cambio de denominación en el escenario de una “Nueva Argentina” de la justicia social peronista en la que ya no deseaban ser llamadas sirvientas o criadas. Debían ser nombradas como “trabajadoras de casas particulares”. No estuvieron ausentes otros fenómenos en apariencia ajenos a la lucha de clases basada a menudo en huelgas o acciones de protesta de un proletariado organizado en sindicatos y en el lugar de trabajo, idealmente en fábricas u oficinas. En circunstancias muy diferentes, las trabajadoras domésticas manifestaron sus desacuerdos y odios hacia sus patrones a través de desafíos, renuncias para ir a otro empleo, rumores y chismes, la transmisión de información para el robo en las casas patronales, así como la sustracción por mano propia e incluso la agresión física directa. No faltaron ocasiones en que las empleadas robaban ropas o joyas de las patronas que ellas se consideraban con derecho a usar, o con resentimiento de clase arrojaban a la calle las vestimentas lujosas para arruinarlas. Si estas últimas

actitudes tenían un aspecto de identificación con las patronas y sus consumos, también poseían un rasgo de protesta contra el prestigio o visibilidad en el goce clasista de ciertos bienes. En suma, se puede mostrar a través de las investigaciones documentales que si bien las trabajadoras domésticas se hallaban en una difícil situación de inferioridad social, organizativa y cultural, no por ello es adecuada la idea, corriente en la época, de mujeres temerosas y resignadas a la explotación y el desprecio. También procuraban desear y ser deseadas.



Imagen 2. Dos hermanas trabajadoras roban a sus empleadores. *Diario La Época*, 22 de junio de 1948.

Esta conflictividad fue asociada al cuestionamiento de la deferencia y tutelajes culturales previas. El historiador Daniel James (1988) vio allí el aspecto “herético” del peronismo hacia las jerarquías sociales previas. Para el antiperonismo también las trabajadoras domésticas fueron representadas como un peligro. Daniel Gamero (2007) denominó al escritor argentino Julio Cortázar “el inventor del peronismo” por la creación de ciertas figuras narrativas luego incorporadas a los relatos e interpretaciones sobre qué fue el peronismo. En efecto, en su libro de cuentos aparecido en 1951, significativamente intitulado *Bestiario*, formuló algunas alegorías perdurables del peligro peronista donde las mujeres amenazantes tuvieron protagonismo. En uno de sus relatos, “Las puertas del cielo” (Cortázar 1951), narra la asistencia de dos varones blancos de clase media a un baile público donde se encuentran “los monstruos” que invaden la ciudad culta. Apelando a términos racistas y despectivos, Cortázar distingue sobre todo a las sirvientas de piel oscura, modales brutales y malos olores que, sin embargo, son en la figura de una ellas llamada Celina el

objeto de deseo sexual y temor. Los viejos tópicos del *malón* indígena y el carnaval se confundían en el baile popular que reunía a sirvientas y conscriptos provincianos. El peligro social y sexual de las trabajadoras domésticas fue un aspecto de la construcción del otro social y cultural en la literatura antiperonista. Por supuesto, no se trata de que Cortázar inventara un fenómeno tan complejo como el peronismo, sino que articuló literariamente temas *a posteriori* centrales para la historia de la literatura argentina vinculada con la temática peronista: las jerarquías entre lo alto y lo bajo en materia cultural, la suciedad y la limpieza, la violencia y la educación, la blanquitud y la negritud (o las pieles cobrizas).

Con el derrocamiento del gobierno peronista en septiembre de 1955 se abrió un nuevo escenario. El “cabecita negra” fue resignificado como el obrero combativo, masculino, haciendo olvidar la actuación de las mujeres del sector doméstico que habían suscitado tantas inquietudes y que Eva Perón -aunque de piel “blanca” era también una migrante interna desde su Junín natal- parecía representar en una mezcla de amenaza femenina donde se conjugaban violencia y sexualidad (Guber 2002).

Las dos décadas que transcurrieron entre el *coup d'État* de 1955 y la sangrienta dictadura militar de 1976-1983 verificaron cambios sociales en las costumbres públicas y privadas. Los *sixties* prometían finalmente la modernización demorada, con la internacionalización de los consumos, las innovaciones musicales y políticas. El trabajo de las mujeres en el hogar también se vio afectado por las nuevas tendencias y el desarrollo de tecnologías del procesamiento de alimentos y lavado de indumentaria que facilitaron un nuevo modelo donde los quehaceres domésticos dejaron de ser vistos, hasta cierto punto, como inadecuados para la “mujer moderna”. Inés Pérez (2015b) ha investigado esa reinención del trabajo en el hogar. La demanda global de trabajadoras domésticas disminuyó relativamente, pero en términos absolutos se mantuvo estable. Lo que no se perdió entre las promesas de la “modernización”, fue la repercusión de las representaciones culturales de las trabajadoras domésticas como personas incultas, oscuras y peligrosas, donde los discursos racializantes tienen un papel destacado. Tal vez sea de interés, como genealogía de nuestra “actualidad”, asomarnos a qué ha sucedido con las imágenes de las trabajadoras domésticas en los tiempos de cuarentena generadas por la pandemia del Covid-19.

Mi hipótesis es que el salto temporal, a primera vista arbitrario, muestra justamente que no es injustificado pues expone la persistencia de una relación antagónica de clase atravesada por odios, temores, amistades, injurias y ambivalencias irreductibles en una sociedad de clases. La índole económica del clasismo inherente a la relación social capitalista coexiste con otras dimensiones sistémicas afines a dicha desigualdad estructural, tales como la dominación masculina, el racismo y las jerarquías de cultura.

2. Trabajadoras domésticas y clasismo racializado en tiempos

de cuarentena

He indicado previamente que el año 2013 entraña una fecha importante para las trabajadoras domésticas pues por primera vez se reguló el sector de acuerdo a una ley nacional. Desde entonces se instituyó el límite de 8 horas diarias de trabajo y se prohibió la labor de personas menores a 16 años. Según informaba por esas fechas el sindicato Unión de Personal Auxiliar de Casa Particulares (UPACP), el número de personas empleadas en el rubro era de 1,100,000, en su enorme mayoría mujeres. Cinco años más tarde, la Segunda Encuesta Nacional a Trabajadores sobre Condiciones de Empleo, Trabajo, Salud y Seguridad, probablemente por un mejor registro de la actividad, elevó el número a 1,400,000 (Observatorio Superintendencia de Riesgos del Trabajo 2020; López Mourelo 2020). La composición femenina del empleo alcanzaba al 99,3% Este número representa el 17,4% de las mujeres asalariadas en el país y el 8,1% del empleo total. Una singularidad operante desde la década de 1960 es que un número creciente de trabajadoras proviene de los países limítrofes, especialmente de Bolivia y Paraguay. Esas trabajadoras alcanzan en 2018 al 10% de la fuerza laboral sectorial, aunque tradicionalmente el porcentaje se eleva en la ciudad de Buenos Aires (Rodríguez Nardelli 2016). No hay datos confiables sobre la significación del número de hijas de migrantes, entonces argentinas de primera generación, en la composición de la fuerza laboral. Lo que no se modifica es el estigma de la incultura y la subordinación racializada para esas trabajadoras.

Según informa la mencionada Encuesta, la mayoría de las trabajadoras se emplea después de cumplir los 35 años, a menudo en búsqueda de un ingreso como cabezas de familia. Esta cuestión se reveló como especialmente importante durante la cuarentena con la suspensión de las clases escolares pues la asistencia a las instituciones educativas creaban tiempos utilizados para el trabajo en otras casas, los que disminuyeron con la necesidad de asistir a sus propios hijos e hijas.

Las trabajadoras domésticas fueron especialmente afectadas por las medidas restrictivas de la cuarentena. A pesar de la ley de 2013 y los incentivos estatales para el registro formal de las trabajadoras -por ejemplo a través de la devolución de impuestos a las y los patrones- se calcula que todavía más de dos tercios del sector se encuentra en la informalidad en contraste con el 34% de ausencia de registro que afecta al conjunto de los asalariados. El auxilio del Estado al cese de actividades asalariadas, el Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia (IFE) fue implementado solo durante tres oportunidades a fines del año 2020.

Específicamente respecto del Covid-19, además de los efectos destructivos sobre la demanda de empleo, la modalidad “con retiro” y “por horas” hace que la circulación entre casas de labor y sus propios hogares exponga a las trabajadoras al contagio en trenes, subterráneos y colectivos. Recién en diciembre de 2020, es decir nueve meses después de iniciada la cuarentena, se autorizó a las trabajadoras domésticas el acceso al transporte público en calidad de “personal esencial”. Hasta entonces el acercamiento al lugar de trabajo

estuvo a cargo de los y las empleadores, lo que disminuyó drásticamente la demanda del servicio doméstico. Estas circunstancias se asemejan al análisis que proveyó Louisa Accari sobre la primera muerte por el Covid-19 registrado en el Brasil, que no por azar fue la trabajadora doméstica negra de 63 años de edad Cleonice Gonçalves (Accari 2020)

La problemática del transporte de las trabajadoras había llegado a los medios de comunicación antes de la pandemia. El conflicto se presentó en la zona de Nordelta, un conjunto de barrios cerrados conocidos como *countries* en el partido de Tigre, en noviembre de 2018 debido a que por presiones de los propios habitantes, se impedía a las trabajadoras utilizar los buses de transporte exclusivos del lugar. Por eso las empleadas se veían obligadas a utilizar *remises* (automóviles de alquiler) o taxis que, contra lo que determina la ley, en general abonaban de sus bolsillos. Las trabajadoras bloquearon el acceso a los barrios cerrados en protesta por la situación. De acuerdo a los choferes de los buses de la empresa MaryGo, ellas no podían subir porque todos los asientos estaban ocupados y no estaba permitido viajar paradas. Pero según algunas empleadas la situación era diferente. Una de las trabajadoras que no quiso dar su nombre para no sufrir represalias, testimonió al respecto: “Las empleadas nos enteramos que la verdad es que no nos dejan viajar en esos micros, con profesionales o propietarios, porque en una reunión de vecinos ‘nordelteños’ dijeron bien claro que los vecinos (gerentes de importantes empresas, políticos, empresarios, figuras mediáticas) no quieren viajar más con nosotras porque dicen que olemos mal y hablamos mucho.” (Pronto, 2018).

Los chats de vecinos de Nordelta, según informó la prensa, rechazó las acusaciones de discriminación y MaryGo tuvo que dejar subir a las trabajadoras. Lo cierto es que el mismo conflicto se había presentado con anterioridad, en 2008 y 2010, y había suscitado la misma forma de protesta por parte de las empleadas. La tensión entre los patrones ricos de Nordelta y las empleadas pobres y de piel insuficientemente “blanca” se constituyó en un escena de pugna ideológico durante los meses de pandemia aún en curso.

Un escándalo de repercusión nacional ocurrió cuando salieron a la luz twits de integrantes del equipo nacional de rugby “Los Pumas” con expresiones racistas especialmente dirigidas contra las trabajadoras domésticas. En este lugar es preciso aclarar que en la Argentina el rugby es defendido por sus practicantes como un *deporte de caballeros*, de gente *educada, blanca y con dinero*, en oposición al fútbol multitudinario, propio de *negros villeros*. La clase media no se halla siempre cómoda en esa división. Eso es particularmente válido para los varones de dicha clase para los cuales, de manera general, el fútbol y el asado de carne vacuna son marcadores de masculinidad heterosexual.

Los equipos de rugby más importantes está ubicados en la zona norte del conurbano, justamente cerca de Nordelta. La misma situación se reitera en otras sedes de equipos de rugby del país, como en Mendoza y Tucumán, en los que el deporte se identifica como marca de distinción de la clase rica. De hecho, la oposición al fútbol de “negros” desencadenó el hecho. Los Pumas no

homenajearon al recientemente fallecido popular futbolista Diego Maradona en un partido jugado con los All Blacks de Nueva Zelanda, quienes sí manifestaron su recuerdo. Subrayo aquí que en la Argentina Maradona es tan adorado como despreciado, contándose en esta última actitud los reproches de “negro”, “villero”, “violento”, “peronista”, “zurdo”, “gordo”, “drogadicto”, entre otros. En medio de la polémica suscitada por el olvido o descuido en el duelo por el ídolo popular, en diciembre de 2020 se dieron a conocer antiguos twits de integrantes de Los Pumas, y entre ellos su capitán, en la que bromeaban con expresiones como las siguientes:

El odio a los bolivianos, paraguayos, etc. nace de esa mucama a la que una vez se le cayó un pelo en tu comida (Pablo Matera, capitán); Voy a rapar a la mucama la puta madre (Matera); Mi empleada es un primate fuera de joda (Guido Petti, jugador); Qué es una mucama embarazada de trillizos? Un kit de limpieza (Petti).



Imagen 3: Twits de rugbiers argentinos.



Imagen 4: Twits de rugbiers argentinos.

Uno de los varios sindicatos que representan a las empleadas, la Unión de Trabajadoras Domésticas y Afines (UTDA) reaccionó condenando los twits que,

afirmaba, no eran exclusivos de los jugadores de rugby involucrados:

La UTDA repudia enérgicamente la expresiones racistas, xenófobas y misóginas proferidas por tres integrantes del seleccionado argentino de rugby, las cuales en alguna medida demuestran los prejuicios que posee un sector importante de la sociedad argentina respecto de nuestro colectivo laboral y del valor de nuestro trabajo (Gestión Sindical 2020).

La repercusión del debate cultural y social generado por el caso de los rugbiers recorrió durante varios días los medios de comunicación y las redes sociales de la Argentina. Incluso fue tema de un personaje sarcástico creado por el actor Santiago Campana, “Dicky del Solar” de Nordelta (por ejemplo en <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-II-UBbs1w>). Del Solar es un apellido tradicional del rugby local. Dicky recupera los temas tradicionales de los conflictos que se ocultan detrás de la relación con la empleada Betty, a la que llama en tono jocoso “Betún” (*bitumen*, en alusión evidente al color oscuro de su piel). Por ejemplo, en el video de Youtube asociado al enlace, Dicky reprocha a Betty, quien “no es argentina”, comer demasiados alfajores que el empleador tiene contados, o hacer llamados telefónicos de larga distancia utilizando el aparato del patrón. En el mismo tono dice haberse preocupado por la salud de Betty pues podría olvidarse cómo limpiar pero, añade, que “por lo bien que lo hace pareciera llevarlo en el ADN”. En la serie de Dicky del Solar, Betty juega un rol central en la representación del clasismo y racismo argentinos.

La intersección de dimensiones de clase, racialización, color de piel, género y cultura perdieron solo parcialmente la poderosa conexión con el fenómeno del peronismo visto en la sección anterior de este artículo. El nexo continúa de alguna manera vigente, así sea debilitado. Lo que se mantiene resistiendo las promesas de la “modernización” son las cristalizaciones clasistas, racistas y misóginas que desmienten las ilusiones de un país “sin problemas raciales”. Las circunstancias particulares de la extensa cuarentena no fueron obstáculo para que dejen de manifestarse.

3. Conclusiones: clase, género y jerarquías de color de piel en la Argentina

El propósito de este trabajo consistió en destacar dos lineamientos que en mi opinión pueden enriquecer la reflexión sobre el racismo en la sociedad argentina contemporánea. En primer lugar, la mediana duración de la historia de las trabajadoras domésticas revela la interacción entre procesos de cambio particulares (la consolidación del Estado nación en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX, el peronismo, la pandemia de Covid-19) y sedimentaciones de fenómenos que resisten el paso del tiempo. Es lo que se observa respecto de los atributos racializados del trabajo doméstico sobre todo a partir de 1930, aunque en

realidad así se reconfiguraban antiguas clasificaciones provenientes de tiempos coloniales. El mito del país blanco y sin conflictos raciales revela sus dificultades cuando reconstruimos las trayectorias de las trabajadoras domésticas. En segundo lugar se encuentra la conveniencia de intersectar el análisis de clase con la racialización y las jerarquizaciones atribuidas al color de piel, rasgos culturales y corporales asignados a ciertas ocupaciones, tales como el olor de las trabajadoras domésticas. Por supuesto, estas cuestiones son hallables en otras experiencias históricas. Se recordará así que en la película surcoreana *Parasite* (2019), la violencia de clase desde abajo es desatada cuando el rico empleador confiesa no tolerar el olor “insoportable” de los empleados domésticos. La cuestión del olor fue significativa en el relato de Cortázar sobre los “monstruos” antes mencionado y fue expresada por una trabajadora como una de las razones por las cuales no las dejaban utilizar los transportes de Nordelta.

Las trabajadoras domésticas explotadas, despreciadas y discriminadas sistemáticamente no fueron meras víctimas de las duras condiciones en que vivieron y viven. Las formas de la lucha de clases son complejas y dinámicas. Suelen adoptar las configuraciones posibilitadas por las situaciones concretas. En los tiempos del primer peronismo 1945-1955 la conflictividad de clase asumió la institucionalización gremial, el reclamo por no ser llamadas “sirvientas” sino “trabajadoras”, e incluso acciones que no por ser delictivas están eximidas de ingresar al repertorio de pugna clasista.

Ya bien avanzado el siglo XXI el contexto nacional y global se ha modificado enormemente. El mundo es otro. Pero también es el mismo si reflexionamos cómo incluso en una situación de pandemia, los discursos y prácticas de larga duración revelan una obstinada persistencia. Las maneras en que son consideradas y representadas las trabajadoras domésticas en una zona exclusiva como Nordelta, del cual el escándalo de los twits de los rugbiers son un aspecto, expresa las continuidades en el cambio de un país cuyas clases dominantes e intelectuales lo han imaginado como “moderno”, no “latinoamericano” sino “europeo”, “blanco” y “culto”. Por lo tanto debían invisibilizar o subordinar como inferiores a todos aquellos cuerpos y sujetos que no ingresaran en la construcción mítica.

Entiendo que la investigación sobre este tópico pierde filo crítico al utilizar ingenuamente el concepto de modernización, como es habitual hallar en los estudios argentinos. De hecho, la ideología de la modernización ha estado desde mediados del siglo XX en las premisas del desprecio y opresión de las trabajadoras domésticas vistas como ignorantes y brutas. De tal manera las concepciones sociales emitidas desde los sectores privilegiados y las categorías académicas pertenecen a un mismo conjunto de ideas, por cierto en general con actitudes éticas antagónicas.

Una versión distinta, en apariencia más empírica y matizada, es la que recupera los puntos de vista de los actores sociales, tanto por parte de las trabajadoras como de las empleadoras. Las reconstrucciones etnográficas aportan detalles significativos, por ejemplo a propósito del tópico de larga duración vinculado

con las relaciones afectivas como mediación de la divisoria de clases. Por ejemplo, se ha afirmado sobre el afecto, la amistad y la “casi familiaridad” entre empleadas y patronas, que desde el punto de vista patronal suele plasmarse en la idea de que no se trata de una relación de clase: las trabajadoras “ayudan” en la casa (Canevaro 2020). No es sencillo incorporar a esa narrativa del afecto las escisiones ligadas a las jerarquías de clase, de color de piel, de cultura. Algo similar ocurre con el concepto de reciprocidad y de dones entre empleadoras y empleadas (Casas 2019). El hecho de que se permita a una trabajadora llevar a un hijo a la casa de trabajo durante algunas horas diarias porque no es posible dejarlo al cuidado de otra persona o institución crea un compromiso informal con la parte empleadora. ¿Hasta qué punto ese permiso habilita a la patrona una demanda mayor de trabajo o disponibilidad horaria? El problema de la reciprocidad retorna a la condición asimétrica de la relación de clase, entorpeciendo la generación de un lazo de reciprocidad.

El perdurable nudo entre clasismo, racismo y jerarquizaciones de cultura interrumpe el sueño de una superación automática de los obstáculos para un mundo más justo. Tampoco la acción del Estado parece ser suficiente. La incorporación del trabajo doméstico al sistema de las normas laborales es tardío (2013) y aún hoy la informalidad del sector alcanza casi al 70%, revelando obstáculos sociales que exigen medidas más drásticas. Una estrategia más efectiva puede vislumbrarse al percibir la enormidad de los desafíos que supone el anudamiento de las diferentes formas de injusticia cuya alternativa también requiere ser global.

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Prison and Covid-19 in Argentina through the eyes of Twitter users

Erika M. Heredia

Abstract

In Argentina, overcrowded conditions and poor sanitation that exist in many prisons across the country threatened to contribute to the spread of COVID-19, increase mortality rates, and place the health system at high risk of collapse. In response, between March and May 2020, the Argentine government ordered the transfer of some prison inmates to home imprisonment, thus implementing international health organisations' guidelines. The conditions of the inmates and the crisis that the prison sector was experiencing, became a central issue in the public agenda during the first months of the pandemic.

In this paper, I analyse the social attitudes of Twitter users, employing critical discourse analysis tools to explore the cognitive social patterns that enable the reproduction of whiteness and its exclusion practices. Drawing on a broad sample of 16,836 tweets spanning from January to July 2020, I focus on those tweets that discuss the release of prisoners due to COVID-19.

This analysis unmaskes the conflictive relationship between the sector of the population invested in the idea of a nation linked to supposed European origins and those who deviate from this national myth. Consequently, the tweets operate as a cultural manifestation on whiteness in the context of an profound humanitarian crisis. They compose a sort of escape valve favoured by the anonymity and the affordances of the medium, where racism, dehumanization, eliminationism, and contempt for otherness are gruesomely exposed.

Keywords: prison; protest; COVID-19; whiteness; Argentina; Twitter.

Context

In Argentina, overcrowded conditions and poor sanitation that exist in many prisons across the country threatened to contribute to the spread of COVID-19, increase mortality rates, and place the health system at high risk of collapse. In response, between March and May 2020, the Argentine government ordered the transfer of some prison inmates to home imprisonment, thus implementing international health organisations' guidelines (Alderete et al., 2020; Gauna & Sanchez, 2020). The conditions of the inmates and the crisis that the prison sector was experiencing, became a central issue in the public agenda during the first months of the pandemic.

Prisons in Argentina, as in other countries like Brazil, Colombia or Mexico (Belmiro, 2014, Londoño et al, 2020), are overcrowded; for example, "In some

jurisdictions such as Buenos Aires (SPB), this situation was notoriously aggravated with a population of 42,460 detainees, which represents 40% of the total prison population of the country and with an overpopulation index of 110%” (Gauna & Sanchez, 2020, pp. 5 & 7). As a result, sanitary conditions are far from acceptable; there is little ventilation, there are shared dorms instead of individual cells, and prisoners take turns sleeping due to lack of beds (Inadi, 2020, Fahsbender, 2020).

In this context, the Argentine government and judicial institutions considered and adopted measures and recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to limit contagions and to protect the lives of inmates and their families. These measures included the dissemination of information on prevention and sanitation to the prison population, security personnel, and to visitors. Additionally, hygiene products were provided to the prison population, and alternative means of communication were used to reduce the transport of inmates for court proceedings (Alderete et al., 2020; Gauna & Sanchez, 2020, Fahsbender, 2020, Fahsbender & Palacios, 2020).

As the pandemic progressed and worsened, collective activities such as educational classes and visits were suspended. At the same time, in different prisons around the country, growing protests demanded the implementation of the measures suggested by WHO, OHCHR, SPT and IACHR. On April 24, 2020, after a 17-hour protest in the Villa Devoto Federal Penitentiary Complex—popularly known as Devoto’s Prison— inmates and government representatives reached an agreement that would be replicated in all federal prisons, and later in the provincial penal systems. As a result, the government created crisis committees involving the inmates and drew up lists of inmates who were at higher risk of severe Covid-19 illness, as a result of chronic diseases, or pregnancy in the case of female inmates. Officials also explored alternatives to prison sentences, including options such as house arrests, temporary exits, assisted freedom, and semi-freedom. These alternatives were aimed mainly at pregnant women, people over 60 years old, people who were housed with their children under the age of six, prison inmates with sentences of less than three years, people who were insulin-dependent diabetic patients, or who suffered from immunosuppression, chronic heart, or kidney failure. People eligible for these alternatives to prison sentences made up a significant percentage of the prison population. In the Federal Criminal System for example, almost 10% of inmates met those requirements —around 1,200 people (Alderete et al., 2020, Infobae, 2020). However, only 112 people were actually released from prison or obtained the benefit of home arrest, assisted release, or parole (Alderete et al., 2020). Similarly, in the Penal System of the Province of Buenos Aires, less than 2% of the inmates —a total of 800 people— were given alternatives to prison sentences (Inadi, 2020)

As a result, tensions around the inmates' protests and human rights concerns escalated in public discourse. It was against this background that I collected my samples from public Twitter exchanges, with the aim of analysing the social imaginary that shaped these discourses.

Twitter and tweets

In the current cyber public sphere, people are eager to participate through tweeting, reacting, favouriting, reading, or posting and assume their interactions as part of their socialization processes. Then, studying social media and Twitter in particular provides a sort of window on contemporary societies (Puschmann et al., 2014). In that sense, I contend that social media, along with other virtual artefacts, must be incorporated for studying culture and society in recognition of the new possibilities provided by social media APIs (Application Programming Interface), where the data available for research purposes were collected while the users were socializing online. In consequence, according to Veltri (2020), studying big data obtained through Twitter API amplifies the scope to understanding complex phenomena happening in Social Media by incorporating new instances related to behavioural information with minor conscious intervention of the subject studied. To put it clearly, traditional research relies on testimonies and self-reported data of the subjects studied, allowing them to answer according to conscient analysis of the situation. Meanwhile, APIs collect data when the subjects are performing their daily routine, thus diminishing data manipulation by subjects studied.

Agreeing with Puschmann et al. (2014) that the expression style in Twitter is closer to oral than written communication and, consequently, people write as they speak; I argue then that the content and form of tweets inevitably reflect people's social and personal circumstances, class formation, prejudices, fears, and hopes. Furthermore, cultural conceptions linked to ethnicity configure and shape the use that communities make of Twitter (Brock, 2012). On the other hand, according to Marwick & boyd (2010), Twitter users write for their imagined audiences and try to maintain certain authenticity between their off-line self and their virtual persona. In the case analysed here, I claim that it is possible to recognize certain concepts related to the people deprived of their liberty that the speakers share with their imagined audience. In that way, it is possible to comprehend certain social, moral, and aesthetic values they attribute to prison inmates. In other words, Twitter users try to establish links with people who share similar ideas, racial frames and beliefs (Brock, 2012); while they contradict those who do not share the same conceptions.

In Argentina, Twitter is placed in 4th place of preference preceded by WhatsApp Groups, Facebook, Instagram (Carrier, 2019) with over 5 million users (Kemp, 2021) whose ages correspond mostly to Generation Z¹ and millennials of middle

¹ Generation Z or GenZ are the cohort born between 1995 and 2010 whose older members are now beginning to integrate into the job market. They are the first generation who spent their

and upper-classes from urban areas. Such characteristics clearly distinguish Twitter from Facebook whose use “tends to grow as the socioeconomic level decreases” (Carrier, 2019, para. 4). At the same time, Argentine Twitter’s users seems to follow news accounts to be constantly informed on local and national political topics (TelcosMedia, 2019) which leads us to think that a large part of those who participate in Twitter belong to the middle and upper-classes who, according to vanDijk (1994), have the ability to handle multiple discourses that impact government policies. On the other hand, the privacy policies of Twitter favoured certain anonymity on the user and do not allow to identify for sure who is behind a Twitter account. However, due to the use of the language and words, the events depicted, and certain recurring notions linked with social class that is possible to read in the tweets, I suggest that users that appear in my analysed sample correspond mostly to millennials and GenZ of the dominant classes, or at least they diverge from the most vulnerable classes.

Whiteness and Twitter

Historically, since Colonialism, Argentina as well as other societies, was organized by the hierarchies established by whiteness as a system and an ideology that promoted a supposed superiority of certain social agents over others. Consequently, the privileges were distributed among the wealthy and dominant groups of the political class descending from European conquerors, the clergy, the nobility, and the petit bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, indigenous people, mestizos and Africans were marginalized, devoid of wealth and means of production. This way of structuring society —with modifications and negotiations— was inherited by contemporary societies. In Anibal Quijano’s words ‘The ‘social classes’, in Latin America, have ‘color’” (2000, p. 241) and compose a complex phenomenon where race and class are integrated. In this way, many times classist attitudes hide racism (Hernández, 2015; Moreno Figueroa, 2010).

Considering all that is possible to know about Twitter users in Argentina and understanding that whiteness as the dominant system penetrates all cultural aspects including discourses, I argue that in the tweets collected whiteness attitudes emerge in contrast to the ‘Other’. Agreeing with Geler (2016), Kaminsky (2009) and Gordillo (2016) this ‘Other’ is located —discursively— closer to blackness and represent the opposite of the whiteness expectations linked to the ideas of progress and civilization. Because whiteness in Argentina functions as an umbrella race that embraces all that is outside of ethnical blackness, being ‘black’ in Argentina is not really about colour, or physical appearance, but it has political, geographical, class, cultural, and moral implications that are rejected by the dominant sectors of society (Alberto & Elena, 2016; Geler, 2016; Gordillo, 2016; Kaminsky, 2009; Keeling, 2017; Reid Andrews, 2016). These sectors use all possible means to separate themselves

entire life in the Internet era so companies are starting to explore their consumer habits that may differ from millennials’ (Entrepreneur Staff, 2020).

The collected comments which I will discuss below expose racism, dehumanization, eliminationism, and white supremacy; in short, people expressed contempt for otherness and the socially marginalised strata of society in the context of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and its consequential protests. The shared themes in the tweets reflect how whiteness operates through exclusion practices. Then, the tweets reproduce a cultural manifestation of whiteness that display elements that are strongly rooted in cultural practices and deposited in national values.

Discussion

Killing with words

Of the total sub-sample, 146 tweets (32%) contain the words “kill” or “die” with recurring comments such as, “*¿Por qué no los matan?* [Why don't they kill them?]" or, “*se tienen que morir* [they have to die]" or “*hay que matarlos* [they have to be killed]", thus introducing eliminationism discourses. According to Neiwert, eliminationism is “a politic and a culture that rejects dialogue and the democratic exchange of ideas in favour of the pursuit of outright elimination of the opposite side, either through suppression, exile, and ejection or extermination” (2009, p. 11). This suggestion contained in the tweets that some entity, maybe ‘the society’, should eliminate people that are ‘uncomfortable’ must be historically contextualized.

The policy of state terrorism during Argentina’s last military dictatorship (1976-1983) had left deep marks on the country’s social fabric. The regime’s alleged enemies of the nation dubbed ‘*elementos subversivos*’ [subversive elements] were imprisoned, kidnapped, disappeared, and, in many cases, were executed by their captors and buried in nameless mass graves. Their recently born children were taken and resettled with regime-friendly foster families to avoid the ‘ideological contamination and chaos’ allegedly spread by their biological parents (Teubal, 2003). According to Gordillo (2016), the military dictatorship was dedicated to honouring white Argentina, so they treated the ‘subversive elements’ with the same violence with which the government treated Amerindians and mixed-race gauchos during the national state organization of Argentina in 19th Century.

During the dictatorship years, officials emphasized that the violence unleashed by the military regime was a spatially cleansing force, which hoped to rid Argentina of “*elementos ajenos al ser nacional* [elements alien to the national being].” Because this terror sought to prevent revolution and to discipline the subaltern classes in a sweeping fashion, it unleashed violence regardless of the victims’ skin color. But the state violence of the late 1970s also sought to whiten space through the destruction of places of perceived barbarism. (Gordillo, 2016, p. 253)

Then, Gordillo emphasized that whiteness is spatially situated and that can be true in relation to the tweets analysed here, where jail seems to be the place for blackness as if committing a crime was not typical of whites. Then, if jail is a space of blackness, getting rid of inmates seems desirable for those speaking through tweets.

One example reads, “*Que negros de mierda los de la carcel de Devoto. Un tiro y al rio, si total no sirven para nada* [Those shitty blacks in Devoto prison. One shot and into the river, they are useless]” (tweet 5680). This particular tweet that talks about killing inmates and throwing them into the river, are chilling reminders of the so-called ‘death flights’² of 1976-1977, where military aircrafts threw unconscious but alive political prisoners into the Río de la Plata and the Argentine Sea, where they drowned. Some of their bodies were subsequently found on the Argentine and Uruguayan coastlines and were then buried in nameless graves (Llorente, 2021).

In the sub-sample of tweets, one of the other most named technologies through which Twitter users imagined eliminating people was through the use of weapons, such as firearms or bombs. One tweet read, “*esos negros de mierda que violan, matan y roban nunca cambian hay q ponerles una bomba en la carcel* [Those negros de mierda that rape, kill and steal never change, we should bomb them in jail]” [tweet 4056]. This tweet makes it clear that in the eyes of its author, people deprived of their liberty should not have any possibility of social reintegration, and that they should not be valued as citizens.

I argue that this eliminationism is already rooted in an Argentine social imaginary due to the legacies of the dictatorships and the traumatic experiences that shape ways of dealing with people that are considered as being on the margins of society, reducing them to the point that they are not considered human beings anymore.

‘They are not people’

Gamarnik (2017) explained that during the last dictatorship various state outlets, the established media, and other institutions, supported an ideological mechanism that allowed to discursively disconnect the ‘subversive elements’ from their human nature. Likewise, according to the *Technical Report of the Discrimination Observatory* (Inadi, 2020), at the start of the prison protests, the headlines referred to them as ‘riots’ or ‘revolts’, implying that violence was an inherent condition of protest where the protesters were inmates. In that sense, the Inadi’s Report showed that written press played an important role in

² In October 2020 a trial started that focused on the death flights “On this occasion, the prosecution seeks to prove the existence of the “death flights” operated from Campo de Mayo, a military base in the northeast of the province of Buenos Aires where another clandestine detention center operated, to convict those who commanded that operation” (Llorente, 2021, para. 8).

perpetuating stigmatization of people involved in criminal proceedings. The Inadi's Report's findings echo van Dijk's assertion (1994) that the mass media contributes to the creation of discourses that establish and reinforce dominant socio-cognitive patterns for perceiving of marginalised groups and people.

These headlines seemed to suggest that people who are being processed by the penal systems do not have the right to protest. However, according to Inadi's Report people subjected to criminal proceedings are guaranteed to retain all their human rights by the Argentine National Constitution; they have the right "to work, to study, to health, to live in a healthy and clean environment, to their personal safety and integrity, life, dignity and non-discrimination, regardless of their procedural situation" (Inadi, 2020, p. 4) . Thus, in theory, the only restriction would be freedom of movement —although the imprisonment conditions impede the fully exercise of all their rights in practice. In any case, Inadi's Report suggested that by using certain terminology to define people deprived of their liberty during 2020 protests, the headlines of the written press tended to reduce their humanity and contribute to implant a fixed idea that they are not subjects protected by law.

The idea that inmates should not have any human rights also appeared in the analysed tweets. Therefore, anyone who commits a crime is denied the possibility of being fully human and is associated with the savage and the uncivilized. For example, one tweet read, "*Los presos pidiendo derechos ajajaja no ven que ustedes no tienen negros de mierda, no son personas* [Prisoners asking for rights ahahaha. don't you see that you haven't got any? *Negros de mierda*, you are not persons" (tweet 4808).

Many speakers insisted that inmates should be stripped off their human rights because they committed crimes. According to these speakers' socio-cognitive pattern, imprisonment is not enough; the inmates must continue to pay for their offenses with being deprived of their personal dignity. "*No queremos morir en una cárcel", dice el trapo q colgaron los presos en el motín. Me están jodiendo q los van a escuchar?? Xq no lo pensaron antes de entrar, NEGROS DE MIERDA!!!!* ["We don't want to die in a jail," says the rag that the prisoners hung up during the riot. Are they kidding me? Will anyone listen to them? Why didn't they think about it before they went (to jail), YOU NEGROS DE MIERDA !!!!]" (tweet 5456). In their view, inmates have no right to protest during the COVID-19 emergency, and therefore they have no right to health; the underlying idea seems to be that prison must be a sort of hell for those who broke the rules.

However, this dehumanization is even more complex because inmates are associated with a certain way of being and living. In the tweets cited in this article, being a prisoner is clearly equated with being black, which in the Argentine social imaginary has its own meaning. In the tweets collected, whiteness only emerges in contrast to the 'Other'. Being black in Argentina is not only about colour, or physical appearance, but it also has political, geographical, classist, cultural, and moral implications that are rejected by the dominant sectors of society. These sectors use all possible means to separate

themselves from the marginal, from the black, and from those who do not belong to their group that they envision as inserted in whiteness.

In that sense, to call someone '*negro de mierda*' is highly pejorative and violent because the term carries a lot of symbolism. To define it quickly, generally those who are classified as '*negros de mierda*' are suspected of living in *villas miseria* [shanty town] or at least in poor neighbourhoods. They are stereotyped to listen to urban tropical national music (cumbia³ o cuarteto⁴) and to go to places⁵ where people listen to that kind of music. They are also stereotyped to have precarious jobs, or to be unemployed and live on social assistance⁶, using welfare money to spend on consumer goods and on parties. They are imagined as alcoholics and drug users, as criminals and thieves that procreate many children who consume state resources. As a corollary they are defined as generally lazy and are accused of being unwilling to work. Finally, sometimes they are stereotyped as being from neighbouring countries and having indigenous and black features. Geler described these stereotypes as "*popular negritud*" [popular blackness] and representing "a social and cultural stigma against mestizo and low-income social groups" (2016, p. 220)

In more general parlance, I claim that anyone who suffers an inconvenience of any severity with an individual, state institution, or organization might exclaim the phrase "*¡qué negros de mierda!* [Those *negros de mierda*!]." The phrase colloquially means that these people have experienced something negative in their life, or that they have observed something negative. That is, it is a figure of speech with derogatory connotations that always hinges on otherness. This otherness is projected towards people who occupy different spaces and whose habits and customs differ from those who assume themselves to be 'white.' This self-recognition as 'white' comes from what Kaminsky called "the myth of a monocultural Argentina" (2009, p. 1) that was constructed by Argentine elites during 19th Century using material and discursive means. In that sense, Argentine elites —mostly based in the capital city— imagined the true Argentine citizen as cosmopolitan, white, and with European origins. They concentrated on displacing the native population and making the African population invisible, forcing them into poverty and marginalization, denying their ancestral roots, even in national censuses, where ethnic origins different from what was posited by whiteness did not appear until 2010. The result was the persistent idea that Argentines are basically Europeans 'transplanted' onto Argentine soil that mixed with each other, achieving a kind of 'melting pot' of 'European races'.

³ "*Cumbia* music, a tropical genre imported from Colombia became extremely successful in 1990s Argentina, especially among the urban working-class" (Aguiló, 2014, p. 178)

⁴ *Cuarteto* is a genre created in Cordoba in the 1940s, a mix between pasodoble and tarantella and tropical sounds. It engendered a 'popular' or working-class dance subculture as can be appreciated in the movie "*De caravana*" (Ruíz, 2010).

⁵ *Bailes* or *bailantas*, or concerts of those musical styles where people dance.

⁶ It generates conflicts with the middle-class over the payment of taxes and the use of the proceeds.

During the 20th century, the middle-classes and the institutions and state systems kept this belief alive through all the instances of discourse —books, educative system, artworks, main history narratives, mass media, among other mechanisms. Consequently, being white became an inherent characteristic of being Argentine (Adamovsky & Arza, 2012; Alberto & Elena, 2016; Geler, 2016; Gordillo, 2016; Joseph, 2000; Kaminsky, 2009; Keeling, 2017; Reid Andrews, 2016).

According to Geler (2016), whiteness in Argentina compounds a complex set of behaviours, assumptions and values that represent what is socially acceptable in relation with European ancestry and capitalism. For example, in my analysed sample one person had tweeted: “*En un motín de bs as los presos rompieron la cárcel y los familiares aplaudiéndolos desde afuera , que negros de mierda* [In a riot in Buenos Aires the prisoners caused damage to the jail and the relatives applauded them from the outside, those *negros de mierda*!]” (tweet 5558). The inmates and their families are labelled in the aforementioned derogatory ways because ‘popular’ blackness represents deviant ways of being uneducated and savage, while whiteness is considered normal, civilized, and obedient of the social rules.

‘All of them are murderers and rapists’

Governments around the world confronted the problem of prisons becoming potential breeding grounds for the Covid virus. Yet, in Argentina, the Fernández-led government action generated strong opposition and *cacerolazos*⁷ by outraged citizens, who demonstrated against an allegedly ‘massive release of prisoners’. They were inspired by press headlines that criticised the government’s actions, alleging that they failed to guarantee the safety of victims of past crimes and potential future encounters with their assailants (Fahsbender, 2020; Fahsbender & Palacios, 2020; Inadi, 2020; Infobae, 2020; Redacción AN / AG, 2020; Redacción La Nación, 2020).

According to the tweets analysed here, the concern was focused on the assumption that the most frequent crimes committed by inmates, in addition to robbery, are rape and murder. This attitude is apparent in tweet 5341, “*Estos negros de mierda no tienen reinserción en la sociedad. Por estas cosas, la pena de muerte (violadores y asesinos) debería aplicarse, para no desbordar las cárceles* [There is no reintegration into society for these *negros de mierda*. For these

⁷ *Cacerolazos* are protests where citizens make noise by hitting pots and pans to attract the attention of institutions and governments. According to Telechea, *cacerolazos* represent “a type of demonstration with peaceful characteristics. Its particularity lies in the symbolic concentration in a specific element, in this case, an instrument of cooking. In this way, the carrying of pans seeks to give a specific meaning to a manifestation that alludes to the right to life through the need to eat (2006, p. 142). According to the author, these protests initiated in 1982 by working-class families to which the petit bourgeois later joined. Over time it became one of the forms of protest preferred by the Argentine middle-class and they were massive during 2001 politic-economic crisis.

things, the death penalty (rapists and murderers) should be applied, so as not to overflow the prisons]”. In reality and despite the eliminationist desires of this Twitter user, less than 15% of the inmates were convicted for crimes related to murders (9.7%) or sexual offenses (4.5%) (CELIV, 2017). In other words, Argentina in general has a low homicide rate —6.6 per 100,000 inhabitants— but it has a high robbery rate (53.7%) —though most of these convictions are for attempted robbery—(CELIV, 2017; Pardo, 2016). For many Argentines, insecurity tends to be about property related crime, according to a survey carried out between 2010 and 2015 by the Argentine Catholic University Observatory (UCA). The study found that although only about 35% of those surveyed had suffered a criminal act, about 85% persistently felt insecurity related to crime. On the other hand, people from the lower social strata were more likely to suffer criminal acts, and less likely to report them. In turn, they have fewer material and personal tools to address the traumatic psychological consequences of those crimes (Muratori & Rodríguez Espínola, 2016).

This feeling of insecurity and the idea that the government is incapable of providing effective justice is evident throughout the analysed sub-sample, suggesting that the sentiment of powerlessness and impunity comes from structural junctures that remain unresolved:

Esto es peronismo en su máxima expresión, solo derechos y libertades para los delincuentes, los ciudadanos quédense encerrados y no vayan a trabajar, sino los multan y les abren una causa. ESTO ES LO QUE VOTARON NEGROS DE MIERDA [This is Peronism at its finest, only rights and freedoms for criminals. Citizens stay locked up and do not go to work, otherwise you will be fined and processed. THIS IS WHAT YOU NEGROS DE MIERDA HAVE VOTED FOR] (tweet 4393).

As is evident in the tweet, the speaker is discouraged by the measures of the current government and accuses the *negros de mierda* of having voted for the reduction of the rights of 'citizens'. In this sense, as I pointed out above, inmates and *negros de mierda* do not appear to be citizens to the authors of the tweets.

On the other hand, when the speaker points out “this is Peronism at its finest”, he/she suggests that Peronism as a political force never defended the right of the “citizens” and, on the contrary, punishes them. In this sense, it must be remembered that Peronism, although it is a movement that encompasses the entire political spectrum from left to right, has historically been associated with followed by the working-class, while the middle and upper-class opted for opposition parties. In this way, what the speaker calls “citizens” refers to those belonging to the white and dominant strata, and not those from the ‘non-white working-class’.

Dissenting opinions

However, in these highly polarized discourses there is minimal room for dissent. In a minority of tweets, the speakers point out how criminal behaviours are often racialized. According to the author of tweet 4353, the inmates are imagined as poor and non-white while felonies committed by white people are frequently invisibilized by public opinion.

Muchos hablan de los presos, como si solo hubiera homicidas, violadores y "negros de mierda". No hablan de los empresarios que estafan, de los rugbier que mataron en manada, no hablan de los que evaden impuestos como Macri. Ustedes no odian a los presos Odian los pobres. [Many speak of the prisoners, as if there were only murderers, rapists and "negros de mierda". They do not speak of the businessmen who defraud, of the rugby players who have killed in hordes, they do not speak of those who evade taxes like (former president) Macri. You don't hate the prisoners; you hate the poor.] (tweet 4353)

In this sense, this speaker frames the general public opinion about people deprived of liberty and points out that the vulnerable classes are not the only ones capable of committing crimes. However, according to the speaker's criteria, public opinion rarely associates the middle- and upper-class with blackness.

Curiously, this type of dissident ideas in the analysed sample are seldom embraced as in the tweet 4353. However, they are cited by the speakers who do associate popular blackness with jail, accusing those who empathize with the human rights of the prison inmates of being irrational and naïve "*hay gente q defiende lo indefendible esos negros de mierda que violan, matan y roban nunca cambian*" [There are people who defend the indefensible, those *negros de mierda* who rape, kill and steal never change]" (tweet 4056). Here the speaker is raising once again the impossibility of social reintegration of prisoners deprived of their liberty that I mentioned before.

In turn, some speakers claimed that defending the rights of prison inmates portrays the typical hypocrisy of people who lack experience in the everyday reality of the country:

Me cruce con varias personas que tenían la bandera de defender a los presos, a los que roban y te venían con 123229 argumentos, hasta que esos mismos que defendía les robaron sus iPhone y cambiaron el discurso a: negros de mierda, muertos los quiero... hipocresía. [I met several people who defended the prisoners, those who steal, and they came to you with 123229 arguments. Until those very ones they defended stole their iPhone. At that time, they changed the speech to: 'negros de mierda, I want you dead!' ... hypocrisy. (tweet 4958)]

The selection of the stolen object made by the speaker of the ABCD tweet is noteworthy. Carrying an iPhone represents in Argentina a certain purchasing

power and a social class. Clearly, the protagonists depicted in this tweet are not *negros de mierda*, but members of the accommodated classes who, due to social inexperience, dare to defend the ‘enemies’ of the way of life as outlined by whiteness.

In that sense the discussion is always circular among members of the same imagined community who occupy certain places in the upper layers of the social pyramid. They are never directly arguing with the ‘*negros de mierda*’, but, rather, they are talking about the *negros de mierda* who are not on Twitter but in the places that whiteness has assigned them. In the case analyzed here, that place is jail.

Conclusions

Although there is a heterogeneous audience, my research shows how Twitter constitutes one of the spaces where whiteness is manifested and reproduced. On this Twitter's sample, those who consider themselves members of the true white and European Argentina linked to the idea of order and progress, use their tweets to differentiate themselves from those inserted in ‘popular’ blackness. In this arena, people deprived of their liberty were associated with the ideas of anti-progress, chaos, and barbarism. Those racist structures of domination practiced through discourse act as barriers to social advance and integration of the inmates depriving them of any possibility of integrating as citizens with full rights.

The sampled tweets also revealed how stigmatization and prejudice are so normalized that they are almost not questioned. That is the true power of whiteness as an ideology; it is turned invisible and to unmask its mechanisms requires an ability to carry out an extensive deconstructive exercise. This paper aimed to shed light on some of these mechanisms and their linkages to a cultural framework. In this sense, each tweet integrates meaning and symbolisms that define them as cultural artefacts that match the social fabric from which they emerged.

The data represented here then, highlight the importance of analysing discourse, especially in the age of social media, as a manifestation of a social imaginary that condemns those who are not contained into the myth of monocultural Argentina. Nevertheless, activism could benefit from this way of assessing the ideas that underpin public opinion in a tangible way. In that sense, research about whiteness praxis in Argentina were stated previously by other authors; however, this research adds tools to monitor them on new environments offered by social media. With this knowledge, activist groups could create strategies intended to correct wrong conceptions regarding prison populations.

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About the author

Erika M. Heredia's research explores how national identities are expressed in digital environments, with a special interest in narratives that build a sense of community in social media. She believes that the study of technological tools from a critical point of view provides a path toward social justice, the final purpose of all academic intervention in society. She recently earned her PhD degree in Texts and Technology, University of Central Florida (2021) where she analyzed how Twitter indirectly exposes daily whiteness in users from Mexico and Argentina while explored the role of the United States as symbolic and cultural power over those countries. Her previous studies include a M.A. in Humanistic Studies (Tec. De Monterrey, Mex. 2014) and a B.A. in Audiovisual Communication (UBP, Arg. 2005). For more information, see www.erikamheredia.com / info at erikamheredia.com

Las modalidades del racismo hacia las y los Wichí en el siglo XXI (Chaco salteño, Argentina)

Natalia Boffa¹

Abstract

El racismo en el cono sur puede ser analizado desde tiempos coloniales, desde sus distintas etapas y virajes político-ideológicos. Un cambio de época constitutivo del racismo en Argentina, que le aportó nueva entidad y fundamentación científica, ocurrió desde mediados del siglo XIX, con la instauración de la dicotomía “civilización y barbarie”, durante la formación del Estado nacional. A partir de esto, mayormente, los indígenas fueron identificados como los enemigos de la nueva nación. Las políticas indigenistas del siglo XX no lograron subsanar esta dicotomía ni superar muchos de los prejuicios y estigmas reproducidos desde el siglo anterior; más bien, podríamos pensar que el racismo se ha institucionalizado y normalizado. En este trabajo nos abocamos a sus concretas manifestaciones hacia las comunidades wichí del Chaco salteño (Argentina), en lo que va del siglo XXI, antes y durante la pandemia. Específicamente, tomamos tres casos que fueron noticia en las redes sociales, que pusieron en debate ciertas prácticas políticas, interpretadas como discriminatorias y racistas por sus protagonistas wichí. Los casos están vinculados a una escuela de Misión Chaqueña, al sistema de salud en Tartagal y Embarcación y a los proyectos alimentarios de una ONG. Desarrollamos el estudio a partir de relatos y fuentes recuperadas de trabajos en terreno, visitas a archivos y publicaciones online, en base al método de la Historia Oral.

Keywords: Pueblo Wichí - Políticas racistas – Luchas indígenas – Educación – Salud – Alimentación.

¹ Este artículo fue redactado en plural, porque forma parte de las reflexiones que hemos realizado a lo largo de varios años en grupos de trabajo y de extensión universitaria; sin embargo, su elaboración es de mi exclusiva autoría, es resultado de mis estudios e interpretaciones y me responsabilizo de los errores, omisiones y contradicciones que puedan aparecer.

Las formas concretas del racismo institucional en el Chaco salteño²

Introducción

En el último año, aparecieron en la prensa nacional y provincial noticias sobre varios casos de muertes por desnutrición infantil en el Chaco salteño, en donde las afectadas eran poblaciones indígenas wichí de la zona rural (por ejemplo, ver Clarín 2020; Infobae 2020; Quepasasalta 2020) (Imagen 1). Algunas de las noticias contaban que se había declarado la emergencia sociosanitaria en la zona; sin embargo, otras, más tardías, mostraban que a pesar de esto seguían sucediendo los casos de muertes por desnutrición. Esto, en parte, se podía atribuir a los efectos socioeconómicos de las medidas tomadas por la pandemia. Al respecto, las estimaciones oficiales indicaban que, en Argentina, los niños, niñas y adolescentes pobres habrían pasado de 7 a 8,3 millones durante el año 2020 (UNICEF 2020); lo que indicaba mayor cantidad de grupos sociales vulnerados y la profundización de sus condiciones de precariedad (como las situaciones padecidas por las comunidades o poblados wichí salteños).

No obstante, ya han existido casos de desnutrición en distintos períodos históricos y la prensa los ha mostrado o no, por distintas razones o intereses (ver, por ejemplo, Clarín 2015). En el presente artículo no nos ocupamos de analizar las causas de su aparición en la prensa, tampoco las condiciones socioeconómicas individuales de cada caso de desnutrición infantil en Salta, mucho menos las causas clínicas o biológicas. Más bien, nos interesan analizar ciertas explicaciones socio-históricas, incluidas las manifestaciones sociales, los prejuicios y estigmas que se han hecho explícitos en torno a estos casos; por eso, para empezar, hicimos foco en las respuestas o explicaciones que los y las comentaristas de las noticias adujeron como parte del problema. Estas personas subieron comentarios que apuntaban a responsabilizar a las madres indígenas y a criminalizar a sus familias, justificando esto mediante la reproducción de una serie de prejuicios y estereotipos de clase, género y étnico-raciales. Es decir, a la terrible información que transmitían las noticias, se le sumaban comentarios llenos de estigmatizaciones sobre las y los indígenas y, sobre todo, referidos a las madres indígenas (no tanto a los padres u otros familiares). Por ejemplo, las ponían bajo sospecha porque, decían, “la madre no presenta ningún cuadro de desnutrición”; luego se pasaba a explicar que el problema de la desnutrición sucedía porque “los originarios viven de la caza y la pesca, es decir [son] VAGOS” y que, en lugar de utilizar el dinero de los planes sociales para alimentos, lo usaban para alcohol y drogas (Quepasasalta 2020, énfasis en original). Desde estas acusaciones, los comentarios pasaban directamente a criminalizar a “los padres” (léase “padre y madre”), que, según decían, deberían estar presos. Mientras que en otra de estas noticias se hablaba de que el

² El Chaco salteño es la parte del Gran Chaco que se encuentra en la provincia de Salta, Argentina. El Gran Chaco es una inmensa planicie que se extiende desde la pre-cordillera hacia el este, ocupa el corazón de Sudamérica y es la segunda zona boscosa más importante luego de la Amazonía en este continente (Torrella y Adámoli 2006).

problema era que estas comunidades estaban “olvidadas” o “abandonadas”, como si la desnutrición fuera causada accidentalmente, como si la falta de asistencia del Estado fuera por omisión o como si esto se solucionara con la asistencia del Estado.



Imagen 1: niñas wichí. Fuente: registro personal (La Golondrina, 10 de enero de 2001).

A partir de todo esto, nos surgieron una serie de interrogantes acerca de cuál era el origen social e institucional de estos prejuicios y cómo la reproducción de estas acusaciones, sospechas y estigmatizaciones manifestaron expresiones de jerarquización y diferenciación, entre las que nos interesaron sobre todo las enunciaciones étnico-raciales (la cuestión de clase y género ameritan trabajos por separado, en profundidad).

Al respecto, desde hace tiempo, distintos estudios han coincidido en que la racialización de las poblaciones tuvo un lugar central en el proceso de dominación y explotación colonial (Fanon 1961; Bonfil Batalla 1989; Quijano 2000, entre otras y otros). En América, desde el siglo XVI se discutió si los denominados “indígenas” compartían la naturaleza humana con los europeos y, cuando el Papado lo confirmó, se estableció que pertenecían a una categoría inferior; desde entonces, la idea de raza y el “complejo ideológico del racismo impregnan todos y cada uno de los ámbitos de la existencia social” (Quintero 2015, 89; ver también Quijano 2001). En el siglo XIX, a raíz de la

reestructuración del capitalismo se produjo la superación de la colonización ibérica en Latinoamérica; sin embargo, esto no incluyó la supresión de la jerarquización y diferenciación étnico-racial; por el contrario, los Estados nacionales independizados reprodujeron esa misma estructuración societal. Esto fue lo que permitió la continuidad de la relación de dominación colonial, ya no como relaciones de colonización sino de colonialidad (Grosfoguel 2006).

Durante la formación del Estado argentino, esto se tradujo en políticas de exterminio, que, a partir de entonces, negaron las territorialidades indígenas y su capacidad de negociación étnica (Trincheró 2000). Así, desde la perspectiva liberal-positivista, los indígenas fueron asimilados como “salvajes”, “bárbaros” e “inmóviles” (Sarmiento [1847] 2007; Alberdi [1852] 2007) y fueron considerados “enemigos tradicionales desde tiempos coloniales” (Roca 1884). Esto tenía la intención de someter a borrado a esta parte de la población y, en algunos casos, reprochar las anteriores políticas de pactos, acuerdos, alianzas y amistades entre gobernadores y soberanos indígenas (Trincheró 2000; Farberman y Ratto 2009; Bayer 2010, entre otros). En el Gran Chaco, no se produjeron grandes modificaciones en la zona de “frontera”³ hasta avanzado el siglo XIX, cuando la incipiente industria azucarera y las tradicionales actividades ganaderas comenzaron a cobrar relevancia y los contratistas y colonos comenzaron a demandar mano de obra indígena. Esto se sumó a las campañas militares, algunas exploratorias y otras ejemplificadoras o de exterminio, que intentaban poner al Gran Chaco bajo jurisdicción del Estado nacional. De esta manera, en esta región, a las acciones militares punitivas contra grupos indígenas “enemigos” se sumaron otras formas de dominación que apuntaban a preservar la masa de trabajadores disponibles. En este punto fueron centrales las misiones religiosas para contener y propiciar el disciplinamiento, aunque por períodos entraban en tensión con otros grupos de poder (Teruel 2005; Spota 2010; Iñigo Carrera 2011).

Desde entonces, los sectores hegemónicos dieron por eliminada, reducida, sometida o asimilada a la población “no blanca” del país e implantaron la idea de una “Argentina Blanca”⁴, un país poblado por descendientes de europeos donde no habría racismo porque no habría “negros” (afrodescendientes, indígenas o mestizos) (Ratier 1972; Álvarez Leguizamón 2016; Gordillo 2020). Cualquier hecho que ponga esto en contradicción, que produzca su negación, como las manifestaciones públicas o disturbios callejeros donde generalmente

³ Nombre que se le daba a la zona no-sometida por el Estado en formación y que estaba bajo el dominio de distintas parcialidades indígenas.

⁴ Con este término, Gordillo, no se refiere a “un actor bien delimitado y compuesto por gente de piel blanca”, sino que concibe a la “Argentina Blanca” como un proyecto territorial y de clase que se manifiesta a nivel cotidiano en el deseo no siempre consciente de sentir que la geografía nacional es en gran parte europea (Gordillo, 2020, 10). De hecho, como ejemplo, menciona que dentro de los críticos de la “Argentina Blanca” existen personas de piel clara y ojos azules como Nora Cortiñas (referente destacada de derechos humanos y cofundadora de Madres de Plaza de Mayo) y Osvaldo Bayer (historiador, escritor y periodista reconocido), mientras que algunos de sus defensores muestran rasgos indígenas como el exgobernador de Salta, Juan Carlos Romero.

participan sectores pobres, quienes son tildados de “negros”, ha resultado conflictivo y se ha traducido en la (re)legitimación de la violencia estatal. Por ejemplo, en el 17 de octubre de 1945, cuando irrumpen los “cabecitas negras”⁵ en la Plaza de Mayo pidiendo la liberación de Perón (Ratier 1972) o, más recientemente, en los saqueos cordobeses y tucumanos de 2013, cuando los manifestantes fueron denigrados como “negros de mierda” en las redes sociales y reprimidos por las fuerzas de seguridad (Gordillo 2020), por nombrar sólo un par entre tantos otros casos.

Estas expresiones racistas no sólo aparecen de manera pública en las redes sociales o en las calles, sino que suelen incluir diversas formas de racismo no declaradas, no percibidas socialmente, incrustadas en y naturalizadas por instituciones de distinto tipo. Según Taguieff (1998), los racismos⁶ pueden aludir tanto a formas de intolerancia de grupos marginales o minorías como a formas institucionalizadas, movilizaciones étnico-raciales, clásicos movimientos xenófobos, entre otros. En este sentido, plantea que el fenómeno racismo tiene un carácter pluridimensional que puede incluir actitudes (opiniones, prejuicios, insultos, entre otros), comportamientos (evitamiento, persecución), funcionamientos institucionales (diferenciación dentro de los organismos del Estado) y discursos ideológicos o programas políticos (generalmente ligados a los nacionalismos). Esto no debe confundirse con el etnocentrismo que han podido desarrollar distintas sociedades a lo largo de la historia y que alude a la autopreferencia y hostilidad hacia otros grupos; el racismo “tiene fecha y lugar de nacimiento”, dice el autor, por eso es necesario historizarlo y hacerlo inteligible. Desde esta perspectiva, la historización de los racismos indefectiblemente remite a la primera modernidad, es una invención de occidente, que comienza a finales de la Edad Media y que se expandió a nivel planetario a través de los imperialismos coloniales⁷ (Taguieff 1998; Wieviorka 2009).

Específicamente, el racismo institucionalizado no se presenta como una idea o doctrina ni es explícito, sino que “deja de serlo y permite, en última instancia, disociar al racismo en actos de las intenciones o de la conciencia de algunos actores” (Wieviorka 2009, 36). De esta manera, el problema se presenta como una cuestión estructural, en donde el racismo se despliega a través de mecanismos rutinarios en el marco de un sistema generalizado. Esto no quiere

⁵ Forma despectiva en que se nombra a la migración interna que se asienta en la capital porteña, al menos desde el 17 de octubre de 1945, cuando se produjeron masivas movilizaciones obreras en apoyo a Juan Domingo Perón.

⁶ Pierre André Taguieff (1998) proponía desencializar el racismo, racistas y antirracistas, por eso se refiere a “los racismos” y “los antirracismos”. A partir de esto, proponía que las clasificaciones de los racismos no resultan de fenómenos totalmente distinguibles, sino que existe una cierta “unidad del racismo”, dentro de la que se pueden distinguir distintas lógicas de jerarquización y diferenciación, su co-presencia, contradicciones, combinaciones históricas y vigencia.

⁷ A pesar de que “raza”, como término científico, no apareció hasta la Ilustración, en el siglo XVIII, los racismos constituyeron la base de los sistemas de clasificación social coloniales (Wieviorka 2009, 19-20).

decir que los actores queden libres de racismo o de ser racistas; más bien, por el contrario, los actores construyen y constituyen las instituciones. Tampoco quiere decir que la idea de “raza” pueda deificarse como categoría analítica, disociada de las relaciones de clase y género, dentro del sistema capitalista. Ya en 1967, Jeanne Hersch planteaba que la idea de “raza”, ambigua y esquiva, seguía remitiendo, como un hecho factual, a las toscas observaciones sobre el color de piel y textura de cabello, para designar lo superior e inferior y justificar las desigualdades; así, hechos y valores se han combinado en “raza” y la han convertido en “un componente del sistema mundial y la historia” (Hersch 1967, 115-116). Pensar el racismo institucional permite analizar las formas veladas, no brutales, de este fenómeno y sus abscesos en situaciones más visibles de violencia.

En principio, las noticias nos recordaron algunos de los casos que relataron distintas personas wichí durante los trabajos en terreno, poco tiempo atrás; pero en estos relatos, además de la discriminación, se expresaban distintas formas de resistencia, por eso, nos preguntábamos si podían pensarse como luchas antirracistas. Recuperamos tres casos, de entre muchos otros posibles, que se desarrollaron en el ámbito educativo, de salud y en proyectos alimentarios, en donde las distintas expresiones despectivas o denigratorias hacia las personas wichí quedaron expuestas y denunciadas públicamente por los y las wichí en cada caso, igual que ocurrió con la desnutrición infantil. De este modo, el objetivo general de este trabajo se orientó a dilucidar distintas formas de discriminación étnico-racial desde los reclamos de las propias víctimas. A partir de esto, intentamos distinguir casos de discriminación y racismo desde sus lógicas sociales y, sobre todo, desde sus lógicas institucionales. De esta manera, analizamos la forma en que estas manifestaciones racistas y las luchas wichí por combatirlas expresaron, por separado y en conjunto, el carácter pluridimensional del racismo en la zona de estudio y constituyeron así ciertas luchas antirracistas.

Concretamente, nos abocamos a las expresiones, gestos y prácticas racistas que nuestras y nuestros interlocutores han padecido en distintos ámbitos institucionales y que han relatado en entrevistas personales o denunciado ante medios de comunicación y la justicia. Los tres casos que describimos en este trabajo transcurrieron en el Chaco salteño, en comunidades wichí, pero los procesos descriptos no eran los únicos de esta zona; más bien, fueron seleccionados de entre muchos otros casos posibles de analizar. La selección se basó en decisiones metodológicas, en donde se tuvieron en cuenta las experiencias en terreno y la posibilidad de mantener comunicaciones durante la pandemia. Los trabajos de campo fueron realizados mayormente entre 2012 y 2015. En aquel entonces buscábamos comprender las luchas socioterritoriales wichí en la zona rural de la región; sin embargo, durante su desarrollo fue inevitable conversar sobre otras problemáticas, lo que fue develando aspectos comunes de las diversas luchas del pueblo wichí. Uno de estos aspectos era el racismo, que atravesaba la vida cotidiana de las comunidades que recorríamos. Así, seleccionamos aquellos casos cuyo contexto y problemática de base habíamos relevado en los trabajos de campo, que involucraron a personas ya

entrevistadas en ese entonces y que se hicieron públicos a través de los medios de comunicación, aunque no hayamos estado presentes en el momento de los hechos. El primer caso ocurrió en la escuela de Misión Chaqueña y permitió analizar la negación del acceso a cargos jerárquicos a la población indígena capacitada. El segundo caso transcurrió en Tartagal y dejó ver la situación de racismo en el sistema de salud, en situaciones cotidianas, pero que terminaron en expresiones de violencia. El tercer caso atraviesa al Chaco salteño, porque se trata de las declaraciones de una persona a cargo de proyectos alimentarios en distintas comunidades wichí, en donde se terminó denigrando las formas de vida de esas mismas comunidades.

Este estudio se basó en trabajos etnográficos y de Historia Oral, que permitieron la vinculación de las entrevistas en profundidad realizadas durante los trabajos en terreno con material de archivo oficial y periodístico, impreso y digital, mediante la triangulación metódica de la información (Rivera Cusicanqui 1987; Bartolomé 2003; Guber 2005). Las entrevistas en profundidad se realizaron con consentimiento de los actores, pero agregamos iniciales ficticias a aquellos que puedan estar amenazados o en peligro y dejamos los nombres de aquellas y aquellos que aparecen en los artículos periodísticos ya publicados en internet. El trabajo de archivo consistió en la indagación y recopilación de artículos periodísticos online sobre los casos seleccionados, así como la recuperación del registro fotográfico de distintos documentos que aludían al racismo (actas, denuncias y otros actos judiciales que hicieron las organizaciones wichí) realizado en el transcurso de los trabajos de campo. También indagamos los sitios web oficiales del gobierno nacional, provincial y municipal y de organizaciones no gubernamentales, desde donde recopilamos proyectos, publicaciones y acciones emprendidas en relación a los casos de estudio. Además, contábamos con copias de proyectos y otros documentos obtenidos en terreno. El tema es muy vasto y el territorio muy amplio, por eso seguramente la recopilación de material puede resultar parcial; sin embargo, creemos que es suficiente para este primer acercamiento a la problemática planteada.

Fundamentalmente, buscamos reconstruir los sentidos y significaciones que los propios actores expresaban respecto al racismo y que representaron los enclaves o potencias de las luchas desplegadas en el seno de las instituciones interpeladas. En esta operación, el esfuerzo por desnaturalizar el lugar común de lo hegemónico nos llevó a indagar en el interior de los procesos de lucha wichí; pero, lamentablemente, esto puede traer dificultades, como ha planteado Saltalamacchia (1994), porque las conversaciones y reuniones que suceden en el momento en que se van forjando las luchas sociales, quedan a lo sumo en la memoria, pero es imposible encontrarlos en archivo documental alguno. De este modo, recurrir a la memoria de aquellas personas que pudieron estar vinculadas de alguna manera se convierte en una vía central para acceder a esa información. Esto, combinado con la contrastación o apoyatura de las noticias periodísticas y otros documentos públicos, permitió realizar un análisis donde comenzaron a revelarse algunas de las formas veladas y no tan veladas del racismo hacia los wichí salteños, particularmente relatados desde sus propios padecimientos y luchas.

Racismo en educación: la escuela de Misión Chaqueña y la lucha en la capital salteña

El primer caso que nos interesa presentar comenzó en la escuela primaria de Misión Chaqueña, una de las comunidades rurales wichí más grandes del Chaco salteño⁸. En noviembre de 2018 un grupo de familias wichí tomó la escuela por un mes como acción de protesta, porque reclamaban que el cargo de Directora para este establecimiento educativo debía ser ocupado por una persona wichí, no criolla. Las trabas burocráticas impuestas para el acceso de la única maestra wichí que consideraban que reunía las condiciones generaron la protesta y toma de la escuela. En enero de 2019, ante la negativa e inacción del gobierno, los grupos movilizados se trasladaron a la ciudad de Salta capital, en donde se desplegó un acampe de veinte días (imagen 2); en el proceso, hicieron huelgas de hambre y se encadenaron en el espacio público, tras lo que lograron reunirse oficialmente con algunos funcionarios políticos (Nuevo Diario 2018; Álvarez Ferreyra 2019; Indymedia 2019).

En estos episodios las y los wichí de Misión Chaqueña (al menos 70 personas) irrumpieron en la cotidianeidad de la Plaza IV Siglos de la ciudad de Salta (el nombre del lugar es todo un símbolo que remite a la conquista y colonización) para denunciar abiertamente un problema del sistema educativo que aparentemente no estaba en la agenda política en ese momento: el racismo. En general, el problema no aparecía en estos términos; sin embargo, los y las wichí denunciaban que “nosotros no existimos en ese reglamento⁹”, como decía la dirigente wichí Octorina Zamora (Álvarez Ferreyra 2019). Esto nos hace pensar que se estaban reproduciendo políticas de borradura hacia esta parte de la población dentro de las reglamentaciones y políticas educativas estatales, reproduciendo el racismo histórico, aunque de manera más sutil.

En realidad, según nuestros interlocutores, las autoridades no hacían lugar al pedido de la comunidad porque la reglamentación ponía como requisito un mínimo de 13 años de antigüedad en la docencia a las maestras o maestros que deseaban postularse para un cargo directivo. Anadelia Villa Fuertes, la maestra wichí que la comunidad consideraba capacitada para el cargo de Directora, no alcanzaba los 11 años de antigüedad en la docencia, de los que se le reconocían menos de 8 años (entrevista con PL, Misión Chaqueña, 11 de enero de 2019; también Marín Flores en Álvarez Ferreyra 2019). Entonces, los funcionarios se justificaron diciendo que la docente en cuestión no reunía los requisitos reglamentarios necesarios para esta designación, según dictaba la ley para

⁸ Los primeros misioneros anglicanos llegaron al Ingenio La Esperanza en 1908, hacia 1911 se instalaron en el ingenio y en 1914, luego de la zafra, acompañaron a las familias indígenas en su retorno al monte, hasta el lugar donde fundaron la primera misión, Misión Chaqueña, a unos 50 km de Embarcación (Lunt 2011). Estos procesos fueron estructuradores del espacio en esta zona del Chaco salteño, aunque no fueron los únicos, pero sí resultaron significativos. Muchas de las que hoy se denominan “comunidades indígenas” quedaron estructuradas según los criterios de organización misional (Trinchero y Maranta, 1987; Trinchero, 2000).

⁹ Se refería a la reglamentación oficial que contenía las condiciones y requisitos que debían cumplir las y los docentes para acceder a los cargos jerárquicos.

cualquier postulante, e insistieron en que “es imposible ir en contra de la ley de educación” (Adelantado 2019). De este modo, podríamos pensar que la ley era igualitaria para todas y todos, porque alcanzaba tanto a indígenas como a no indígenas por igual; sin embargo, nos preguntamos si esto era suficiente para incluirlos participativamente en el sistema educativo o si esto propiciaba cierto integracionismo. Además, no nos quedaba claro si reclamar un tratamiento especial de las poblaciones indígenas en la ley garantizaría la igualdad o generaría cierto segregacionismo¹⁰.



Imagen 2: acampe en la Plazoleta IV Siglos, Salta. Fuente: Anred 2019.

En el caso concreto que analizamos, al menos un par de cuestiones nos generaron ciertas sospechas, nos hacían ruido. Por un lado, por qué había sólo una joven postulante wichí para el cargo directivo y, por otro, por qué siendo el problema una cuestión administrativa ya establecida en un reglamento se

¹⁰ Algunos de los riesgos de las luchas antirracistas, según Wieviorka (2009), consisten en que, por un lado, al reclamar por las especificidades culturales se promueva el repliegue comunitario y autoaislamiento del resto de la sociedad, lo que sería igual a una autoracialización; por otro lado, si el movimiento o reclamo se centra en los derechos humanos en general se correría el riesgo de promover un integracionismo asimilacionista que diluya la lucha antirracista en cierto universalismo. Ambas lógicas antirracistas se encuentran siempre en tensión.

desarrolló la protesta en la escuela y, luego, a kilómetros de distancia, se realizaron acciones de fuerza tan drásticas como tomar el edificio educativo, hacer huelga de hambre y encadenarse en el espacio público. En este punto, para intentar comprender un poco más, nos remitimos a los relatos de nuestros interlocutores¹¹ wichí de esta zona, en donde ya hacía tiempo nos venían explicando la centralidad de la educación para sus comunidades y las luchas que estaban desarrollando en ese sentido, dentro y fuera del sistema educativo estatal.

Un referente wichí (que enunciaremos como MM), en Embarcación (Salta), hace tiempo nos contaba que desde siempre han existido grandes prejuicios respecto a la niñez y adolescencia wichí. Nos explicaba que se han sentido marginados del sistema de educación y que al conversar con docentes y funcionarios públicos de la educación les decían “pero los wichí no progresan porque son vagos” (MM, Embarcación, 16 de julio de 2013). Sin embargo, según nos contaba, el problema era que las familias que enviaban a sus hijos e hijas a la escuela debían contar con ciertos recursos monetarios, sobre todo si querían seguir estudiando una profesión (que en algunos casos implicaba radicarse en otra ciudad). Miguel nos decía:

Yo saco una conclusión de que nos tratan de vagos, pero imaginate, yo como padre tengo ahí a mi hija que ella es la única que ha salido de la secundaria, me está costando un montón hacerla estudiar [una carrera profesional], una que yo ya tengo mi edad, yo no puedo tener trabajo. Entonces eso nos pasó en la educación, yo me di cuenta: no, no, no, no lo hacemos porque somos vagos, es muy difícil para nosotros, muy difícil, muy difícil nosotros. (MM, Embarcación, 16 de julio de 2013)

Este tipo de comentarios se reproducían en los relatos de muchos de nuestros interlocutores. Así, a la cuestión étnico-racial, que calificaba a los wichí de vagos, se sumaba la situación de clase, por el difícil acceso al trabajo y la pobreza, que truncaba las posibilidades de acceder a los niveles superiores de educación. De esta manera, podemos pensar que este pudo ser uno de los motivos por los que Anadelia era una de las pocas maestras wichí recibidas y la única que se acercaba a los requisitos para el cargo directivo de la escuela de Misión Chaqueña.

Ahora bien, otra cuestión que abundaba entre las denuncias y reclamos durante el acampe en la plazoleta IV Siglos, era que, además de lo anterior, las y los estudiantes del nivel superior tenían dificultades para terminar sus estudios porque “no tienen buena base” (Marín Flores en Álvarez Ferreyra 2019¹²). Esto

¹¹ En general, por el tema y recorte de nuestra investigación, hemos entrevistado mayormente a hombres, por eso cuando hablamos de interlocutores generalizamos en masculino.

¹² Esto también surgió en otras entrevistas, como durante las conversaciones con un auxiliar bilingüe que trabajaba en Rivadavia Banda Sur (VE, Carboncito, 24 de marzo de 2013).

quería decir que la educación primaria que recibían era de baja calidad y esto afectaba la trayectoria educativa completa de las niñas y niños wichí y su acceso al nivel superior. Marín Flores lo explicaba más ampliamente de la siguiente manera:

El sistema educativo [estatal] está hace más de 50 años [en la comunidad]. No hay progreso, no hay fruto. El sistema dice que el único que puede acceder al cargo de directivo es el docente que tiene años, mucha experiencia de servicio, eso nunca nos sirvió a la comunidad porque no tenemos hasta el momento muchos chicos capacitados, solamente tenemos 5 o 6, con mucho esfuerzo. Hemos tenido casos de chicos que han sido enviados a otras provincias, por ejemplo, Córdoba, Mar del Plata, inclusive acá, y se tuvieron que volver porque no tienen una formación básica partiendo de la primaria, secundaria. En la primaria los chicos salen con una nota 9 o 10 pero cuando van a un nivel terciario se dan cuenta de que todo era falso. No saben nada. Inclusive en la comunidad tenemos un nivel terciario que hemos logrado así, luchando, y no podemos hacer que nuestros chicos aprovechen porque no tienen una buena base, los que lo pueden aprovechar son chicos de otros lados. (Marín Flores en Álvarez Ferreyra 2019)

El hecho de que en Misión Chaqueña funcione un Instituto de Formación Docente, conseguido mediante la lucha de los últimos años, indicaba que existía una preocupación y movilización de la comunidad por formar a las nuevas generaciones de manera profesional. Sin embargo, el hecho de que no lo puedan aprovechar las y los estudiantes de la comunidad, sino “chicos de otros lados”, generalmente criollos, nos hace suponer que existían otro tipo de problemas. En este punto, nos preguntamos si la baja calidad educativa dependía de las personas y voluntades individuales o era una cuestión más general, estructural, y, en todo caso, analizamos cuáles eran los motivos.

La provincia de Salta cuenta con una Coordinación de Educación Rural dentro de la Secretaría de Gestión Educativa; sin embargo, no cuenta con la modalidad de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe (Ley Nacional 26.206 2006). De todos modos, el sistema educativo incluye la contratación de auxiliares bilingües que trabajan como parejas pedagógicas de los y las maestras de sala o de grado interpretando la lengua materna (por ejemplo, wichí) y ayudando a las y los estudiantes con la segunda lengua (castellana), como ocurría en la escuela 4528 de Misión Chaqueña y en la escuela 4266 de Carboncito, sólo por mencionar dos escuelas de la zona de estudio. Algunas escuelas han presentado proyectos institucionales que apuntaban a valorizar la lengua materna, la cultura y las trayectorias educativas interculturales; sin embargo, parece que su implementación suele ser dificultosa y presenta contradicciones (HS¹³, Carboncito, 26 de marzo de 2013).

Por un lado, en muchas instituciones, la diferencia cultural era asumida como un problema que había que solucionar, no como una posibilidad, y su resolución

¹³ Directora de la escuela 4266 de Carboncito.

tenía una sola dirección, que era que los y las wichí incorporen la cultura y lengua criolla. Esto podía apreciarse en muchas de las declaraciones de los y las manifestantes y personal wichí de la escuela. En alguna ocasión, los auxiliares docentes wichí de una escuela de la región nos contaban que estos cargos suelen ser ocupados por personas wichí que reciben una capacitación especial, pero no tienen un título docente. Al hablar sobre su función en las escuelas y jardines, se quejaban de que no podían enseñar ningún tema del currículo en idioma wichí, que solamente podían actuar como traductores wichí-castellano; además, sufrían maltratos por parte de las y los maestros, por ejemplo, al dejarlos de lado durante la planificación y desarrollo de las clases. Esto se reproducía entre las y los estudiantes, porque en las escuelas en donde asistían las y los hijos de criollos, estos se mostraban reticentes a trabajar colaborativamente con sus compañeros y compañeras wichí (VC y VE, Carboncito, 24 de marzo de 2013). Además, el paso de la primaria a la secundaria producía un cambio abrupto hacia un sistema monolingüe y no intercultural (Página 12 2021). Finalmente, en el nivel superior, se generalizaba el fracaso. Una madre wichí expresaba:

La educación es un desastre, nuestros hijos no aprenden a leer, no se expresan bien. Los hemos mandado a la universidad de Córdoba y de allá vuelven totalmente fracasados. Es por eso que las mamás decidimos levantarnos y luchar por una buena educación y el futuro de nuestros hijos. (Gabriela Díaz en La Otra Voz Digital 2019).

Los motivos que argumentaban las familias eran netamente étnico-raciales. Marín Flores explicaba que una de las causas en la dificultad del aprendizaje estaría dada porque si bien los y las estudiantes wichí saben el castellano, “el problema es el castellano académico” (Álvarez Ferreyra 2019). Así, la lengua se convertía en una barrera difícil de franquear. Por eso la importancia de que la directora que postulaban sea wichí, porque comprendía las dos lenguas y culturas.

Por otro lado, también existía una sistemática inferiorización de estas poblaciones dentro de la burocracia y las finanzas del Estado, que permitían ciertas maniobras de gestión que no contribuían a mejorar la situación de estas escuelas, tanto materiales como profesionales. Según algunas denuncias, las y los maestros criollos tenían por costumbre tomar por un corto período cargos jerárquicos en escuelas rurales para obtener un plus de sueldo y poder acceder a una jubilación más abultada en el futuro, por eso a la escuela de Misión Chaqueña la han llamado la “Dubai” de las maestras, un lugar para recoger dinero haciendo lo menos posible y retirarse (Octorina Zamora en Adelantado 2019; Zamora 2019). Octorina contaba que esto generaba poca pertenencia o compromiso con la comunidad de la escuela; en este proceso, distintos tipos de maltrato estaban naturalizados en estas instituciones, todos asociados a que las y los maestros criollos se burlaban y subestimaban a estas familias, por ser wichí. La cuestión étnico-racial era el epicentro en cada relato, por ejemplo, Gabriela Díaz “expuso que el cuerpo docente está conformado por *criollas* y *que*

eso genera que las y los niños no quieren asistir a la escuela” (La Otra Voz Digital 2019, resaltado de la autora). El rechazo de los y las niñas wichí hacia las maestras se debía a que eran criollas. La causa de esto eran los maltratos físicos y no físicos que “las maestras criollas” ejercían sobre los y las niñas wichí, mientras que, aparentemente, el trato no era igual hacia las y los niños criollos. Una madre wichí contaba, por ejemplo, que “los chicos no saben nada, no saben leer ni escribir, no conocen los números. Si no traen una brazadita de leña no comen. No queremos más eso para nuestros hijos” (Herrera en La Otra Voz Digital 2019). Además, otra madre wichí agregaba que el trabajo incluía “no solamente leña, los mandan a traer ladrillos, varillas, los obligan a vender bonos y rifas. Les dicen que si no traen leña no tienen para comer, no tienen para el té, no tienen para nada, que son malos chicos” (Gabriela Díaz en La Otra Voz Digital 2019). Así, la falta de recursos, o sea, los recursos negados por el Estado, generaba situaciones críticas en donde la violencia racista se volvía algo cotidiano. Esto, a primera vista parece responsabilidad de las docentes, podemos inferir que esto se sostiene en un nivel estructural (aunque quizás esto merezca un estudio en profundidad).

El grupo de madres también se quejaban de que la ración que brindaban en el comedor escolar solía estar cruda o quemada, mostrando falta de cuidado y desprecio al momento de gestionar la alimentación en estas instituciones educativas. A esto se sumaban situaciones aberrantes, por ejemplo, en la escuela de Misión Chaqueña, debían lidiar con un maestro criollo alcohólico y otro abusador, que fue denunciado por intentar abusar sexualmente a una niña wichí en la escuela en 2007, hecho que no se consumó porque el auxiliar bilingüe intervino a tiempo sacándole la niña de sus brazos. Sin embargo, a pesar de las denuncias, el gobierno no tomó medidas respecto a esta persona y se jubiló en la misma escuela (Zamora 2019). Así, contaban los motivos por los que los niños y niñas wichí no querían ir a la escuela, porque se sentían amenazados, denigrados y discriminados. Estos episodios, narrados de manera fragmentaria y discontinua, en conjunto, nos hicieron pensar en la naturalización del racismo en la región y su problematización por parte de las madres wichí.

El cúmulo histórico de situaciones racistas y la organización colectiva en contra de esto llevó a la toma de la escuela, el acampe y encadenamiento en la Plazoleta IV Siglos. Una vez ahí, se exigió la atención del gobernador, luego de que la Ministra de Educación, Analía Berruezo, rompiera su promesa de atender a las y los demandantes. “Se esconde como rata”, decían las madres con indignación (Gabriela Díaz en La Otra Voz Digital 2019). El problema era que esta negación a atenderlas se sumaba a los otros tipos de maltratos y discriminación que venimos narrando, que habían sido denunciados y reclamados en la propia escuela y que no habían tenido respuesta.

En este punto de las protestas, ya no se exigía solamente el cargo para una directora wichí en Misión Chaqueña, sino que también se exigía que se sancione una ley de educación indígena, que cubra las demandas específicas y las problemáticas propias de los jardines y escuelas de las comunidades (Zamora 2019). Así, declaraban ante los medios que “se manifiestan por el derecho a la

educación indígena, a la transmisión de conocimiento indígena” (Álvarez Ferreyra 2019). Esto, de ninguna manera era una novedad surgida durante el acampe. Ya hace unos diez años que en el Primer Congreso Nacional de los Pueblos Originarios de Argentina, realizado en Misión Chaqueña, se había elaborado un documento que exigía, entre otras cosas, “una inmediata reforma del sistema educativo que permita enseñar en las escuelas de nuestra nación originaria de manera efectiva y obligatoria nuestra cosmovisión” (GA, Misión Chaqueña, 30 de julio de 2015¹⁴). Otros proponían la “posibilidad de que cada colegio tiene que ser puro de los wichí, no puede incluir criollo”, porque, si no, decía, “la maestra (...) tiene problema y se desquita con wichí, que si hay un criollo inteligente más se va a llevar bien y por ahí también los chicos [wichí] se molestan. Miran que más lo admiran al chico criollo” (PM, Sachapera II, 26 de julio de 2015). De esta manera, hacía tiempo, distintas organizaciones o referentes wichí se venían pronunciando contra las prácticas racistas naturalizadas dentro de las instituciones educativas y proponían soluciones antirracistas que por momentos alcanzaban cierto autosegregacionismo, porque el deseo de que sea “puro de los wichí” era un modo de evitar algo de esta violencia.

En este sentido, las madres wichí que se encontraban en el acampe de la plazoleta IV Siglos apuntaban a pedirle al gobernador que designe como directora a Anadelia Villa Fuerte (a pesar de no cubrir los requisitos), no tanto para que haya una maestra wichí en un cargo jerárquico, como pretensión individual y personal¹⁵, sino, más bien, para interpelar al sistema educativo de manera concreta y garantizar el derecho a la educación intercultural bilingüe, aunque sea en una de las escuelas de la zona. Con esto, se intentaba luchar contra la discriminación y violencia racista padecida desde tiempo histórico, aunque sin autosegregarse. Como decía Zamora, no estaban buscando un puesto de trabajo, sino una ley de educación indígena que mejorara las condiciones del sistema educativo. Finalmente, luego de reunirse con varios funcionarios del gobierno, se le ofreció a Anadelia un puesto de “Coordinación”, con un contrato precario, que no cubría las expectativas de las y los manifestantes, pero que

¹⁴ Esto forma parte del Documento T.I.E.R.R.A. (Tratado Interétnico para la Refundación de la República Argentina), elaborado en el Primer Congreso Nacional de los Pueblos Originarios de Argentina, 25 al 27 de mayo de 2010, renovado sucesivamente año a año en los congresos subsiguientes, firmado por referentes indígenas de distintas partes del país (Archivo de la Universidad del Monte, gentileza de PL).

¹⁵ Paralelamente al acampe en la ciudad de Salta, en el pueblo de Embarcación, cabecera del municipio donde se halla Misión chaqueña, una protesta de vecinos se manifestaba contra el acampe wichí y la designación de Anadelia como directora, aduciendo que sólo era una maniobra para acomodar a la hija del exdelegado municipal (Quepasasalta 2019). Sin embargo, esto se explicaba como una maniobra política por parte del oficialismo local. Gabriela Díaz decía: “Es muy triste ver a nuestros hermanos en contra de nosotros, dejarse manipular por el intendente, los están usando y esos papás saben muy bien que la educación es muy mala, que es un desastre. (...) Nosotros fuimos y es una vergüenza que nos estén haciendo pelear entre nosotros, lo lamento mucho por mis paisanos, mis hermanos de la comunidad, porque ellos lo hacen por un plato de comida” (La Otra Voz Digital 2019).

Anadelia decidió aceptar para apaciguar las amenazas que estaba padeciendo (Zamora 2019).

En general, esto nos lleva a pensar que la inexistencia de la modalidad de educación intercultural bilingüe en la provincia constituía una de las tantas negaciones históricas del Estado hacia los grupos wichí (y otras etnias), a pesar de que desde la Coordinación de Educación Rural se contemplaban algunas especificidades interculturales y se promovían algunos proyectos concretos¹⁶. En relación con lo anterior, parece que la educación intercultural bilingüe quedaba supeditada a la buena voluntad de las individualidades de los y las docentes que, en este caso, trabajaban en el ámbito rural del Departamento de San Martín, como la ya mencionada directora de la escuela de Carboncito, Silvia Haro (también, por ejemplo, Barroso 2021). No obstante, esto no era suficiente, porque en la vida escolar cotidiana las relaciones estaban jerarquizadas y diferenciadas racialmente y la buena voluntad de algunas y algunos docentes no subsanaba la negación sistemática normalizada por el Estado y naturalizada por gran parte de la sociedad.

La toma de la escuela, el acampe y encadenamiento en la Plazoleta IV Siglos de la ciudad de Salta representaría entonces un absceso antirracista que irrumpió en la capital salteña, pero que no era novedosa para quienes la gestionaron. Más bien, mostraba apenas una parte de la lucha contra los profundos e históricos racismos y sus aspectos pluridimensionales. Es decir, el racismo, incrustado y reproducido en las instituciones educativas, se concretizaba mediante distintas modalidades (prejuicios, segregación, discriminación); pero fundamentalmente significaba un persistente ejercicio de la violencia sobre las poblaciones wichí, porque, como dice Wieviorka, “el racismo siempre es violencia en la medida que constituye una negación de quien resulte víctima, es decir, una alteración de la parte de la humanidad de la que cada cual es portador” (Wieviorka 2009, 87). Por eso, el acampe en la plazoleta IV Siglos representó una parte de las permanentes luchas antirracistas wichí, que fue motorizada por el cúmulo de experiencias colectivas desplegadas en lo cotidiano de las escuelas de las comunidades wichí, ante el racismo institucional estatal.

¹⁶ En algunas escuelas se realizaron encuentros regionales entre maestros, maestras, auxiliares bilingües y directivos que trabajaban con culturas indígenas para compartir experiencias y fomentar la elaboración de textos bilingües. Las comunidades de la zona de estudio participaban de estos encuentros desde hace al menos 20 años (HS, Carboncito, 26 de marzo de 2013; CN, Embarcación, 17 de julio de 2013). Cabe aclarar que, mediante este trabajo de más de dos décadas, en conjunto con comunidades indígenas de otras provincias y de Bolivia, se logró recientemente la sanción de la ley provincial de reconocimiento de la lengua wichí en el congreso salteño. Sin embargo, como vemos a lo largo del texto, aunque es central, esto es apenas uno de los aspectos de las luchas wichí.

Racismo en el sistema de salud: denuncias de discriminación en Tartagal y Embarcación

El segundo caso que presentamos muestra algunos episodios para analizar el racismo en el sistema de salud de Tartagal y Embarcación, antes y durante la pandemia, ocurridos no necesariamente dentro de un hospital o sanatorio. Por ejemplo, días antes de la declaración del estado de emergencia por pandemia en Argentina, los caciques y representantes de 43 comunidades wichí de la zona de Tartagal realizaban un corte de ruta pidiendo trabajo y una de las personas que había quedado bloqueada en el camino era el Doctor Céspedes, médico del hospital Juan Domingo Perón de esa ciudad. Según los manifestantes, el doctor, muy enojado, les gritó:

USTEDES LOS CACIQUES INDÍGENAS SON SUCIOS, VAGO, MATAÇOS.
QUEREMOS VER CUANDO USTEDES VAN AL HOSPITAL, NO, NO LOS
QUEREMOS VER. YO ME ENCARGO DE MATARLOS 1 POR 1. NO QUEREMOS
VER NINGÚN INDÍGENA. CUANDO YO MATO UN MATAÇO WICHÍ NADIE
SABE, PORQUE YO SOY DOCTOR (CEUPO 2020, énfasis en original; ver
también Tartagal al Momento 2020; Paredes 2020).

El corte de ruta se debía a reclamos por trabajo; sin embargo, luego de este incidente los manifestantes agregaban “así nos discriminan como pueblos originarios que hoy sólo buscamos fuentes de trabajos para nuestros gentes, no queremos bolsones, sólo queremos proyectos y fuentes de trabajos” (El Tribuno 2020a). De esta manera, el episodio de odio se traducía directamente en un ataque étnico-racial hacia los pueblos originarios, que manifestaba abiertamente prácticas de desvalorización y de supuesta eliminación de los “matacos” en el sistema de salud.

Nos preguntamos si este fue un episodio de odio aislado o, si, más bien, fue un episodio más, entre muchos que se han reproducido en el interior de las instituciones sanitarias y en las políticas de salud por parte del Estado provincial. En realidad, por las expresiones usadas en el episodio mencionado podríamos decir que esta pregunta se responde sola; sin embargo, nos interesa indagar en las distintas modalidades en que esto ha sucedido antes y durante la pandemia de Covid-19.

En el Chaco salteño, la situación socio-sanitaria era grave mucho antes de que el gobernador Gustavo Sáenz declarara la emergencia por la desnutrición y, luego, por la pandemia (por ejemplo, ver Clarín 2015). Chagas, tuberculosis, cólera, dengue, fueron algunas de las causas de muerte en la zona, muchas evitables, con un sistema sanitario adecuado. Sin embargo, los distintos gobiernos y medios de comunicación, en lugar de fortalecer el sistema de salud, a lo largo de la historia, buscaron culpar a la población por estos males y acusaron a las poblaciones indígenas por la falta de higiene personal y de los lugares habitacionales y costumbres alimenticias insalubres. Por ejemplo, según los medios de comunicación y el gobierno salteño, una de las causas de la epidemia

de cólera ocurrida en la década de 1990 habría sido que los indígenas comían pescado crudo; esto manifestaba una visión culturalista, que, además, estaba muy lejos de la realidad (Clarín 2000; Trincherro 2007; Informe Ampliado 2020). No obstante, a lo largo de las últimas décadas, algunos cambios fueron acercando al sistema sanitario y comunidades indígenas entre sí. Por ejemplo, algunos y algunas wichí tuvieron la posibilidad de seguir la carrera de enfermería o capacitarse como agentes sanitarios, aunque a veces esto quedaba a cargo de privados¹⁷ (El Tribuno 2021).

Los hospitales o pequeñas salas médicas se encuentran en las ciudades o en los poblados más grandes. Desde ahí, las y los agentes sanitarios recorren las comunidades indígenas periurbanas o rurales, en vehículos particulares o a caballo (no suele haber ambulancias disponibles en estas zonas). Sobre todo, en la zona rural, donde hay familias wichí que no hablan castellano, es importante que el agente sanitario entienda el idioma. Algunos agentes sanitarios nos contaban que, de esta manera, lograban llevar alimentos y medicinas modernas, vacunas o insumos sanitarios a familias alejadas de los centros urbanos (CP, Misión Chaqueña, 16 de julio de 2012; PM, Sachapera II, Tartagal, 26 de julio de 2015).

En general, los y las agentes solían mostrar una visión un tanto higienista, en donde prevalecía la idea de que la construcción de letrinas, la limpieza del hogar de forma regular, nuevas formas de preparación de alimentos y la utilización de la medicina moderna podía mejorar la calidad de vida de las familias wichí. Sin embargo, también notaban que el deterioro de las formas de vida wichí se debía al hacinamiento en poblados, privación del monte (alimentos, medicinas naturales, leña y otros insumos) y políticas de bolsones de alimentos de baja calidad (llamados alimentos “criollos”, como arroz, harina, azúcar, aceite). Prudencio Cabral ya hace tiempo nos contaba que:

En otro tiempo cosechaban anco, mandioca, papa, batata, pero ahora no, (...) antes la gente, tranquila, se iba al campo, (...) tiempo de algarrobo, iban a buscar, cerquita acá 100 metros, traemos, machacamos y ya tenemos [harina de] algarrobo, pero hoy lamentablemente ya no hay algarrobo (...) porque hay todo motosierra, ya no hay algarrobo, entonces ahí perdimos la vitamina, porque el algarrobo tiene vitamina C. (CP, Misión Chaqueña, 16 de julio de 2012)

De esta manera, en parte, la pérdida del monte causada por la deforestación y cercamientos agrícolas era seguida directamente de la pérdida de alimentos de

¹⁷ Esto quiere decir que algunas empresas de la zona suelen ofrecer acuerdos a las familias wichí para poder producir en las tierras usadas y ocupadas por la comunidad (generalmente esto requiere el desmonte de zonas boscosas) a cambio de algún servicio o prestación. De esta forma, la empresa evitaría problemas judiciales con las comunidades que tienen derechos sobre esas tierras (Constitución Nacional, art. 75, inc. 17), incluso juicios de expropiación que han sido favorables en alguna comunidad de la zona (por ejemplo, ver Ley Nacional 25549 2001, a favor de la comunidad Hoktek T'oi).

calidad. Así, los problemas de salud se asociaban a ciertas deficiencias nutricionales que antes estaban resueltas por la diversidad de frutas, verduras y carnes que combinaba lo que se producía en la comunidad con lo que se consumía del monte. A esto se le sumaba la falta de agua potable y los efectos de los agroquímicos (Rodolfo Franco y Anastasia Flores en Página 12, 2020).

Desde otra localidad de la zona, PM nos explicaba que no eran pocos los alimentos producidos por los wichí, que solían cultivar varias veces al año, pero que esto se fue dificultando: “hace un tiempo preparaban cercos, volteaban así y sembraban, (...) nosotros podemos tener tres siembras [al año]. (...) Nosotros sembramos así pero ya no, no” (Sachapera II, 26 de julio de 2015). Según contaban, esta práctica fue abandonada por muchas familias a causa de cambios socio-ambientales en las últimas décadas. CT nos contaba: “ahora este año no hemos comido choclos [maíz], porque se seca. (...) Es por él [señala al sol], se quema, (...) mucho calor y no hay agua” (Pacará, 26 de julio de 2015). Entonces, uno de los problemas era que los procesos de desmonte produjeron una exfoliación de grandes zonas boscosas, que provocó el aumento de las temperaturas de las tierras que quedaron al descubierto y esto produjo un proceso de desertificación general (Seghezzeo *et al* 2011). Al aumento de temperaturas por la desertificación se sumaba la falta de agua en el río. El agua llegaba a Pacará por el río Itiyuro, que había sido bloqueado en 1972, cuando el gobierno construyó un dique en la parte alta del río¹⁸. En estas condiciones, cualquier trabajo de siembra estaba destinado a fracasar. En este contexto, ya desde hace tiempo, muchas familias han decidido moverse de la zona rural a los pueblos o ciudades para vender su mano de obra; sin embargo, tampoco esto era seguro (Pais *et al* 2008; Schmidt 2014). Así, a la falta de alimento se sumaron el hacinamiento urbano y la precarización de las viviendas, por eso protestaban, por ejemplo, cortando la ruta, como en el momento del episodio que introduce este apartado.

Otro problema era que el déficit provocado por el despojo de los bienes comunes de la naturaleza y los medios de producción pretendía ser resuelto mediante subsidios y entrega de mercadería por parte del gobierno, pero resultaba siempre insuficiente. Por ejemplo, en febrero de 2020, PL nos contaba que, luego de numerosas denuncias y de que los casos de muertes por desnutrición salieran en los medios nacionales, el gobierno repartió bolsones que contenían un kilo de arroz, un kilo de harina de maíz (polenta), un kilo de harina de trigo, un kilo de azúcar, 800 gramos de leche en polvo, una lata de pulpa de tomate y un litro de aceite (imagen 3). Junto con esto, el gobierno envió a gendarmería para que distribuya bidones de agua, que terminaron instalándose en la zona y abusando sexualmente de algunas niñas de las comunidades (PL, Misión Chaqueña, 23 de febrero de 2020). También, particulares como el empresario Marcelo Tinelli prometieron realizar pozos de agua. Sin embargo, al mes,

¹⁸ El río Itiyuro, en la zona media e inferior, tiende a secarse y se pierde en el monte hacia el sudeste progresivamente. Esto no se produce por fenómenos naturales, sino que fue causado por la construcción del Dique Itiyuro en 1972 (EPI 2002; Herrán en Copenoa 2009; Borelli 2011a; 2011b).

cuando comenzó la emergencia de Covid-19, los envíos de alimentos se suspendieron y de los pozos prometidos sólo se realizaron tres (El Tribuno 2020b).

En este punto, nos preguntamos si eran estas algunas de las modalidades en las que se expresaba el racismo en la zona. Como venimos analizando, el racismo no aparece siempre de forma brutal y visible públicamente, sino que también existen formas veladas, que son normalizadas en las instituciones y naturalizadas por la sociedad. En el caso de la salud, el hecho de normalizar una forma de alimentación particular (en este caso, la alimentación criolla) y despreciar o negar otras (alimentación wichí) podría pensarse como parte de la discriminación racista que se ha ejercido sobre las poblaciones wichí, que afectaba directamente a su salud. Por eso, los relatos sobre los fracasados o abandonados trabajos en las huertas, el hacinamiento en la ciudad y los bolsones de mala calidad, todo junto, era percibido por los y las wichí como la imposición de una forma de vida que necesariamente obligaba a abandonar las propias, en detrimento de cierta calidad de vida que sentían les era más favorable. Sin embargo, esto no necesariamente estaba asociado directamente a perjudicar la salud wichí, sino que estaba vinculado a otros intereses. MM lo explicaba de la siguiente manera:

Es la cuestión de la tierra, que son miles de hectáreas para nosotros, para poder continuar con nuestra cultura, a pesar de que lo están inculcando otro tipo de vida. (...) Nosotros ya hemos nacido ya con una cultura ya y no podemos cambiarla de un día para otro y no la vamos a cambiar tampoco, y no puedo yo tampoco como dirigente (...) ayudar a engañar al pueblo diciéndole que esto es más rico [lo criollo] (...) o decirle mirá dejá de comer [lo del monte], te conviene comer pollo en lugar de comer una perdiz, o te conviene comer un mestizo y no una corzuela, ¿ve? (Embarcación, 16 de julio de 2013)



Imagen 3: Bolsón de alimentos del plan de emergencia socio-sanitario. Fuente: gentileza de PL (Morillo, 23 de febrero de 2020).

MM no sólo planteaba que no pueden cambiar la cultura de un día para otro, también afirmaba: “y no la vamos a cambiar tampoco”. Esta lucha, en defensa de las propias formas de vida, significaba una valorización que contradecía la negación que se les imponía a los wichí como pueblo. En este sentido, el dirigente sentía que “engañaba” a su gente si apoyaba el cambio hacia la alimentación criolla. Resulta importante resaltar que la tensión intercultural no estaba dada tanto por las diferencias netamente culturales, sino por la negación impuesta sobre la cultura wichí al ser desalojados de sus medios de producción, reproducción y existencia, por la “cuestión de la tierra”. La elección no se daba en términos igualitarios, sino que una cultura era sometida por la otra mediante presiones estructurales. Estas presiones estaban directamente conectadas con la valorización económica de las tierras de esta región en las últimas décadas, que se concretaba a través del despojo y puesta en producción, sobre todo con *commodities* como la soja, el maíz o la ganadería empresarial (Slutzky 2004; Barbera 2014; Leake *et al* 2016). Entonces, no eran regiones “olvidadas” o “abandonadas”, como decían en alguno de los comentarios que mencionamos al principio del trabajo, porque “no es que no les importe, sino que les importa quedarse con las tierras” (Franco 2020). Eran poblaciones a las que se le negaba deliberadamente el acceso al agua y alimentación acorde a sus formas de vida y cultura, en un orden jurídico que favorecía a los movimientos de valoración del capital (Trinchero 2000).

Ahora bien, este deterioro de la alimentación y acceso al agua, desde hace tiempo, ha provocado problemas de salud en esta zona. La desnutrición y deshidratación suelen estar emparentadas con enfermedades infecciosas como chagas, dengue, tuberculosis, cólera y, últimamente, Covid-19, que se han propagado con increíble facilidad en estos sitios a causa de sus problemas de agua y alimentación deficiente (Trinchero 2007; Melo 2020; Álvarez Leguizamón 2020). A partir de la presencia de estas u otras enfermedades, las familias wichí debían recurrir al hospital o sala médica. En esos ámbitos, las situaciones de discriminación solían ser más tangibles, más concretas, más brutales. Por ejemplo, Toribio Campos nos contaba:

Y bueno y yo digo que, ya que estamos *hablando despacio*, que yo lo que tengo problema es de *esa gente del hospital*. Esa gente va por ahí, siempre llega a mi casa, a mi casa, cada vez cuando llega, y yo tengo una hija que estaba enferma allá la he llevado al hospital y le han dicho los médicos que “no hay cama, no hay cama”, y viene otro hermano que dice “no, acá no hay cama”. Pero dice otro paisano “qué no va a ver, no da cama a esos matacos, esos indios wichí”. Pero ¿por qué se habla así? Yo digo *que de mi parte yo soy bien negro, que la cara que no, no sirve, pero todos somos igual, ¿no cierto?* Pero lo que nosotros seguimos sangre [señala las venas de su brazo], no cierto, es lo mismo. *Pero a estos no podés decir nada porque no hay como hablarles*. Bueno yo decía que ellos yo decía por aquí con [Antonio] Cabana¹⁹ que ellos, que nosotros podamos conseguir

¹⁹ Referente Iogys de la ruta 86, junto a un grupo de comunidades ha logrado el reconocimiento nacional de la etnia Iogys y un lugar en el Instituto Nacional del Asuntos Indígenas (INAI).

el lugar allá, en 86, que consiga un médico, que consiga sanitario, que lleva allá, que quede allá, entonces no venimos a molestar a ellos [al hospital]. Aquí si vos no llevás número no le va a atender o algo en el bolsillo debe ser que va a atender. Racista, yo conozco bien. (CT, Pacará, 26 de julio de 2015, resaltado de la autora)

Esta larga alocución sintetizaba varias ideas y disparaba muchos interrogantes. En primer lugar, lo que se estaba por decir debía hacerse “hablando despacio”, en voz baja, ¿por qué esto no se podía decir en voz alta? En segundo lugar, el problema no era tanto el hospital, sino la “gente del hospital”, al menos, cierta gente que los discriminaba, que no les daban camas a los wichí (o su nombre despectivo “matacos”), tanto médicos como “hermanos”. ¿Dependía del personal de salud decidir la asignación de camas o había una explícita política institucional? En tercer lugar, el problema era que su cara “no sirve”, por el color de su piel, “negra”, aunque el mismo Toribio decía que “somos iguales”; sin embargo, “estos”, esas personas del hospital, no entendían esto. ¿Era la naturalización de la diferencia racial lo que provocaba que no se pudiera poner en discusión esta discriminación, habría prácticas políticas que apuntaban a reforzar esto? Debido a lo anterior, en cuarto lugar, Toribio pensaba que lo mejor era conseguir un médico para la zona de su comunidad (la ruta 86), para no “molestar” en el hospital y también para no tener que llevar “algo en el bolsillo” (quizás una coima). En definitiva, Toribio comprendía claramente que esta gente era “racista”, los conocía bien, decía, quizás por eso prefería mantenerse alejado.

Volvamos al primer episodio que narramos, el que protagonizó el Dr. Céspedes. Luego de analizar lo anterior, podemos pensar que este médico era parte de las personas del hospital que no daban cama a los “matacos”, aunque hay que aclarar que no todo el personal de salud de la región actuaba de la misma manera (Franco 2020, Corvalan 2021). No obstante, por los relatos y noticias analizadas, podemos inferir que este caso no fue una excepción, no era un hecho aislado, sino que esto estaba acompañado por políticas sanitarias deficientes y discriminatorias, que afectaban especialmente a los y las wichí (y a otras etnias). En la zona de Misión Chaqueña había tan sólo un médico para toda la zona que trabajaba con insumos insuficientes. Con indignación MM nos contaba: “tienen un hospital [en Misión Chaqueña], porque son como 4000 ellos, está abierto, no quiere decir que está apto, viste. Primero porque tener un hospital abierto no quiere decir que esté solucionado el problema, porque le faltan todos los insumos” (Embarcación, 16 de julio de 2013). Los pocos puestos para el personal de salud y la falta de insumos en la comunidad se sumaban a la discriminación en el hospital de la ciudad. El Dr. Franco contaba que:

En la zona estoy yo, yo solo. En mi pueblo [Misión Chaqueña] vivimos 5000 personas, yo soy el único médico que hay, (...) y en el pueblo vecino Carboncito, que también viene la gente a atenderse conmigo, hay 2000 personas. Y en otros pueblos cercanos hay otros tantos. (...) Yo los atiende de la mejor manera, pero después tengo una pared, que es el hospital de Embarcación, que es el más

cercano [a 50 kilómetros], (...) que no tienen nada y además *están acostumbrados a no hacer para las comunidades [indígenas]*, entonces uno quiere una derivación y no, uno los manda a internar y los mandan de vuelta y al otro día se muere, que me ha pasado. Me ha pasado mandar a internar un chico de 21 años con hipertensión, llegó al hospital se le había ido la hipertensión (...) lo mandaron a la casa, no le dieron medicación para tomar, a los dos días me llama el padre el chango se había muerto. (Franco 2020)

El doctor Rodolfo Franco decía que el hospital era una pared infranqueable, porque “están acostumbrados a no hacer nada por las comunidades”. Esta normalización de la desatención médica, incrustada en las políticas y prácticas sanitarias, dejaba ver el racismo institucional, que se expresaba en las prácticas cotidianas, aisladas o no; por eso, el doctor Franco agregaba “la peor lucha es con los colegas”. En todo caso, si, a pesar de todo esto, los y las wichí lograban ser atendidas en los hospitales de las ciudades o unidades sanitarias de las comunidades, el problema era que no existía en general una política sanitaria intercultural, sino “monocultural” (Álvarez Leguizamón 2020). Por ejemplo, la barrera del idioma y la separación del enfermo de su familia para pasar a quedarse solo o sola en una sala a cargo de los “profesionales”, eran algunas de las situaciones que provocaban angustia y eran percibidas como imposiciones violentas por los y las wichí.

Esto no mejoró con el paso del tiempo, mucho menos en Pandemia, más bien, se profundizó y se pusieron al descubierto (aún más) las políticas institucionales que los y las investigadoras han llamado de genocidio o etnocidio, por hambre y negación de la atención (Álvarez Leguizamón 2015; Informe Ampliado 2020; Melo 2020). Las noticias sobre la falta de atención y de camas, la falta de hisopados, la falta de información sobre los enfermos o las causas de los fallecimientos, se sumaron a las prácticas racistas que sucedían antes de la pandemia. Algunos de los relatos que llegaron a la prensa mostraban la sospecha de los dirigentes wichí ante el aumento de muertes en las comunidades y la desinformación proveniente desde el hospital:

Son muy sospechosas las muertes de mis hermanos. Juan Ambrosio Pérez, de La Mora 1, murió el 17 de agosto y hasta hoy no hay resultados concretos. Él tenía mucha fiebre y no podía respirar. Y también el día 19 a la noche murió Venancio Rivero, con mucha fiebre. El domingo pasado la familia lo había llevado al hospital donde lo atendió el doctor Pailler. Lo tuvieron una hora en observación y, luego, lo mandaron a la casa hasta que se murió. Y no hay resultados todavía, pero es muy probable que sea el Covid. (Modesto Rojas en La Izquierda Diario 2020)

Las sospechas que tenían los wichí sobre el sistema de salud, estaban ancladas en su memoria de maltratos y discriminación; pero, esta vez, tenían doble agravante. Por un lado, los síntomas de las personas fallecidas eran compatibles con Covid; sin embargo, los mantuvieron sólo una hora en el hospital y los

mandaron a la casa “hasta que se murió”. No sólo el fallecimiento fue brutal, sino que negar información sobre el diagnóstico mostraba la ausencia de protocolos y cuidados para el resto de la familia y de la comunidad adonde era devuelto el enfermo. Por otro lado, parece que desde la parte administrativa de las políticas sanitarias se había resuelto que en las actas de defunción había que poner los síntomas y no las causas de muerte, causando mayor desinformación y menores posibilidades de prevención de posibles contagios (Álvarez Leguizamón 2020). Esto, junto con las restricciones en la movilidad, que les impedía acceder a centros de salud de otras ciudades (cuando conseguían los recursos), los maltratos del personal de seguridad y las dificultades en la comunicación en zonas rurales sin internet o telefonía, completaban una situación de profunda crisis socio-sanitaria wichí, anclada en la jerarquización y diferenciación racial de la sociedad.

De esta manera, las políticas sanitarias y las prácticas realizadas por una parte del personal de salud reproducían históricamente, y en particular en pandemia, un profundo racismo institucionalizado. Este racismo institucional era permanentemente normalizado en las prácticas cotidianas sanitarias y, así, naturalizado por el resto de la sociedad. Claramente, esto no era producto del “olvido” o el “abandono”, aunque, si fuera ese el caso, igualmente connotaría un trato despectivo hacia estas poblaciones; más bien, esto era parte de los dispositivos deliberadamente desplegados para negar los derechos o la existencia misma de una parte de la sociedad (los y las wichí), que facilita la concreción de la territorialización del capital en su movimiento de valoración.

Proyectos de alimentación racistas: “los wichí no entienden lo que es la alimentación saludable”

El tercer caso que analizamos está muy conectado con lo que venimos planteando sobre la alimentación wichí, pero nos permite abordar distintos aspectos y otras modalidades de racismo. Alejandro Deane (ingeniero agrónomo y coordinador de la Fundación Siwok), en medio de la crisis socio-sanitaria por las muertes por desnutrición y en plena pandemia, salía por los medios de comunicación diciendo que “los wichí no entienden lo que es la alimentación saludable” y por eso, desde hace tiempo, había decidido desarrollar proyectos hortícolas en las comunidades del Chaco salteño (Víasalta 2020). La desafortunada expresión no pasó desapercibida y fue respondida inmediatamente por distintas personas que la consideraban discriminatoria, como Omar Gutiérrez, que decía: “son lamentables los dichos del ingeniero Alejandro Deane, presidente de la Fundación Siwok, al decir que la desnutrición es culpa nuestra como pueblo wichí” (Cuartopodersalta 2020). Lo lamentable de las expresiones mencionadas era que subestimaban la producción autónoma de alimentos wichí (imagen 4) y ocultaban las causas más profundas de la desnutrición, vinculada al despojo territorial y desmontes. Ciertamente, tanto los medios de comunicación como los funcionarios del gobierno, que se reunieron con Deane y le dieron su apoyo, insistían en reproducir una visión culturalista de la situación, que los culpaba o criminalizaba y que encubría la

situación de pobreza estructural y discriminación racial a la que se venía sometiendo a estos pueblos (Buufosalta 2020). No obstante, nos preguntamos en qué se basó Deane para realizar la declaración de más arriba y con qué implicancias raciales.

Desde hace tiempo, Deane ha desarrollado distintos proyectos en la región basados en inversiones de bajo costo y autosustentabilidad (artesanías, huertas, entre otros) (Deane en La Gaceta 2015). En una serie de comunicaciones personales Deane nos explicaba que operaba en la zona desde 1978, como propulsor e intermediario encargado de la comercialización de artesanías pequeñas wichí al exterior; pero por la crisis argentina de 2001 y la proliferación de artesanos que competían entre sí, las ventas dejaron de ser rentables y la producción decayó. La comercialización de artesanía la continuaron los y las wichí por su cuenta y Deane se orientó a otros proyectos que apuntaban a acompañar a algunas familias wichí en emprendimientos productivos de tomates, ajíes u otros cultivos adaptables a la zona (Deane, Misión Chaqueña, entre el 16 y el 22 de julio de 2012).



Imagen 4: Plantación de maíz en la Universidad del Monte (organización wichí lindera a Misión Chaqueña). Fuente: gentileza de PL (Misión Chaqueña, 21 de febrero de 2021).

Esto indicaba que Deane no sólo estaba interesado en la autosustentabilidad de los wichí, sino en trabajar en producciones excedentarias; por eso, cuando las artesanías dejaron de ser rentables quedaron en segundo plano. Ciertamente, esta persona proponía que profundizar el desarrollo de los proyectos de tipo productivista capitalistas era la única solución para apalear los problemas de pobreza de las familias de la zona. Esto generaba cierta desconfianza en las

familias wichí, que habían tenido experiencias de fracasos de otros proyectos similares, como la granja “San Miguel”²⁰; sin embargo, la necesidad hacía que muchas familias aceptaran trabajar con Deane.

Este tipo de proyectos presentaba ciertas ventajas, pero también algunos problemas. Por un lado, las lógicas productivistas eran contradictorias con las formas de producción y reproducción wichí. Esto no quería decir que las familias se negaran a desarrollarlas o combinarlas; sin embargo, El mismo Deane admitía que los wichí de Misión Chaqueña “viven al día”, decía que era así porque eran cazadores, culturalmente no concebían la posibilidad de invertir a largo plazo, por lo tanto, tampoco manejaban los tiempos del mercado (Deane 2009). Por otro lado, Deane planteaba que el “desarrollo” de los wichí debía estar vinculado al aprendizaje perdurable del uso de herramientas y técnicas novedosas para incorporarse al mercado hortícola y poder superar las falencias nutricionales, en base al objetivo general de “promover y preservar sus valores culturales (...) afirmando sus raíces e identidad” (Deane 2009, 6); sin embargo, la propia ONG reconocía lo siguiente:

Toda la producción necesita un sistema de compra inmediata. Al ser cazadores viven al día, por ende, lo que produzco hoy lo vendo hoy. La idea de invertir ahora para cosechar en 5 meses no la conciben. Por eso siempre debe haber alguien capacitado y que reciba los trabajos en el día a día. (Deane 2009, 14)

En este sentido, por un lado, la idea de autosustentabilidad del proyecto quedaba limitada a la disponibilidad de personas especialmente capacitadas, no siempre wichí. Por otro, la relación con la naturaleza se volvía un vínculo extractivo; esta forma de concebir la naturaleza, se contradecía con otras formas de producción y reproducción de la vida que nuestras y nuestros interlocutores defendían (MJ y DP, Carboncito, 18 de julio de 2012).

Las novedades acercadas a Misión Chaqueña en el proyecto de huertas de Siwok significaban el “desarrollo” de la comunidad desde una perspectiva desarrollista, aferradas a la relación con el mercado, a la producción de frutos “vendibles”, no sólo al autoabastecimiento, y a insumos tecnológicos novedosos y costosos que se conseguían mediante donaciones o financiamientos privados. Como decíamos, uno de los problemas de la perspectiva desarrollista en que se encuadraban los proyectos de esta ONG resultaba discriminatorio de otras formas de vida, porque el mercado capitalista ponía a la naturaleza al servicio de las personas y la convertía en una forma de capital extraíble, medio para el “desarrollo” (Gudynas 1999; Quintero 2012). Esto dejaba por fuera otras formas de concebir la naturaleza y producir alimentos, ontológicamente diferentes; esto no implicaba una visión culturalista, sino formas más participativas de

²⁰ Emprendimiento desarrollado por la “Iniciativa Cristiana” de la iglesia anglicana, iniciado en 1972, que, por diferentes razones sociales y económicas, fracasó en la década de 1980 (Trinchero y Maranta, 1987).

producción por parte de las comunidades. Incluso la autosustentabilidad que proponía Deane era contradictoria con su objetivo de promover la cultura wichí, porque, como ha sostenido Arturo Escobar “pensar alternativas bajo la modalidad del desarrollo sostenible es ubicarse dentro del mismo modelo de pensamiento que produjo el desarrollo y lo sostuvo” (Escobar 1998, 416).

La cuestión del financiamiento merece un párrafo aparte, porque el desarrollo de proyectos provenientes de organizaciones no gubernamentales solía contar con presupuestos manejados por estas últimas, en lugar de que lo hagan las comunidades. Algunos de nuestros interlocutores nos contaban que Deane les proveía mangueras e insumos hortícolas usados, donados de fincas vecinas “amigas”, lo mismo que los paquetes de semillas, que llegaban abiertos a las huertas wichí, lo que les hacía pensar que eran sobrantes donados; por lo tanto, no estaba claro en qué se empleaba el presupuesto de los proyectos (PL, Misión Chaqueña, 17 de julio de 2012; también MJ y DP, Carboncito, 18 de julio de 2012, entre otros y otras). Esto no era novedoso, ya en otras ocasiones, las distintas familias, comunidades u organizaciones wichí de la zona habían denunciado que, tanto algunas organizaciones no gubernamentales como el gobierno local, los apartaban del control de los presupuestos de los proyectos u obras públicas destinadas a sus comunidades (ver, por ejemplo, El Tribuno 2011a; 20011b).

El caso de la Fundación Siwok no era el único de la región, sino que existían otras experiencias de trabajos con ONG, instituciones religiosas u organismos del Estado que mostraban contradicciones y tensiones entre la idea de ayuda, asistencia o desarrollo y el reconocimiento de la cultura y participación colectiva de las comunidades indígenas (Trinchero y Belli 2009; Quintero 2010, 2012). El problema era que la pobreza y desnutrición wichí eran pensadas desde una perspectiva economicista y productivista, que buscaba la solución en el mismo mercado de trabajo o de producción que la generaba (Álvarez Leguizamón 2015). Distintos factores promovían la inserción de las familias wichí en los proyectos presentados por las diversas instituciones mencionadas; sin embargo, la exclusión en la participación y control del presupuesto de los proyectos, la donación de insumos usados (quizás descartados por las empresas), la falta de consulta y consenso sobre las formas de implementación y concepciones implicadas en la producción de alimentos, por nombrar algunas cuestiones, no dejaban de percibirse como actos de discriminación, subestimación y maltrato contra los que la mejor opción era, en la medida de lo posible, abandonar los proyectos.

Palabras finales

Taguieff (1998) decía que el racismo no es un fenómeno abstracto, tampoco un ente, el mal, sino que cuenta con su propia historicidad, se puede localizar su surgimiento en el imperialismo colonial europeo y se pueden observar sus transformaciones a lo largo el tiempo y de los espacios que ha afectado, por eso proponía hablar de “racismos”, en plural. Sin embargo, estos racismos se

pueden analizar como una unidad, en tanto tienen en común las lógicas de jerarquización y diferenciación de unas sociedades sobre otras. Estas lógicas operan en distintas dimensiones, por ejemplo, suelen estar muy visibles en doctrinas ideológicas como la dicotomía “civilización y barbarie” y sus políticas de exterminio, pero también aparece en prácticas más rutinarias, por momentos veladas, encubiertas, naturalizadas e institucionalizadas.

En definitiva, siempre significan distintas formas de violencia, física y simbólica, en contextos que las vuelven posibles e incluso las legitiman (Wieviorka 2009). En este sentido, el racismo ha sido entendido como un elemento central en la estructuración societal latinoamericana desde la época colonial (Quijano 2000; Quintero 2015). En particular en Argentina, la construcción de una Argentina Blanca propició no sólo la negación o intento de borrado de parte de la población considerada “no-blanca”, sino también la idea de que, al no existir población no-blanca, esto significaba que no existía racismo en Argentina (Álvarez Leguizamón 2020; Gordillo 2020).

Específicamente, en el Chaco salteño, los tres casos presentados mostraron tanto episodios y discursos de odio explícitos como prácticas institucionales naturalizadas más veladas. En la escuela de Misión Chaqueña las situaciones cotidianas de racismo, incrustadas en las estructuras institucionales, se concretaban en el maltrato de las maestras y maestros criollos hacia los y las niñas wichí, el menosprecio hacia las familias y la ausencia de políticas educativas interculturales bilingües participativas, excepto en casos específicos que dependían de la voluntad docente. Estas prácticas racistas desbordaron cuando se jubiló la directora en 2019; esa coyuntura fue la oportunidad para llevar los reclamos que hasta el momento se hacían a nivel local, al plano provincial. El carácter pluridimensional del racismo, en este caso, despertaba distintas resistencias en múltiples direcciones, un tanto dispersas, como cuando los y las niñas wichí se negaban a ir a la escuela, las familias decidían no enviarlos o pedían una escuela sólo para wichí; sin embargo, en conjunto, las distintas dimensiones auspiciaron de motor para la organización colectiva y la lucha antirracista en otros niveles. De modo similar, el racismo expresado en el sistema de salud se concretaba en distintos ámbitos y niveles, tanto en prácticas cotidianas como en políticas sanitarias inadecuadas e insuficientes. El episodio de violencia que remitimos al iniciar el apartado, en donde el doctor Céspedes gritaba que mataba a los “matacos” poco a poco en el hospital, mostraba lo más brutal del discurso racista; no obstante, como vimos, esto se replicaba en otros espacios del mismo sistema, en donde la lucha antirracista se desplegaba tanto entre pacientes y profesionales como “entre colegas”, como decía el doctor Franco. Del mismo modo, la alimentación wichí se había convertido en tema de debate en los últimos años y los proyectos agro-productivistas eran presentados como la solución; sin embargo, la lucha de los wichí sostenía que esto requería de mayor participación en el control de los presupuestos, en la implementación colaborativa y en la perspectiva ontológica que sustentaban.

Todo esto, nos hace pensar que el racismo manifestado en el Chaco salteño, desplegado desde distintas dimensiones y niveles, no necesariamente podría

captarse como un fenómeno homogéneo o personificado en determinados actores sociales. Más bien, como dice Taguieff (1998), sería necesario historizarlo para desplegar un antirracismo también pluridimensional, pensado desde los factores de “situación”, porque el racismo depende de los contextos más que de la disposición de ciertos actores. En relación con esto, Gordillo (2020) nos recordaba que la Argentina Blanca no corresponde necesariamente al sector de la sociedad de piel blanca, sino a un conglomerado de personas que se identifica con el proyecto territorial que la construyó como parte central de la identidad nacional. Del mismo modo, en el Chaco salteño, junto con las familias wichí, muchos y muchas docentes bregan por la educación intercultural bilingüe desde sus lugares de trabajo, aunque esto entra en conflicto con otras familias wichí. También, muchos y muchas profesionales de la salud entran en conflictos con sus colegas al pedir el acompañamiento adecuado para las comunidades, aunque algunos agentes sanitarios wichí puedan seguir ciertas pautas higienistas monoculturales. Del mismo modo, muchas familias wichí abandonan los proyectos productivistas, pero también otras adhieren.

En este sentido, quizás identificar las distintas dimensiones y prácticas racistas, sobre todo, aquellas que corresponden al racismo institucional, nos permitiría hacer inteligible las formas concretas en que se producen los procesos de jerarquización y diferenciación étnico-racial en nuestra sociedad. En ese trabajo, que merece profundas investigaciones futuras, será un desafío superar las nociones más abstractas del racismo institucional, otorgarle entidad como una unidad, al mismo tiempo que se le reconoce su especificidad en cada contexto y, a partir de esto, valorar las prácticas antirracistas tal como las han motorizado los propios actores.

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Las últimas publicaciones y trabajos científicos abarcan distintas temáticas vinculadas con sus estudios de posgrado y la formación docente. Algunas de estas publicaciones consistieron en capítulos de libros, compilación de actas de jornadas y publicación de ponencias en eventos académicos.

Otras participaciones en eventos académicos consistieron en formar parte de las Comisiones Organizadoras de Jornadas Nacionales de Educación y también Jornadas Internacionales Ciencias Sociales, así como la Coordinación General de las *II Jornadas Interdisciplinarias de Estudios Sociais Latino-Americanos*, Universidad de Integración Latinoamericana (UNILA), en Foz do Iguaçu (Brasil), 11, 12 y 13 de septiembre de 2019.

Desde 2008 participa de proyectos y grupos de investigación locales (UNS) e internacionales en CLACSO. Desde 2012 ha participado de Proyectos de Extensión Universitaria subvencionados por el Colectivo de Estudios e Investigaciones Sociales (CEISO), Programa de Voluntariado Nacional Universitario (Ministerio de Educación de la Nación) y Secretaría de Extensión (Universidad Nacional del Sur).

Argentina's origin myth under fire: Indigenous contestations of naturalised racism

Heike Schaumborg

Keywords: chaco, wichí, guaraní, quom, indigenous, antiracism, discrimination, naturalisation of racism, resistance, insurgence.

Preamble

To impress Spanish business leaders in the midst of a comprehensive economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, Argentina's president, Alberto Fernández, celebrated, in an ill-informed manner, one of Argentina's innocent-sounding origin myths but one that whitens and Europeanises its population; in short, it is profoundly racist. Here, we will be exploring some of the indigenous responses to this in the Argentine Chaco region as well as explorations of subtle forms of reproducing racism and what that might mean for antiracism. This section comprises **a recorded conversation with Nancy Lopez, a Weenhayek-Wichí community leader**, and some WhatsApp messages exchanged with a Guaraní activist from the same geographical region, about a day of antiracist protests by indigenous people in the Chaco (Formosa province) during the pandemic.

By giving voice to people who are seldom heard, I hope to shine a light onto institutional racism and how it is reproduced in the everyday as experienced and resisted by indigenous people in the Argentine Chaco. The aim of this contribution is to highlight what some of the authors in this Special Issue note as characteristic of contemporary Latin American anti-racism: 1) There is an incipient anti-racist movement emerging in Latin America, 2) The indigenous insurgence takes many different forms, 3) There are understandings of class that underpin its tactics and an appropriate language of antiracism is still in its making. But these exchanges recorded here also complement the contributions in this journal with further insights and points of departure for future elaborations of the problem in question. They include specifically questions related to the role of history, the appropriation of racism by those who also suffer it, in particular the mestizo population, institutional complicity, and how established political constructs are deconstructed by emerging antiracist protest articulations. The latter is particularly illustrated by the WhatsApp messages that I reproduce here both in English and in Spanish.

The idea here is to grant some space to these voices, to make them heard, while I offer some contextualisation, in addition to Natalia Boffa's relevant and comprehensively researched paper for this same region in this issue.

Some contexts

On 9 June last year, during a meeting with Spanish and Argentine business barons and government representatives, Alberto Fernández, the current president of Argentina, made an excruciating mistake. In his efforts to impress and entice his powerful business guests from Spain to invest in Argentina, he wrongly cited the Mexican poet Octavio Paz as having once said, "Mexicans came from their Indians, the Brazilians came out of the jungle, but we Argentines descended from boats, and they were boats that came from there, from Europe. And that is how we built our society" (Perfil 2021). Besides that he appeared to have confused Octavio Paz with one of Argentina's rock stars, Litto Nebbia, the racism underpinning this excerpt of which Fernández appeared to be oblivious, caused an immediate backlash with Latin America's political elites, the opportunity was seized upon by his rival Bolsonaro in Brazil, who was declared "Racist of the year" by Survival International (Survival International 2019). It is noteworthy that Litto Nebbia's zamba in fact was an ironic take on this origin myth; but not everybody gets irony.

Importantly, the politically most damning response did not come from the establishment, but from an indigenous awakening in the Chaco, which is a region popularly, and historically, known in Argentina as "The Impenetrable", referring to its remoteness, deep forests, and indigenous hostility to colonization efforts.

In today's connected world, the "Grand Chaco" (approximately half of which is in Argentina and the rest split between Bolivia and Paraguay, and a little bit in Brazil) has lost much of its remoteness to the world's fastest and most intense rate of deforestation in the twenty-first century. It is Argentina's most ethnically diverse region, inhabited by a large variety of indigenous groups, involving hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and domestic agriculturalist traditions). As the interview with Nancy and the anonymised WhatsApp excerpts below reflect, these people faced all sorts of tough conditions which further hardened during the pandemic as evidenced by a range of events; from six Wichí infant deaths related to malnutrition in the first month of 2020, and with further cases to follow in the course of the pandemic, but also violent confrontations with the authorities and lack of access to essential services and resources, not least potable water and health services. It is not some kind of imagined romantic notion of remoteness that is responsible for this brutal disregard for life, but institutional racism. Such racism is so normalised in Argentina, that even the country's president is uneducated in recognising the profound racism that underpins this well-known origin myth which he wholeheartedly referenced as truth.

Much more can be explored about Argentina's origin myth, but it suffices to note that the creation of Argentine national identity built upon this myth and displaced other identities. Much of the local Black population present in Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century had arrived in Argentina from Cabo

Verde, but opted to reclaim their colonial Portuguese rather than African heritage as a whitening strategy in a society which not only marginalises Black people but claims that they don't exist (Tamagno and Mafia 2011). Similarly, Tamagno and Mafia (ibid.) note that indigenous people, although treated differently, were also at least side-lined by the national imaginary, with national census data on the indigenous population either being incomplete, non-existent and collected erratically until the early years of the twenty-first century, where such data began to be collected more systematically. Indeed, the 1949 reform of the national constitution made clear in article 68 (15) that "...there can be no racial and no class distinctions between the inhabitants of the country" (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos 2015:8). While it might reflect a certain egalitarian aspiration of national unity, it undermined and indeed, as various authors in this issue note, eliminated Black and indigenous identities from a White-European *Criollo* national imaginary. A complex mix of changing conditions in the 1990s encouraged struggles by diverse groups and strata for visibility and rights. In part, large-scale privatization of the land sharpened territorial conflicts and claims by indigenous people and others (such as the shanty-town movements), while the return to democracy years following the last military regime (1976-1983) had triggered and energized civil and human rights movements. It was at this time, for example, when Black people in Argentina began to actively reclaim their visibility (Tamagno and Mafia 2011).

The WhatsApp discontent

Despite the social emergency that was then declared for the entire Chaco region, near the country's northern borders with Bolivia and Paraguay, indigenous communities did not take long to respond. In the part of the Chaco belonging to Formosa province, indigenous people were organising a lively protest against racism [see video]. They then disseminated it through their WhatsApp groups, reaching other indigenous people, for example the person who then forwarded it on to me. I received this message on 14 June from an activist from a Guaraní community in Tartagal.

This is the exchange and anonymised WhatsApp excerpts he had forwarded (see the original messages in Spanish below):

"Hello, good day, sister Heike, racism begins with our rulers", wrote my Guaraní contact and then forwarded me the anonymised WhatsApp messages:

- 1) Good day, brothers and sisters. From Saenz Peña we repudiate all that which our communities have been putting up with, there are many who are our bosses and we are being threatened that if we don't get vaccinated then they'll sack us from our jobs, and simply having an aboriginal face means that we are then persecuted and that they want to treat us like rubbish with lack of decent behaviour and respect, and it's them who are the most ignorant and are *re vivos* (who cleverly cheat). Because thanks to our

brothers, they are there sweating in the seat and they believe themselves to be more than us the working people, they are rubbish as persons and you won't imagine how many more things are happening in all the places where there are communities. We must unite and go out onto the streets, we haven't got another choice, brothers and sisters"

2) I can't believe what that monster perón was saying, that they had arrived to organise and not destroy the indians and humanize.....? They shouldn't take us for ignorant with those racist and inhuman discourses. In fact, Peron took the same position as the other monsters, Sarmiento and Roca, with their idea of exterminating the *originarios*, on several occasions they ripped the babies from their indigenous mothers' breasts, the soldiers against each other, but in the end, very little is said about what they did to us, although at present non-indigenous persons who perhaps... perhaps.... Know of the massacre but pretend to be distracted so as not to tell, but that's how things are. Today, perhaps, some might say something, but The past must be forgotten Haha, I'm afraid I don't share this same idea, when evidently racism, mistreatment, rape, murder are latent and continuing, one has to understand that to talk of pardon when we have already forgiven thousands and thousands of times over, and to talk of patience, our patience reaches up into the sky, to talk of becoming brothers, we've already tried one time and another but we are rejected, they talk to get closer, we've tried that thousands of times but we are rejected, talking of forgetting, and we've already tried that thousands of times but they hurt us.... I understand that I'm wichí and every time a mama wichí is pregnant that little one even when still in the womb is already being discriminated against, and if you wish we can talk about health in our municipality Rivadavia Banda Sur and think of the cases there have been and you realise that few talk about the reality, that is unfortunately how things are. You can't live like that."

3) The movements have begun; the Chaco resistance resounds. No more deaths. Justice for José lago and the other brothers who have lost their lives ☹️☹️☹️.

Explanatory Note: Josué Lago was a 21-year old Qom (Toba), who was murdered on 11 June 2021 by a live bullet from the police during repression of a protest in the Qom neighbourhood of Los Silos, Chaco province (Infoqom 2021).

4) I'm from the community Maria Cristina¹, Departamento Ramón Lista Formosa. We the *pueblos originarios* suffer under the authorities that govern the people in my region where we live from what we have, it's a struggle for the indigenous people: school, water, energy for light, secondary school, pension and more. It is the state's responsibility to ensure that people have got these things, we've obtain those things through protests, without protests we don't get anything. Many indigenous [persons] have died due to badly functioning governments. They are mean to indigenous people, that is my thinking, it's what I see through the news in social [media] networks.

Original WhatsApp messages in Spanish (they also contain original orthographic mistakes / los mensajes de WhatsApp originales (también contienen los errores ortográficos originales):

“Hola buenos días hermana Heike el racismo empieza x nuestros gobernantes”

1) Buen dia hnos y hnas desde saenz Peña repudiamos todos los que estan pasando las comunidades hnos, aca tambien hay muchos los q son patrones nuestros tambien estamos bajo amenazas que si no nos vacunamos nos cortan el trabajo y x solo tener la cara de aborígenes somos perseguidos y nos quieren tratar como basura en la falta de trato y respeto, y son ellos los mas ignorantes y son re vivos xq gracias a los hnos ellos estan ahi transpirando el asiento y se creen mas que la gente que si nosotros laburamos, son unas basuras como personas y no se imaginan cuantas cosas mas estan pasando en todos los lugares donde hay comunidades, a unirse y salir a la calle, no queda otra cosa hnos y hnas.

2) No puedo creer lo que decia ese monstruo peron que llegaron para organizar y no destruir a los indios y humanizar ...👤? .Que no nos tengan la gente por ignorantes con esos discursos racistas e inhumanos ,de hecho peron tenia la misma postura que los otros monstruos ,sarmiento ,y roca ,con esos ideas de exterminio a los originarios ,en varias ocasiones madres originarios que se les arrancaban de sus senos el bebe ,los soldados que se tiraban unos contra otros en fin muy pocos hablan de lo que nos hicieron aunque hay en la actualidad personas no originarios que quizas ...quizas... lo sepan de la masacre pero se hacen los distraidos por no decirlos .pero es así las cosas .Actualmente quizas algunos diran pero... el pasado hay que olvidarlo ...jeje , lamento no compartir la misma idea ,si evidentemente el racismo ,el maltrato ,las violaciones la matanza es latente y continua ,hay que entender que si hablamos de perdon ya hemos perdonado miles y miles de veces ,y si hablamos de paciencia ,nuestra paciencia llega hasta el cielo ,si hablamos de hermanarnos ya lo intentamos una y otra vez y nos niegan ,si hablamos de acercarnos ya lo intentamos miles de veces y nos niegan ,si hablamos de olvidar el ya lo intentamos miles y miles de veces pero no?"ieren de nosotros ? ,entiendo soy wichi y cada vez que una mama wichi esta embarazada ese pequeño aun estando en el vientre ya es discriminado y si quieren hablemos de salud en nuestro municipio de rivadavia bansa sur y piensen de los casos que hubo y se daran cuenta que pocos hablan de la realidad ,asi estan las cosas lamentable .asi no se puede vivir .”

3) “Empezo los movimientos sona del resistencia chaco no mas muerte judicia para jose lago y a mas hno que perdieron la vida 😞😞😞”

Nota explicativa: Josué Lago era un joven Qom (Toba) de 21 años a quién murió por una bala de plomo de la mano de la policía que reprimió una protesta del barrio Los Silos, en la provincia del Chaco (Infoqom 2021)

4) yo soy de la comunidad María Cristina¹ Departamento Ramón Lista Formosa. nosotros los pueblos originarios sufrimos con las autoridades que gobiernan el pueblo. en mi zona donde vivimos lo que tenemos es una lucha del pueblo indígena. escuelas. agua. la luz energía. colegio. pensión. y otros. esas cosas el estado es el Responsable de darle la gente. todos los que logramos mediante manifestación sin manifestación no conseguimos nada muchos indígenas murieron por mal funcionamiento de los gobiernos son mezquino para el pueblo originarios esto es mi pensamiento lo que estoy mirando a través de las noticias por las redes sociales.

Conversation with Nancy Lopez, Weenhayek – Wichí community leader and activist, from the community “Mitroja”, Tartagal, Salta (Argentina)/

Conversación con Nancy Lopez, referente local y caciqua Weenhayek – Wichí de la comunidad “Mitroja”, Tartagal, Salta (Argentina)

The transcription below is in Spanish for now, but here is a short contextualised summary in English:

Nancy Lopez is an indigenous community activist, *caciqua*, and co-directs a local radio station run together with her colleagues all of whom represent some of the locally based indigenous ethno-linguistic groups (Wichí, Toba, Guaraní, Chorote, among others). Her mind is strongly focused especially on the women's struggles as she has observed over the past few years growing gendered violence among the communities. Once prompted to address racism, she highlights the importance of understanding the history of the indigenous encounter with racism, colonialism, the military and colonists, which is a history of violence and violation of indigenous people. She discusses the subtle forms of how racism penetrates and is reproduced by the most marginalised people, the mestizos, and the failure of the institutions to challenge it. There, the mestizo of mixed indigenous and 'Criollo' descent was rejected by both the dominant Criollo society as well as the indigenous communities. I suggested to Nancy that perhaps the mestizo is generally viewed to be testimony and a consequence of a long history of violations of indigenous women and their communities. Nancy complains about a lack of opportunities in terms of education for indigenous people. Nevertheless, she notes that the status of mestizos has been changing over the years, and they are now closer to the communities, in other words, barriers of racial difference between these groups have begun to break down. As a note on the side, this reflects perhaps the general changes mentioned earlier during the 1990s, in which rights movements closely entwined with struggles for

visibilization, while neoliberal adjustment policies did their bit to sharpen the polarization between the haves and the have nots, thus eliminating any illusion of social difference among the latter segment of the population.

Nancy also reflects on how current trends of assimilation are a threat to collective indigenous identity through culture and language. The role of language is vital. Institutional inflexibility regarding policies and established requirements leads to racism. Nancy, in this regard, highlights the institutional failure to enable native speakers of aboriginal languages to provide them with a teaching role in that language because of lack of titles. However, structural and institutional racism, social marginalisation had drastically limited indigenous people's access to the education system, both primary but especially secondary schooling was almost unheard of until the late 1990s. This only began to change in this twenty-first century for the younger generations, but often at the cost of losing their own native tongue in a Spanish-speaking education system. The failure of the education system to help the older generations who are fluent in their language to either obtain relevant titles as adults later in life, or to create enabling bridges for those able to teach but with secondary schooling incomplete, necessarily reproduces racial discrimination. Her account and solution (indigenous people should be able to become teachers) echoes such a conflict that Boffa recounts in her contribution in this issue which illustrated clearly the institutional nature of such discrimination in terms of opportunities.

Further, Nancy comments on the intersection of race and gender for her communities: "Always us women we are the ones whose job it is to be there in the institutions". This is a very interesting point about indigenous women bearing the brunt of institutional racism to a significant extent where everyday racism meets gender discrimination, and how it articulates in the schools, hospitals, and social work, etc. Yet, according to Nancy, this gendered racism, or intersection of gender and racism, affects the entire community, men and women. Indigenous women are at odds here with the growing feminist movement in Latin America, and some, like Nancy, are quite explicit about this, because they understand that gendered and racist discrimination are tools of an oppression of the community as a whole, of women and of men. This is largely because indigenous women do not have the luxury to view half of their community with animosity, but that together they are engaged in the struggle for collective survival and to defend their territories broadly understood in order to defend a shared indigenous identity, a shared ancestry and cultural, egalitarian, practices tied to the territory. These territories are today facing enormous threats; physically, socially and culturally. Indeed, the indigenous communities in the Argentine Chaco, as mentioned earlier, confront extreme poverty and access to basic services are scarce, so much so, that the recording ended abruptly just at the point where Nancy was talking about lack of access to basic amenities such as electricity and water, never mind mobile phone

networks. Her mobile phone connection had died. I subsequently asked her whether she wanted to continue, but because it was so symbolic, she laughed and thought it was best to let it end there.

Knowing that discussing racism openly requires the crafting of a public language or transcript, I had arranged to discuss and probe some of the issues in an informal, non-recorded, WhatsApp conversation with Nancy prior to this recorded conversation. Yet, this warming up exercise also meant that perhaps some interesting aspects of the unrecorded conversation were lost, while new issues emerged. It enabled us to explore some of the less evident issues that inform the indigenous experience of institutional racism. They often appear in subtle form in the everyday, but carry the burden of a history of oppression and discrimination. For Nancy, solidarity that she derives from empathy, to feel what the other feels who is need, is central to the struggle against discrimination and for equality.

Transcript/ desgrabación

NANCY: Mi nombre es Nancy López. Soy caciqua y también referente. Trabajo también con mujeres. Vivo en Tartagal a 5km de la ciudad de Tartagal, provincia de Salta. Yo soy una directora de la radio donde trabajamos diferentes grupos étnicos. Estan los Tobas, los Guaraní, también como dirigiendo esta organización, la ARETEDE, La Voz Indígena, donde tenemos también centro cultural "Litania Prado". Estamos trabajando desde el año 1999, venimos trabajando de diferentes problemáticas de las comunidades, también luchando por nuestro territorio, también hoy por hoy, estamos luchando para que nos reconozca como pueblo Weenhayek -Wichí. Todavía nosotros como pueblo Weenhayek sostenemos todavía nuestra cultura, todavía seguimos practicando nuestra cultura en las épocas de nuestros abuelos y abuelas. Estas culturas se nos van perdiendo, porque hoy por hoy, nosotros estamos entrando en una sociedad occidental. También tiene un ¿por qué no? Estamos perdiendo nuestras costumbres, nuestra cultura, porqué siempre nosotros estamos tratando de que esto siga viva nuestra cultura. Pero lamentablemente por todos los avasallamientos que hubo en nuestro territorio, las colonizaciones, ¿no?, cuando se colonizan las comunidades ahí también con esa ruptura hubo muchos, ahí entró con estas leyes otras costumbres, que entran en la comunidad, como por ejemplo: nosotros teníamos esta costumbre de igualdad aquí no había alguien mayor en la casa como más, quiero ser más claro en esto: La mujer y el hombre, tenían una igualdad. ¿Porqué digo una igualdad? Porque el hombre nunca decía que era la cabeza de la mujer, o la cabeza del hogar. No, era una igualdad tanto del hombre como de la mujer. Cuando trabajaban, trabajaban juntos. Nunca la mujer también tenía, nunca la mujer estaba debajo del hombre, por ejemplo, ¿no? Las mujeres en esas épocas también tenían voz y

voto en las asambleas, en las reuniones, en los consejos, la mujer también tenía voz y voto. Pero con esa ruptura que hubo en las comunidades ya en ese entró otras costumbres, que hoy conocemos por ejemplo como el machismo, en las comunidades; ¡en estas épocas no hubo machismo! Nunca conocíamos lo que es el machismo. No siempre...

HEIKE: Y eso, que conexión ves entre el machismo, los cambios que se producían en las comunidades y el racismo, o sea la desigualdad que empezaban a sufrir a partir de las colonizaciones las comunidades aborígenes, como se conectan y donde se conectan esas desigualdades....

NANCY: Claro el machismo surge en ese, por ese camino, entran otras costumbres, y dejando al lado las costumbres que teníamos de igualdad de sufrir, cuando otros sufren, cuando otros tienen necesidad, también uno siente esa necesidad. Por ejemplo, en este caso nosotros como pueblo originario cuando sentimos que nuestros hermanos que están sufriendo por una necesidad que están siendo desalojados, están siendo golpeado. También siento ese golpe en el cuerpo porque nosotros siempre decimos que llevamos la misma sangre, ¿no? Nosotros somos **hermanos** de sangre (énfasis de Nancy). No es, este, si es, si mi hermano es un Toba, pero es originario, nosotros también sentimos también el mismo sentimiento que el hermano. Aquí no había una desigualdad en ese tema también. Son todos, si sufre una familia, sufrimos nosotros también. Y si el hermano sufrió un golpe, ese golpe también lo siento yo. Pero cuando viene, cuando se coloniza las comunidades, ya hay una, a ver, ya cada familia se arregla, hay una... como te puedo decir, ...que cada uno tiene su interés propio....

HEIKE: Individualismo?

NANCY: Individualismo, ahí está la palabra correcta. Hay una individualidad de cada familia y sufre una familia, sufre la familia alrededor. Nada más. No sufren otra gente de las mismas comunidades. Y hay una individualidad. A ver. Puedo tener comida hoy, y si mi hermano no tiene, es una palabra muy fuerte para nosotros como pueblo originario. A ver, si yo tengo comida hoy y mi vecina no tiene nada comer, porque el padre de la familia está enfermo, está en cama, no me interesa, no. No me importa. Pero nosotros este sentir de "no me importa", eso **nunca** lo llevamos nosotros como pueblos originarios. Porque nuestra cultura es diferente. No hay una individualidad. Todos trabajamos juntos, las necesidades las sentimos todos, si tenemos algo compartimos con todos. Si mi vecina no tiene nada, yo con un plato de comida me levanto y le llevo a esa familia que no tiene nada para comer. Entonces eso había antes, no había una

individualidad en las familias. No había, eso nunca hemos sentido, no eso sentir, que "bueno, eso no es mi problema".

HEIKE: O sea, vos decís que eso es bastante recién, ¿no?

NANCY: Claro. Esto son, esa ruptura, de solidaridad, ¿no?, de ser, este, trabajar en conjunto, trabajar en colectivo, eso nace desde la ruptura, desde la ruptura del avasallamiento, mejor dicho, más claro. Desde ahí nace todo esto.

HEIKE: Estamos hablando sobre, principalmente, la cuestión del racismo institucional y anti-racismo que puedan surgir para los pueblos originarios. Pero no se suele hablar mucho en ese lenguaje entre los pueblos originarios. Sin embargo, lo que estas mencionando estás hablando en cierto modo, también se podría interpretar como una penetración de esas desigualdades que se basan en lo étnico. Por ejemplo, vos me habías mencionado una vez que hablamos antes, la cuestión de los mestizos, no?, que no entran ni en una comunidad ni en otra, que no están aceptados mucho por todos. Y vos me habías sugerido que ellos articulan fuertemente el racismo hacia los pueblos originarios, ¿no sé si podés explicar eso un poco?

NANCY: en este caso, cuando hablamos del racismo, también hablamos desde la historia, no? Porque la historia viene a ser..., antes estuvimos nosotros como pueblos originarios no había ni un mestizo por ahí mencionabas un poco cuando se coloniza una comunidad ya entra ahí en las comunidades, y después, bueno, desde ahí como los pueblos originarios estaban muy cercanos a los colonos, a los militares para decir así, otros, otras mujeres Wichí, otras mujeres toba, otras mujeres Wehneyek que han sido también esclavizados por los colonos que fueron a asentar comunidades, tuvieron también, eso dio también, a ver, como puedo decir, cambió muy brusco en ese, no? Porque nacieron, nacieron los hijos! Ya cuando nacen los hijos, ni la otra parte lo acepta, porque los pueblos originarios no aceptaban un mestizo. Y por un lado, los colonos también que estaban ahí, los militares, tampoco aceptaban a esos niños. Y ahí quedó en el medio de las dos partes. No aceptadas por los pueblos originarios, no aceptado por el mundo occidental tampoco los aceptan. ¡Y eso es bien claro! ¡Nosotros cuando tuvimos nuestra niñez, vimos eso! Eso vimos, porque ninguna de los dos partes, ni el mundo occidental los apreciaban, ni el mundo indígena los apreciaba, así quedaron en el medio. Entonces ahí es donde nace el racismo, ahí nace el racismo. Porque crecen, están ahí, ninguna de las dos partes los acepta, entonces ya es también el niño va creciendo y no quiere aceptar de ser indígena. Tampoco quiere aceptar que es un español, o un ruso o un inglés. No quiere aceptar.

HEIKE: Pero no es una forma de racismo, no usa el racismo, vos me habías comentado antes tu experiencia en la escuela, por ejemplo. No usan este lenguaje racista hacia los blancos, sino hacia los pueblos originarios. ¿Podrías reflejar sobre eso? O sea, en cierta forma sería un esfuerzo de "blanquearse", de tratarse de poder, o sea, el poder que reside con el "mundo blanco" para decirlo de alguna forma, y no con los pueblos originarios. Y vos apuntas a la historia me parece muy importante y señalar eso, porque es una historia de violaciones, es una historia de violencia feroz contra los pueblos originarios. Y eso tal vez también se articula en un rechazo de los pueblos originarios hacia los niños mestizo, ¿no? ¿Se podría decir así?

NANCY: Claro, por ejemplo, nosotros en nuestra época cuando vivimos ya, porque yaya en nuestra época ya somos vecinos con gente mestiza, ya somos vecinos, otros están cercanos a las comunidades. Entonces ahí ya cuando entra por ahí decir, bueno, ya tenés cómo, ¿no? Ustedes pertenecen a esta parte de los pueblos originarios, por ejemplo. Yo también yo conté un poco, como acababa de decir, yo conté un poco mi historia sobre la escuela, ¿no? Cuando recién ingresé a la escuela tuve mucha dificultad y no era poco. Porque yo en la escuela, vos no conoces y ven, y nosotros como pueblo originario también vemos la gente que nos aprecian y otra gente que no nos aprecian. En el momento que los conocemos, estamos en frente de una persona que no nos aprecia, en ese momento ya con nuestra mirada o con la mirada no más conocemos ya que ese hombre o esa mujer no nos aprecia como pueblo originario. En mi caso, por ejemplo, en la escuela, lo que más el maltrato o nos burlan como se dice, yo recibí desde la gente humilde, como nosotros, de pueblos pequeños, barrios pequeños, no, donde eran gente de barrio, ¿no? Fuera de la ciudad, donde ellos estuvieron allá alejados. Yo recibí mucho desprecio de esa gente, no, hijo de esa gente que también son humildes igual que yo, pero ellos nunca nos han apreciado. Desde esa parte recibí mucho desprecio, no solamente yo, mira, te cuento más, hubo también en mis lados, en cuarto grado, que teníamos ya empezado la escuela, a la mitad del año vino una chica compañera mía, para mí era una turca muy buena, era muy sensible esta chica, tenía mi edad, y la chica venía desde Córdoba, ¿no? Desde Córdoba vino la chica y sabemos como ellos hablan, no sé si decir, hablan diferente, pero con los tonos me refiero.

HEIKE: Ella era originaria también o no?

NANCY: No, no, ella era, ella vino desde la capital de Córdoba. Entonces ya no pertenecía a los pueblos originarios. Pero yo sentía que ella también le hacían bullying, ¡por el modo de hablar! No era una de los pueblos originarios. Por el

modo de hablar, como hablan los Cordobeses que hablan muy lento. No le daban como decir, mira es una chica de clase, por ejemplo, una chica no es de los pueblos originarios, pero también yo sentía que la despreciaban por el modo de hablar. Entonces ahí también me di cuenta de que yo no estaba sola. A mí me decía de todo, por ahí a mí me cuesta, me cuesta un montón de decir las palabras, horribles que me decían, no, ahí me cuesta mucho en este tiempo de repetir estas palabras feas que me decían, ¿no? Me cuesta un montón repetirlas, porque me trae recuerdos malos, me trae, hoy por hoy, hay mucha gente que realmente son gente que saben expresar, gente que son diplomáticos, gente que son intelectuales, como decimos nosotros. Esas palabras nunca hemos escuchado. Porque hoy por hoy más o menos, porque esa gente te respeta y nunca uno ve la mirada de ellos. Quizás ellos entenderán poco todo de nuestra cultura, pero bueno. Esa gente, no, son ellos que más nos desprecian. Hasta hoy lo veo, hasta hoy, yo veo y eso, hasta hoy...

HEIKE: Pero estas tocando un tema importante ahí, que es toda la cuestión de la lengua. Para la cultura Wichí la lengua es muy importante, o sea, el manejo de hablar, el manejo de convencer en Wichí. Yo recuerdo haberme encontrado con ese problema. Es un gran tema que sigue dando vuelta que es la educación bilingüe y como sigue eso. Los niños están ya desde sí desprivilegiado cuando entran a la escuela porque entran no hablando el idioma etc. Y ese, se le exige el hablar castellano en la escuela para la educación pública. ¿Qué podés comentar de eso, porque eso también es un tema de discriminación, no?

NANCY: Claro, es absolutamente una discriminación. No puedo nombrarlo por otra forma. Es una discriminación total. Yo ahí apunto, que es una discriminación hacia nosotros, hacia los pueblos.

HEIKE: Y como se debería resolver el tema?

NANCY: Por ahí, una opinión para decirlo, a ver como se resuelva esto, en qué forma se resuelvo. Yo creo que se va a resolver cuando hay maestros docentes que realmente son de la comunidad. Porque también ahí está el tema. Hoy, hay mucha gente mayor que hablan bien el idioma [originario] y son conocedores de la cultura y son maestros en hablar en la lengua, pero que hoy esa gente, ya es gente grande porque son las únicas personas que lo hablan el idioma, pero esa gente mayor no ha podido tener la oportunidad de tener una secundaria, por ejemplo, no. Entonces por ahí también está el problema porque yo no tengo un diploma o yo no tengo un título, yo no puedo enseñar a mi lengua materna en las escuelas donde cursan los niños y las niñas de los pueblos originarios. Yo no puedo, sabiendo mi lengua materna, yo no puedo porque yo soy una mujer que

sabe hablar en su lengua pero que no tiene sus títulos. No tenemos títulos. La gente hablantes en el idioma no tiene sus títulos, porque no han tenido la oportunidad. Entonces ahí también está el tema. Por ejemplo, en el Ministerio de educación, para que vos entrés como maestra bilingüe hoy, por ejemplo, no tenés el título, tampoco te van a recibir a que vayas a enseñar en una escuela. Entonces también ahí tenemos un problema. Y cuando yo toco ese tema, son muchos los temas para tocar, por ejemplo, son saberes que tenemos que no podemos ingresar en una escuela contando nuestros saberes. Contando historia, contando las costumbres, los bailes que tenemos, el idioma que tenemos, no podemos ingresar en una escuela porque no tenemos título, no somos diplomáticos. Pero te cuento más, pero hay gente que ha tenido la oportunidad de estar en una comunidad y ha estudiado nuestro idioma como pueblo y hoy son profesores. ¿Porqué? Porque son gente que ha estudiado. No son gente de pueblos originarios que son profesores ahora. El estudió nuestra lengua materna. Y cuando el tenía, ya hablando nuestro idioma, presentó su título, ya cursó en la universidad, en ese momento ya lo toman como profesor de los pueblos, de la lengua materna Wichí o Toba, ¿no? Es lo que pasa.

HEIKE: Para aclarar él porque es tan importante eso, mientras la gente grande no maneja bien el castellano, los jóvenes hoy casi no saben hablar el idioma [de los pueblos originarios].

NANCY: Claro. Lamentablemente es así. Lamentablemente es así, porque hay jóvenes que no hablan el idioma.

HEIKE: En cierto modo es una negación de la lengua nativa por el sistema educativo.

NANCY: Por el sistema educativo o porque nosotros, por ejemplo, yo tuve una oportunidad también de conversar con una chica de cursar en la universidad desde la escuela, desde la escuela terminó en una escuela que está en la comunidad que ahí en la comunidad se habla todo en idioma. Cuando ella va cursa en una universidad y ya se encuentra como que pasa de un mundo al otro mundo desconocido, ¿no? Entonces ahí también sufrió bullying, también, a ella casi no la entienden mucho. Y eso lo entiendo, porque hay chicos que manejan bien la lengua materna, tienen el secundario completo, pero tampoco sabe expresarse bien. Entonces ahí cuando cursa en la universidad, ahí tiene problema, porque ella contó también su experiencia desde la universidad. Profesora que ya manejan palabras técnicas. No es lo mismo que en una escuela en una comunidad, que capaz las maestras docentes hablan palabras que son habladas, muy conocidas. Pero ya hablando de la universidad ya usan palabras

técnicas, muchos usan palabras técnicas. Y para un joven Wichí, le va a costar también, aunque sepa hablar mucho el castellano.

HEIKE: No tiene acceso a ese otro lenguaje, digamos, de cierta formación. Ahí pasa otro nivel de discriminación, digamos. Se habla de la experiencia de racismo entre los hermanos y las hermanas de los pueblos originarios, ¿y se habla en términos de racismo o no?

NANCY: Cuando nosotros, por ejemplo, cuando una mujer indígena ingresa a un centro, por ejemplo, un centro institucional, por ejemplo...

HEIKE: Cómo de qué... de Salud?

NANCY: Si, de salud o de educación, registro o en la judicial. Por ejemplo en la judicial donde trabajan gente con un nivel de abogado por ejemplo, ahí, muchas mujeres indígenas sufren mucho al ingresar en ese, porque cuando llegan a la comunidad ahí están las familias, se juntan y hablan de ese tema, de no entendió muy mucho lo que el abogada la preguntaba, o si ella respondió bien, nunca la han preguntado si ella entendía bien lo que estaban diciendo, hablamos siempre nosotros cuando llegamos en nuestra casa, en nuestra familia, se cuentan todas esas cosas. En qué momentos hemos pasado, en no hemos entendido en el momento en que ingresamos en un lugar institucional, por ejemplo. Y siempre las mujeres somos los que, el trabajo de nosotras es estar ahí en la institución. Por ejemplo, en los hospitales, cuando la mujer pasa una experiencia muy duro, no ha comprendido nada, quizás no podía estar ahí firme para preguntar cosas que no entendió nada, entonces llega a la comunidad, expresa todo, cuenta todo lo que pasaba ella en el lugar institucional. }

HEIKE: y cuáles son las reacciones a estas experiencias?

NANCY: Las reacciones de esta experiencia somos siempre las mujeres nos juntamos y decir, bueno, se tiene que terminar. Porque muchas veces también la lucha de nosotros es eso, porque tiene que haber si o si en las instituciones. Por ejemplo, tiene que haber gente traductores, si o si nosotros siempre lo hablamos y lo venimos hablando siempre, que en todo, las instituciones, por ejemplo, el registro civil, el poder judicial, el hospital, no?, en todas las instituciones del municipio tiene que haber gente traductora, que nos traduzca que está ahí atendiendo a gente de los pueblos originarios. Eso es lo que venimos hablando,

siempre. Es una lucha más de nosotros que cada institución tengan gente hablantes en la lengua materna de los pueblos originarios. Pero también es eso lo que yo contaba antes, la gente hablante no tienen sus títulos, y eso también exigen títulos ahí. Pero la gente hablante mayores no tienen sus títulos. Entonces también ahí hay un problema.

HEIKE: Pero hablando, ya que estamos también en medio de la pandemia, un poco más de la experiencia de los pueblos originarios con el sistema de la salud y las autoridades. Yo recuerdo que antes, lo que vos decías lo que yo también conozco de otros, que se sientan despreciados o maltratados cuando buscan ser atendidos por el sistema de salud, que hubo como un rechazo y mitos sobre el sistema de salud que complicaba tal vez la asistencia del sistema de salud, como vacunación, a los pueblos originarios. O sea, es una cosa de dos filas, lo que llamaríamos racismo encubierto, pero en la pandemia, todas esas experiencias, como se articulan? Se está cambiando algo, se están generando conciencia con respecto a articular alguna resistencia más clara, o comprensión más clara, de lo que está sucediendo ahí? Entre los profesionales, entre las comunidades, en todos los niveles?

NANCY: Yo no sé si hay una comprensión en la parte institucional, me decías, ¿no?, de lo institucional hacia los pueblos originarios, porque también es mucha la dificultad. Por ejemplo, hoy, si yo quiero ir al centro de salud, por ejemplo, voy y pregunto a la seguridad que está ahí atendiendo siempre, no?, en la puerta del hospital. Porque nadie puede ingresar, cuando se colapsa el hospital no podés ingresar. Pero también, yo no sé si hay una comprensión por esa parte. Voy al hospital sabiendo o no saben que nosotros como pueblo originario no tenemos acceso al internet. Pero cuando yo voy al hospital y sale o sale un señor o una señorita, yo pregunto qué día, yo quiero sacarme un turno, quiero hacerme atender con un especialista por ejemplo clínico o ginecólogo. Y lo único que te dan es un número, ¿no? Un número de teléfono o dos, tres números. Será para el ginecólogo, o el oculista, o el traumatólogo. Llamá a ese número para el traumatólogo, y nada! ¡No te dicen nada! Tomá este número, llamá en este número y ahí te van a dar turno y vas a venir a hacerte atender. Pero yo, no digo nada.

HEIKE: No tenés acceso a las llamadas.

NANCY: No puedo sacarme turno, no puedo comunicarme, porque no tengo acceso al internet. Y mucha gente que vive alejada de la ciudad, tiene que venir para que le den el número nada más, ¡y se vuelve como vino! ¡En el lugar donde

vive en la comunidad no tiene señal, no tiene celular, no tiene internet, no tiene nada!

HEIKE: Y son horas de viaje en algunos casos, si media hora ni nada eso, si no son varias horas de viaje.

NANCY: Para algunos, tienen que venir y quedarse seguramente una noche y el otro día siguiente para volverse a casa. ¡Se queda en algún hotel, en algún vecino cercano, de Tartagal, de ciudad, y el día siguiente se va con el número en la mano vuelve a su comunidad y no tiene acceso a internet, no tiene acceso al celular, no tiene el uno no tiene nada! Entonces no sé si hay un conocimiento o comprensión, ¡no sé! ¡No sé cómo llamarlo esa parte, porque también lo que, en muchas comunidades, muchos abuelos, mucha gente mayor, por ejemplo, tengo celular pero no lo sé tampoco manejar! ¡Yo voy en el banco, por ejemplo, y te dan un número, te dicen, bueno, tome este número y bajá una aplicación! A ver, ¡hay que bajar una aplicación! Yo no sé manejar el celular. Hay muchos de los mayores de los pueblos originarios nunca han sabido manejar. Si me dicen vayan a un cyber, es una dificultad total en el medio de esta pandemia, es una dificultad totalmente incomprensible.

HEIKE: Y en muchas comunidades ni hay señal ni de wifi ni de celular.

NANCY: Claro, y eso me vas a entender mucho porque vos ves que en una ocasión viajamos a una comunidad en Corralito, dentro del monte, donde nadie tiene luz ni señal. Y son todas estas cosas, todavía hay un desconocimiento, hay, que te puedo decir, las comunidades todavía seguimos simples, invisibilidades, estamos en esta generación, pero seguimos invisibilidades. No tienen conocimiento como vivimos...

- Beep – sonido de la línea.

HEIKE: Hola? Hola? Se cortó. Hola? Me parece que se cortó el celular (de Nancy) hablando del acceso (la desigualdad y la falta de acceso a servicios y tecnología).

Fin.

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About the authors

Heike Schaumberg is a Latin Americanist and Social Anthropologist with extensive fieldwork based research on the neoliberal crisis and its discontents, as well as on economic and environmental impacts on various communities in the Argentine Chaco region. She has argued for politically engaged and committed research in some publications, and she herself has ample experience as an activist on the Left and in solidarity with a broad range of social movements. For further details, see “about the author” at the end of the Special Issue editorial.

Nancy Lopez is an indigenous community activist and leader, and co-directs a local indigenous radio station. She is committed to the ‘grassroots’ and social movement struggle for social justice and women and territorial rights. She gained much of her education from these struggles and is thus keenly concerned also with making education accessible to all, but where equal opportunities ensure the cultural integrity of indigenous people instead of assimilation at its expense.

The anonymous contact who has shared the WhatsApp thread with Heike Schaumberg is a Guaraní community activist and leader in Tartagal (Argentina). To safeguard this person's anonymity, no further personal details will be provided.

Resisting body-territories – Indigenous women negotiating racism as a pandemic

Anja Habersang

Abstract

An in-depth case study of the ‘Indigenous Women’s Movement for Buen Vivir’ in Argentina reveals how participants negotiate racism as a pandemic in their conflict-ridden everyday realities. In this multifaceted struggle, Indigenous women position themselves as ‘body-territories’, which links their struggles to defend territories against extractivist resource exploitation with the struggle against intersectional discrimination, racism, and the historic violation of their bodies. By highlighting an inseparable interrelation between body and nature, they radically question the Anthropocene narrative that portrays humans as having power over the planet. Instead, the Indigenous women claim a (re)construction of reciprocity with nature and other-than-human beings, as well as with humans, in short, Buen Vivir. This paper explores how the participants conceptualise body-territory through their understanding of Buen Vivir, as well as ‘complementary duality’, and the ways in which these notions configure both (social) relations and gender perceptions. By reclaiming Indigenous epistemologies shaped by this body/human-nature relationality, Indigenous women position themselves as anti-patriarchal rather than as feminists, framing the struggle against prevailing ‘capitalist-coloniality’ as one against the patriarchy. As body-territories, their resistance targets the triggers of systemic racism: capitalist, extractivist, and patriarchal exploitation, and exclusion. At the same time, it implies a struggle for transformation towards new relationalities that include other-than-human beings and nature.

Keywords: alternative futures, anti-racist movements, Buen Vivir, decoloniality, development, feminisms, Indigenous movements, intersectionality

Introduction

Our territory inhabits us because our body is territory. Oppression cannot be analysed without taking into account our bond with our land. The forest, the river and the mountain are part of our being. Everything that is done to our land, is done to our body, which gets sick and weakens together with our land (Interview: Moira).

For Moira, her body is territory. Self-identifying as an ‘Indigenous woman’, she lives in a community in Patagonia in southern Argentina in a territory that she recuperated from the state twenty years ago together with her sister Evis and their mother. Today, her family resists the construction of dams on the river Carrenleufú, which are needed for planned hydroelectric power plants. The proposed dams would cause 11.000 hectares of natural forest to be flooded, including the community’s territory, potentially leaving it 60 meters underwater, and, Evis fears, “kill the energies living in the river and therefore the river itself” (Fieldnotes February 2019). Due to a lack of necessary funding, the project known as ‘La Elena’, a hydroelectric dam to provide the required energy resources for new open-pit mining activities, is currently on hold (Energía Estratégica 2021) – for now.

When the country’s economy collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the centre-left government, headed by Alberto Fernandez, promoted open-pit mining and the extraction of one of the world’s largest shale gas and shale oil deposits through fracking as the way out of the crisis, unveiling a \$5 billion subsidy plan (Palmigiani 2020). Since then, the resumption of open-pit mining operations in the province of Chubut, Patagonia, has been back on the government’s agenda, following a ban enacted in 2003 after a popular consultation and anti-mining protests (Ambito 2021). Creating loopholes to bypass this ban, the government has proposed a new law that provides the green light for “large-scale mining extraction” (Boyadjian 2021). One of the intentions behind the new law is to enable the mining of one of the most important silver deposits in the world (Ibid.). Moira and Evis struggle against such mining and hydroelectric power plant projects, framing the hegemonic development model activities as an imminent threat to their existence. Translocalising their resistance, the sisters are both part of the ‘*Movimiento de Mujeres Indígenas por el Buen Vivir*’ (MMIBV, Indigenous Women’s Movement for *Buen Vivir*, referred to subsequently as the MIBV Movement).

Indigenous women position themselves as ‘body-territories’ as a way of linking their struggle to defend their territories against extractivist resource exploitation with the struggle against intersectional discrimination, racism, and the historic violation of their bodies. In this article I use an empirical case study of the ‘Indigenous Women’s Movement for *Buen Vivir*’ in Argentina to show how Indigenous women – such as Moira and Evis – engage in conflict-ridden everyday realities. I do so by conceptualising their resistance as ‘body-territories’. The aim of this paper is two-fold. By reconstructing the movement’s participants’ emic intersectional and decolonial perspective, it seeks to, firstly, explore how the Indigenous women forming part of the MIBV Movement negotiate the interwovenness of racism with various systems of oppression in capitalist ‘modernity’, and how an anti-racist, decolonial, and anti-patriarchal positioning and strategy emerges from their self-perception as body-territories. Secondly, the paper aims to understand how Indigenous women reclaim Indigenous epistemologies and construct body/human-nature relationality as a way out of crises-ridden times.

The MIBV Movement is a relevant case study for exploring the dynamics at the intersection of race and gender in conflicts arising out of socio-environmental justice issues. The Indigenous women who participate in the movement represent all age-groups and self-identify as belonging to different Indigenous peoples located in communities and urban areas spread from Argentina's north, such as Qom, Aymara, Quechua, Tapiete, Mbya Guaraní, Lule and Wichi, to the south, home of the Mapuche and Tehuelche. According to the participants, the movement is "instituting to amplify rights" (MIBV Movement 2018). The movement started in 2013, "when a few sisters began to travel the country with the idea of creating what is now the Indigenous Women's Movement for *Buen Vivir*" (MIBV Movement 2018), and aims "to make visible what is intended to be made invisible: our body-territories, our worldviews, our identities and our rights as [I]ndigenous women" (Ibid.). Anthropologist Mariana Gomez (2020, 144-145) terms it "the first collective of organized women of [I]ndigenous origin that made themselves visible in the Argentine public sphere".

The MIBV Movement has developed in parallel with a fourth-wave feminist movement in Argentina, which began in 2015 with the outcry #Niunamenos (not one less) – that no more women or girls should fall victim to femicide. The hashtag quickly spread internationally and has inspired a 'feminist awakening' in Latin America. Indigenous women integrated within the MIBV Movement in Buenos Aires have formed strategic alliances with others and participate in demonstrations and activities related to the feminist movement together with the alliance "Anti-Racist Column: Black, Indigenous, Racialized, Lesbian, Trans, Bisexual, Non-binary" (Columna Antirracista 2019b). The MIBV Movement is a founding member of this alliance, which aims to combat "homogenization" and "racism in social struggles" (MIBV Movement 2019b). Nevertheless, the Indigenous women at the centre of the MIBV Movement do not self-identify as decolonial nor Indigenous feminists but think of themselves as body-territories. What Zaragocin and Caretta (2021, 1504) have defined as the inseparable ontological relationship between body and territory has long been embraced by Indigenous ontologies of space, as well as decolonial understandings of the gendered body (Ibid.). Such a perception of the body as territory has become increasingly popular among social movements and other feminisms in Latin America (Cabnal 2015; Cruz Hernández, Bayón Jiménez 2020; Gómez Grijalva 2017; Leinius 2021; Leyva Solano, Icaza 2019; Rodríguez Castro 2020; Zaragocin, Caretta 2021).

In the case of the MIBV Movement, rather than referring to feminist theories, reclaiming Indigenous epistemologies is framed as an emic tool to combat racism, violence, and oppression through decolonising knowledge, relations, bodies and territories. By extending their intersectional analysis to the spatial dimension, the Indigenous women participating in the MIBV Movement claim self-determination for both their body and their territory: "we fight for the self-determination of our bodies, our territories and our peoples" (MIBV Movement 2018). As a way out of crises-ridden times, the MIBV Movement campaigns to (re)establish reciprocal relations with nature and between living beings by emphasizing the inseparable interrelation between body and nature.

This article now proceeds as follows. Firstly, it reviews (decolonial) intersectionality as it is applied by the movement. Secondly, the reader is introduced to the research methods and some reflections on my positionality, before contextualising Indigenous struggles in Argentina. Thirdly, the analysis focuses on the participants' positioning as resisting body-territories, and by exploring their political calls for a new human-nature relationality, shows how the movement negotiates racism as a pandemic, as part of their anti-racist, decolonial, and anti-patriarchal positioning and strategy.

(Decolonial) Intersectionality as an analytical tool

Employing a decolonial and intersectional perspective forms part of the emic approach of the Indigenous Women's Movement for *Buen Vivir*. As Juana, who self-identifies as Mapuche, is in her mid-fifties, and lives in a community in Patagonia, points out: "we are discriminated against because we are Indigenous, because we are women and because we are part of the working class and poor" (Fieldnotes October 2019). The Indigenous women repeatedly emphasize how different social inequalities are interwoven in Argentine society in specific ways, therein disentangling the complexities of how racism and discrimination are experienced. They highlight the intersections of different categories – such as 'gender, class and race' – and their dimensions of inequality, as well as various systems of oppression.

The unravelling of the interrelations between different forms of discrimination is inherent to the movement's emic approach. Such an awareness of different, crossing axes of domination and exclusion was coined 'intersectionality' by Crenshaw in 1989 in order to expand feminist theory and antiracist politics by "embracing the intersection" between gender and race (Crenshaw 1989, 166). Since Crenshaw's contribution, scholars have developed different ways of doing intersectional analyses, in order "to move the field beyond the comparison of groups and towards a conceptualization of how multiple systems of inequality are interlocking and co-constitutive" (Scarborough 2018, 6). Daniel (2021, 16) summarised that intersectionality can be used in three different forms: either as a demand in terms of a collective action frame, as a tool for intersectional activism, and as a research lens.

By reconstructing the way in which the Indigenous women who participate in the MIBV Movement analyse their own everyday realities, this paper explores how their intersectional analyses are shaped by the participants' decolonial thinking that describes global capitalism and neoliberal globalisation as deeply colonial; causing exclusion, inequality, and oppression. In addition, it sheds light on how Indigenous women see an "emancipatory potential" in the process of decolonisation (Burman 2011). Decoloniality is considered a heterogeneous and plural field of practice, thinking and praxis (Walsh 2020, 81). Decolonial Latin American scholars, such as Lugones 2008, Maldonado-Torres 2007, Mignolo 2011, Walsh 2020, or Quijano 2000, aim to reveal prevailing coloniality by examining problematic "racialised, gendered, territorialised, and

heteropatriarchal operations of power” (Walsh 2020, 606). Coloniality refers to how colonial domination has expanded trans-historically and that its effects continue to be perpetuated in contemporary times (Moraña et al. 2008, 2), hence, ‘modernity’. As such, “there is no modernity without coloniality” (Mignolo 2011, 2-3), and modernity can be said to reflect a complex narrative that emerged with the history of European invasions, building “Western civilization by celebrating its achievements while hiding at the same time its darker side, ‘coloniality’” (Ibid.). The “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000), structurally embedded in global capitalism, has legitimized social relations that are shaped by domination and resulting in superiority or inferiority (Walsh 2010, 15). As part of this process, patriarchy and, in the words of Mignolo (2011, 143), “racism, as we sense it today, was the result of two conceptual inventions of imperial knowledge: that certain bodies were inferior to others, and that inferior bodies carried inferior intelligence.”

In contrast, the Indigenous women that take part in the MIBV Movement conceptualise the body as territory. Firmly rooted in a relational worldview or ontology (Escobar 2011), the movement strives for the (re)construction of a reciprocity with nature and other-than-human subjectivities, as well as one between humans, in short, *Buen Vivir*. “It is necessary, in the sense of inevitable, to build a society where *Buen Vivir* as a right is possible” (MIBV Movement 2021a). The notion of *Buen Vivir* translates from Spanish as ‘good living’ and has been advocated by numerous Latin American and Indigenous movements to suggest alternatives to development (Acosta 2016; Gudynas 2011; Escobar 2016; Ranta 2020; Walsh 2010). It deconstructs development as “linked to an economy of production and desire, but also of closure, difference, and violence” (Escobar 1995, 214), and fostered by “the will to end many worlds that produced the one-world and its excesses” (de la Cadena 2015, n.a.). The analysis delves into how the participants of the MIBV Movement conceptualise body-territory through their understanding of *Buen Vivir* and ‘complementary duality’, by exploring the ways in which these notions shape both (social) relations and gender perceptions.

Research methods and positionality in the field

My access to, and my position in, the field was influenced by my earlier experiences in Chile as a human rights activist and researcher. Networks connecting Indigenous activists in Chile and Argentina and my positioning as a human rights activist opened the door to engagement with the MIBV Movement. Consequently, I place my work within the tradition of engaged, activist scholarship (Hale 2006) and follow an actor-oriented approach (Long 2001). This meant regarding research participants as “active stakeholders”, who “are knowledgeable and capable” (Gerharz 2018, 2), and thus, who have agency. Further, this approach implied following the people and the conflicts. Hence, I moved back and forth between different regions in Patagonia, where I lived for five of my seven months stay in various Indigenous communities, and Buenos Aires, where I spent another three months in 2019.

My positioning as an ‘activist scholar’ is rooted in being actively engaged with the movement: collaborating during its events and actions; asked to be a human rights observer in court hearings or activities, such as a ministry’s peaceful occupation. For this analysis, I navigated between my recordings from such events, observation protocols, fieldnotes of informal conversations, and 34 semi-structured interviews (this number also includes interviews with stakeholders in other societal fields such as political, economic, or academic actors who helped me to understand the contextualisation of Indigenous struggles in Argentina). In terms of material from members of the MIBV Movement, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews, and talked to around 15 other women whom I encountered during my engagement with the movement – most of them on a regular basis and on multiple occasions. As the movement as a collective “tries to articulate a collective, [I]ndigenous and feminine voice” (Gomez 2020, 148), I also considered the movement’s campaigns, communiques, and statements publicised on social media, especially after returning from Argentina during the phase of remote data collection which also involved staying in touch with my closest contacts via messenger Apps. The quotes transcribed in this paper are translated from Spanish by myself.

As Daniel (2019) pointed out, research on protests in the ‘Global South’ by researchers from the ‘North’ is conducted in a special area of tension. Some participants and actors openly voiced their suspicions towards me and often I had to navigate contested terrain where I felt embraced by many, yet rejected by others. What accompanied me was my ‘privileged position in society as a white European’, which was often referred to in discussions. Yet some contacts pointed out that everyone – including themselves – needs to focus on decolonising one’s own mind and knowledge, in order to deconstruct racism because “all of us are racist because all of us were colonised” (Fieldnotes March 2019). This resonates with Bonilla-Silva’s (2021, 520) understanding that “racism is systemic because it incorporates all actors into the game. We are all participants because we are racialized subjects, but also because we act racially in conscious and unconscious ways”. Being engaged, questioned, and challenged was essential for me in grasping an understanding of the movement’s negotiation of racism in contested fields of struggle.

While I recognise the importance of avoiding “methodological collectivism” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 212), or “unjustifiable homogenisation” (Gerharz 2018, 2), the analysis shows how a specific positioning as a collective actor and ‘Indigenous women’ reflects the emic perspective of the participants involved in the MIBV Movement. In the process of negotiating belonging as a contested “emotionally charged social location” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 4), Indigenous women denote a collective subjectivity (Marcos 2009, 29). Indigeneity is in this context what Murray Li (2000, 151) refers to as a positioning which “draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle”. Here, the category ‘Indigenous woman’ is associated with a connection to land and the defence of their territory (Gomez 2020) in “struggles over the enactment,

stabilization and protection of multiple socionatural worlds” (Li 2013, 401), reflected in their positioning as body-territories. Thus, the Indigenous women participating in the MIBV Movement construct a collective voice that subsequently emerges when exploring the positionings, imaginations, and practices that accompany their resistance as body-territories.

Contested fields of struggle: nationhood and development in Argentina

This section contextualises Indigenous struggles in Argentina, where conflict in terms of identity construction arises from the national myth that constructs the Argentine people as being those who arrived on boats from Europe, simultaneously making invisible genocidal practices against Indigenous peoples during the nation-building process. While numerous Argentine scholars have provided evidence of these genocidal practices (see for example Delrio et al. 2010; Lenton 2018; Trincherro 2006), to date, the state still officially denies such crimes committed against Indigenous peoples, even though the “genocidal project is linked inextricably to the constitution and organization of the Argentine national state” (Delrio et al. 2010, 138). After capturing territories from Indigenous peoples in military campaigns, the state transferred these to private holders, mostly belonging to the roughly six million immigrants who arrived in different waves of migration over the last centuries, mainly from Europe. As president Alberto Fernandez stated in June 2021: “we Argentines came from the boats, and these were boats that came from Europe, and that's how we built our society” (Ise 2021, n.a).

Thus, the nation-building process was accompanied by a state policy of actively supporting large-scale land acquisitions and today the country is leading this trend in Latin America, together with Brazil (Zoomers and Kaag 2014). Hand-in-hand with contested land ownership, the country's prevailing extractivist development model is one based on the export of agricultural raw materials, mineral resources, hydrocarbons, or plants for industrial use (Brand 2016). This commodification of nature presents another contested field of struggle. Aided by continuous neoliberal restructurings, Argentina – formerly heralded as the “poster child” of the Washington Consensus (Undurraga 2015) – has transformed into an emblematic case of expanding extractivist activities such as agribusiness, mega-mining, and more recently, the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbons through fracking (Álvarez 2016, n.a.). This has caused numerous conflicts in Patagonia, among other places. As Acosta (2013, 82) points out, a complex dilemma arises in societies that promote extractivism: on the one hand they are rich in natural resources, and on the other hand they are impoverished. Consequently, increasing extractivism has deepened social inequalities in Latin America (Acosta 2013; Burchardt and Peters 2017; Svampa 2019).

The MIBV Movement visibilises their communities' conflict-ridden realities, as they focus on the everyday challenges women face. Irma, who self-identifies as

Mapuche, is in her mid-fifties, and lives in Buenos Aires, recalls the beginning of their activism in 2013: “to become visible, we decided to organize a demonstration in Buenos Aires. Finally, in 2015, a demonstration that in the beginning was only aimed at making ourselves visible, transformed into a march to promote *Buen Vivir* as a right in order to foster reciprocity and harmony with nature” (Interview: Irma). According to the organizers, around 10,000 people heeded the movement’s call to demonstrate in Buenos Aires (Lilén 2015). Towards the end of the march, representatives of the MIBV Movement entered the National Congress to deliver the draft for a bill to create a ‘Council of Original Women for *Buen Vivir*’, whose objective is, according to Moira, in her early-fifties, who self-identifies as Mapuche and lives in the community referenced earlier, “to carry out a process of consultation, participation, information and dissemination to propose regulations and policies for the recognition of *Buen Vivir* as a right” (Interview: Moira).

The founding of this council has not yet eventuated, and because “they did not listen to us” (Interview: Irma) the strategy of its organisers changed, after a second demonstration in 2016 using the slogan “*sin nosotras no hay país*” (without us there is no country) (Alegre 2016). “In 2018, we organized a parliament of Indigenous women to search for new ways to work against the state and to survive against all the oppression. (...), we decided to become a movement” (Ibid.). When I asked Moira, why they became a movement, she responded: “[to take] a new transformation step for the strengthening of the struggle of the 36 Indigenous peoples and nations that inhabit this territory, so that our rights against constant subjugation are respected” (Interview: Moira). This reveals how the language of Indigeneity is used as a political resource (Gerharz et al. 2018, 14), and that a rights-based approach forms part of the movement’s strategy in demanding reforms, justice, and rights from the state. Maria, in her mid-thirties, who self-identifies as Quechua and lives in Buenos Aires, explained: “we are Indigenous women organized autonomously, we are self-managed and self-financed” (Interview: Maria). Despite relating to the state, the movement terms itself autonomous with respect to their demands for self-determination over their body-territories. Their autonomous positioning is also reflected in their practices of political self-management and self-organization, such as the founding of soup kitchens during the COVID 19 lockdown, which will be detailed in the following section.

Since the organization of the first parliament, where the participants originally decided to become a movement, parliaments have been organized annually in order to make decisions – by consensus – about campaign topics, strategies, and actions. When 250 Indigenous women participated in the movement’s parliament in 2019 (Frontera 2019), an idea emerged to peacefully occupy the Ministry of the Interior, as Maria told me. During a two-week occupation in October 2019, in which I participated in my movement-assigned role as human rights observer, I witnessed how the participants negotiated their claims with representatives of different state institutions, including the Minister of the Interior (Fieldnotes October 2019; MIBV Movement 2019d).

Hence, among the movement's strategies are direct actions, such as the occupation, organising demonstrations, visibilisation campaigns – also via social media, where they promote their activities – for example, among their 34 999 followers on Facebook – as well as strategic alliance-building, which will be explored in the final section. Alongside these outward-directed actions are those that provide mutual support, affection, and solidarity (economy) – exemplified by the soup kitchens. The subsequent analysis first looks at how the movement negotiated racism as a pandemic during the lockdown, and how they acted in the context of their conflict-ridden everyday realities.



Occupation of the Ministry of Interior

Source: MIBV Movement 2019b



The movement's 2nd Parliament

Source: MIBV Movement 2019d

Lockdown-realities: negotiating racism as a pandemic

Soon after the first 128 Corona-cases were documented in Argentina in late March 2020, the government decided to implement a nationwide lockdown that required people to stay at home, closing down schools and businesses, while strictly restricting movement and travel (Crawford Engagement 2021). Initial support for the measures quickly vanished as the country's economy collapsed, partly due to pre-existing high levels of inflation and a sovereign debt of over \$300 billion, which left the country highly susceptible to the negative impacts of a lockdown (Arnold-Parra 2021). By the end of 2020, 42% of the population was living in poverty, according to Argentina's National Institute of Statistics and Census (2020). The specific cases presented in this section mirror some general trends compiled by a transdisciplinary investigation team from several universities (télam 2020). The report found that the pandemic has exacerbated socioeconomic inequality, racism, and discrimination, as well as verbal and physical institutional violence towards Indigenous peoples, often carried out by security forces (Ibid.).

A spark of hope is provided through the ways the Indigenous women participating in the MIBV Movement have organized autonomously to compensate for the state's absence, "resisting the lack of water and fighting against malnutrition, because hunger does not wait where the state should go" (MIBV Movement 2021b). Some began to organize soup kitchens to provide their communities or neighbourhoods with hot meals, while others raised funds for these soup kitchens. As they made visible this specific practice of solidarity economy through social media, others involved in the movement felt inspired to organize soup kitchens themselves, as Irma told me when talking via WhatsApp. In February 2021, after some kitchens had been operating for almost a year, the movement shared the news on social media that soup kitchens, initiated by

participants of the movement, had spread to different parts of the country. The Qom-community 'Nam' sustains one in Rosario, while the Mbya Guaraní-community 'Ysyry' runs the soup kitchen 'Tataendy' in the Misiones region. Women belonging to the Wichi opened two soup kitchens in the Salta region, where two more, 'Yepotie Itse' and 'Umueel tok-le', are run by Lule-women. Women self-identifying as Qom started four soup kitchens in the Chaco-region, one in the pluricultural community 'ajayhu pawha', and three others in Rio Bermejito, Quitilipi, and Saenz Peña (MIBV Movement 2021 b c



and d).

Source: MIBV Movement 2020e

Alejandra, in her late-thirties and self-identifies as Qom, is one of the women who started a soup-kitchen in the Chaco-region, which she named after her son, Ismael Ramírez, who was shot and killed by a police officer when he was 13-years old in 2018. Since then, together with the MIBV Movement, she has been fighting for justice. An on-going campaign demands that the officer be taken to court, framing the crime as “Indigenous infanticide” (MIBV Movement 2019c). When I shared mate-tea with Alejandra, she told me about the circumstances of her son’s murder: “when Ismael was walking home with his brother David, they came across a strong police operation for an alleged looting of the town’s supermarket, and there, in the middle of the street, he was shot in the chest. The policeman who murdered him walks freely through the streets of Sáenz Peña. They don’t mind killing ‘Indians’” (Fieldnotes October 2019: Alejandra). The campaign makes the accusation that “the racist state is complicit” (MIBV Movement 2019c), ascribing the lack of justice in this case to institutional racism. The movement thereby discloses police discrimination and the violence suffered by people because of their Indigeneity, incidents which increased during the pandemic. According to Freedom House (2021, n.a.), “[e]nforcement of the national quarantine produced a rise in police brutality”. The media have also reported the use of abusive tactics to enforce lockdown measures in low-income neighbourhoods (Miguel Vivanco 2020).

When a police raid occurred in the Tapiete community Misión Tapiete, in the province of Salta in northern Argentina, police officers, who according to eye-witnesses were completely drunk, entered the community firing their guns arbitrarily at whoever crossed their paths (Cebrelli 2020). They particularly targeted the house of Fabiola Roda, shouting threats to rape and kill her. Roda is one of the community’s spokespersons and a member of the MIBV Movement. Such threats are not simply isolated incidents, as Roda vocally denounced when I met her during one of the movement’s activities in Buenos Aires a couple of months before: “the youth is mistreated and beaten by the police. They cannot attend school because they are afraid that something will happen to them on their way to school. They are afraid that the police will make them disappear. How can this happen to our communities?” (Interview: Fabiola).

The MIBV Movement spread the news of this violent incident and the circumstances surrounding it via social media, and filed a criminal complaint with the Human Rights Prosecutor’s Office, which is in charge of investigating crimes committed by members of the provincial security force. Using this incident as a platform, the movement raised further questions which they also spread via social media:

we want to ask the whole country and the Argentines, how many more dead bodies do they need from Indigenous peoples to become aware of the criminal racism that inhabits Argentine institutions and that is fed by the racist indolence of the citizens? Criminal racism is the one who devours, every day, every minute and in every corner of our territories, the innocent lives of Indigenous girls, boys,

women and men. We still have to fight for the right to live with dignity, for the right to be and to exist (MIBV Movement 2020d).

When struggling with conflict-ridden everyday realities during the lockdown, the MIBV Movement declared that “racism is the pandemic” (MIBV Movement 2020b), further explaining this by stating that “institutional racist violence increases” (Ibid.), which directly affects their bodies, as the previous examples revealed. To explore how the Indigenous women negotiate institutional and systemic racism, the following section relates the movement’s positioning and resistance as body-territories to their criticism of racism as interwoven with “other factors in social stratification” (Bonilla-Silva 2021, 519).

Resisting body-territories

We are Indigenous women organized before the call of the earth to protect our territories from sinister extractivist policies that sicken our body-territories, prey on our nature, exterminate our nations, commercialize our culture, reify our worldviews (MIBV Movement 2018b).

By highlighting an inseparable connection between body and territory, the Indigenous women of the MIBV Movement frame their opposition to the extractivist development model as not only having devastating consequences for their territories, but also for their bodies. Consequently, the forests, the rivers, and the mountains, as they cannot be separated from their bodies, cannot be transformed into commodities to be sold. As Marcos (2009, 44) paraphrases: “actions and their circumstances are much more interwoven than is the case in Western thought, in which the ‘I’ can be analytically abstracted from its surroundings” (Marcos 2009, 44). Ana, a Mapuche university-student in her mid-twenties, explained what this means as we drove the 600 kilometres through the Patagonian steppe to one of the movement’s activities in Comodoro, saying that her territory travels with her, meaning that her body cannot be separated from her territory.

Everything belonging to what has been termed ‘nature’ is alive, as I learned from Evis, who is in her early-forties, who self-identifies as Mapuche and lives in the community referred to earlier, as she described what ‘life’ meant: “for the life of the lakes, of the mountains, of the rivers, of the forests that form part of a sacred circle of life” (Interview: Evis). Hence, “we are fighting to preserve the life that will perpetuate the possibility of the existence of humanity”, Evis said. The metaphor of “a sacred circle of life” suggests a relational perspective, where all living beings are connected and interrelated. This interconnection also includes non-human beings and subjectivities, which are considered as living and sacred beings, such as the stone, the mountain, the river, as well as the energies/forces inhabiting nature (MIBV Movement 2020c). This

conceptualisation of the body as territory resonates with de la Cadena's observation that there are no "distinctions between the physical and the metaphysical, the spiritual and the material, nature and human" (de la Cadena 2015a, 25).

Related to their perception of an inseparable interrelation between the body or humans, and 'nature', the MIBV Movement campaigns for *Buen Vivir* to be recognised as a right. Escobar (2016, 26) writes that *Buen Vivir* "implies a different philosophy of life which enables the subordination of economic objectives to the criteria of ecology, human dignity, and social justice." From a relational perspective, or what the MIBV Movement refers to as "three-dimensional life" (MIBV Movement 2020c), *Buen Vivir* is understood by the movement as the reciprocal relations with nature, and between humans and other-than-human subjectivities, including the energies which regulate and create life on earth, or the spiritual ecosystems (Ibid.).

At the beginning of my engagement, I struggled to understand how the movement perceives the spiritual ecosystem. When I asked Sofia about it, a Mapuche in her mid-thirties and active in the MIBV Movement in Patagonia, she said that it is just as important as the other two dimensions of life, the tangible ecosystems and the people who inhabit them, because all three are interrelated. Ana exemplified this understanding by stating that once these spiritual energies are killed/destroyed by extractivism or other large-scale development projects, their forces are gone forever and cannot be brought back to life via, for example, reforestation projects. No matter how many native trees are replanted, the forest cannot be brought back to life if the energies that once inhabited them are gone; what used to be a 'living' forest is then a mere reforestation, without the possibility of becoming a forest again. "We defend our territories in order to also defend these energies/spirits, which make life on earth possible. When there is no interference in terms of human intervention, it is through these energies composing the spiritual ecosystem that from nature life emerges," Sofia added to the conversation.

Throughout my field research, I came across other examples that disclose the role of energies, or the spiritual ecosystems, in generating life. During the summer of 2019, I spent several days in the beforementioned community located in Chubut, Patagonia; the land that was recuperated by Moira, Evis and their mother 20 years ago. During the hottest hours of the day, we spent time by the river Carrenleufú that runs through the communal territory. Before going for a swim, Ana explained that she always asks the energies of the river for permission before entering the water: "many people drown because they enter without asking." From a young age, children learn that – according to Indigenous cosmovision – one should not throw stones into the river. On the one hand, because the energies of the river should not be disturbed, and on the other, because the stones themselves are living beings and therefore are just as sacred as any other living being. Thus, the stones have the right to stay where they are instead of being forcefully displaced for amusement. Everything is related and connected, according to Ana.

While we are talking, we are standing waist deep in the river's ice-cold water. When looking down, I can see my feet standing on the riverbed. The water is crystal clear; there are as yet no mining activities close by, something that is planned to change. To grasp a better understanding of what the spiritual ecosystem means for the participants involved in the MIBV Movement, it seems helpful to remember an earlier quote. Evis framed the construction of hydroelectric power plants, which are to provide the energy necessary for open-pit mining, as a project which would assassinate the river because it kills the river's energies, the regulatory forces that sustain life.

In the late afternoon, we head back to the communal house that is just a few minutes' walk from the river. I would have liked to stay longer, as it was still too early to begin preparations for dinner, but I was told that one should not stay close to the water during this time of the day. The energies recompose themselves before sunset and during this process they should be provided with the necessary space and not be disturbed. This episode illustrates how spirituality shapes everyday life.

The Indigenous women's positioning as body-territories underscores reciprocal relations with 'nature'. Moira specified what human-nature relationality means, namely, structuring "life in a harmonious relationship with all the forces with which we cohabit the territory. (...) the Mapuche peoples did not have the idea of a god, but the great question that has structured the philosophy of the Mapuche peoples is how do I relate to what has been created, and it has been 14,000 years of answering this question. Being peoples of the earth is this; asking, how do we intertwine with the lives of other beings in a harmonious way in order to continue weaving life" (Interview: Moira). Thus, as Moira suggests, only through reciprocal relations with 'nature' does life on earth remain possible.

Hence, the Indigenous women's positioning as body-territories reveals what Escobar called "a relational (non-dualist) and pluri-ontological understanding of life" (Escobar 2016, 21-22). From such a relational perspective, the MIBV Movement frames the present as crises-ridden and dystopian: "we have allowed the imposition of a system of death" (MIBV Movement 2019c). Therefore, "we believe that it is extremely necessary to build a new civilizational matrix, for the planet that needs it more than ever in this time of crisis" (MIBV Movement 2020a). This "denatured humanity" (Ibid.) resonates with what has been termed the Anthropocene narrative, which, according to Malm and Hornborg (2014, 62), "portrays humanity as a species ascending to power over the rest of the Earth System", and fosters a dichotomy between humans and nature.

In order to create more balanced and relational worlds through the (re)construction of *Buen Vivir* and the process of decolonisation, the MIBV Movement "say[s] enough to this capitalist, racist and patriarchal system that is putting the life of the planet at risk" (MIBV Movement 2019c). By making visible how different systems of oppression intersect and reinforce each other, the hegemonic development model of global capitalism is framed as 'a racist and patriarchal system' as well as an imminent threat to human existence. By linking

racism to a pandemic and criticising the increase in institutional racist violence during the lockdown” (MIBV Movement 2020b), the MIBV Movement frames racism as institutional or systemic. Systemic racism refers to a society where social, political, economic, cultural, and even psychological rewards are partially allocated along racial lines. Other important factors in social stratification are gender, class, and sexual orientation, for example (Bonilla-Silva 2021, 519).

The subsequent section demonstrates how the MIBV Movement disentangles the interconnections between different systems of oppression and social stratification factors, exploring why their anti-racist/decolonial struggle is also one against the patriarchy.

Body-territories positioning themselves in the ‘feminist awakening’

During my field research in 2019, I witnessed the rousing energy of the fourth-wave feminist movement on several occasions, such as on International Women's Day on March 8 when over 100,000 demonstrated in the streets of Buenos Aires. Even though the Indigenous women at the centre of the movement do indeed bring feminism into their discourse and take part in activities and demonstrations related to this feminist uprising, they do not position themselves as feminists, but as body-territories. In so doing, they include reclaiming Indigenous epistemologies through decolonisation in their discourse and resistance.

“We are not feminists, we are anti-patriarchal but not feminists”, Moira stated when I interviewed her in her community in Chubut, Patagonia. When I asked her for the reasons behind this distinction, she replied: “because feminism is a logic that analyses women's oppression in terms of the perception of oppression among people. Our territory inhabits us because our body is territory. Oppression cannot be analysed without taking into account our bond with our land” (Interview: Moira). Moira's statement reveals how, according to her perspective, feminism does not sufficiently relate oppression to space and territory. Noelia, a young Qom in her mid-twenties, who lives in Rosario, adds to this debate by rejecting her self-identification as a feminist because she ascribes feminism as a concept coined by the ‘Global North’ (LATFEM 2019). In this perspective, 18-year-old Rain, a Mapuche and one of the youngest active members of the movement in Buenos Aires emphasizes that “it is very necessary that feminism is decolonial because otherwise it remains patriarchal” (Ibid.). A statement published on International Woman's Day, when the MIBV Movement echoes this position: “you cannot depatriarchalize without decolonising” (MIBV Movement 2019a).

Moira explains a central distinction between Indigenous and feminist perspectives by referring to her positioning as body-territory, which is not a new concept and is, indeed, discussed in feminist collectives. In Latin American feminist and women's movements in general, defending “body, territory and therefore life has become a point of convergence between rural and Indigenous as well as feminist activists” (Leinius 2021, 215). Body-territory is thus part of

an incipient feminist analysis of territory, as well as a data gathering and analytical method that is in use in contemporary feminist circles in Latin America (Zaragocin and Caretta 2021, 1504). The collective *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* (Critical Views of Territory from Feminism) (2017, 14), for example, has developed methodologies for mapping body-territories in order to understand how “violence leaves footprints in our bodies but is also connected with the more global invasions of our territories” (Ibid.).

Despite the existence of active feminist discourses concerning the body as territory, the participants involved in the MIBV Movement adopt a long term historic perspective and frame themselves as anti-patriarchal: “our anti-patriarchal struggle is not recent but began when the invader imposed his sword and cross on our territories” (MIBV Movement 2019b). Paula, a Mapuche in her mid-thirties living in a community in Patagonia, explained the reason for this positioning:

we believe that the anti-patriarchal struggle is an anti-systemic struggle, and it is an even deeper struggle, it is a struggle against a civilizing matrix, which is anthropocentric, individualistic, sexist, racist and also misogynous. (...) Patriarchy is not only a practice of sexist violence. Patriarchy is [present] in all manifestations of life, of humanity, because the global system is built on that logic. Patriarchy has also brought us the construction of the geopolitics of nation-states, it is a reflection of the ideological identity of patriarchy. The anti-patriarchal struggle of our movement is therefore a resistance that extends to all structures and particles of this system (Interview: Paula).

Hence, as the movement emphasizes in their communiques, “our anti-patriarchal struggle is an anti-colonial struggle” (MIBV Movement 2019c), framing it as an anti-systemic struggle against multiple, interrelated systems of oppression: “enough[!], to this capitalist, racist and patriarchal system” (MIBV Movement 2019c). The body-territory nexus directly relates to decoloniality, as from the point of view of the movement, capitalist ‘modernity’ is characterised by colonial relations of power, where the intersection of race and gender enables the bodies of Indigenous women to be labelled as inferior to others, and territory to be transformed into an exploitable resource.

When tackling social stratification, such as in the example of gender inequality, instead of identifying as feminists, the MIBV Movement reclaims Indigenous epistemologies in the process of decolonisation: “formerly we were always a complementary duality united by reciprocity and love between beings.” (Ibid.). The notion of complementary duality further explains what positioning themselves as body-territories means for those active in the MIBV Movement.

‘Complementary duality’ as a way out of oppression

By highlighting the inseparable interrelation between body and nature, the MIBV Movement campaigns to (re)establish reciprocal relations with nature

and between living beings, as a way out of these crises-ridden times, echoing the principles of *Buen Vivir*. A similar understanding of relationality is reflected in the notion of complementary duality, which refers to the interdependence between opposites and adds another layer to the participants' perception of what the body-territory nexus means. Duality, not to be mistaken for dualism, is a pervasive element of Indigenous worldview and spirituality that does not have an equivalent in "Western thought" (Marcos 2009, 32). The historical memory of how complementary duality explains social and gender relations, as well as human-nature relationality is still vivid in the case of the Mapuche, who lost their autonomy only 140 years ago, after a state-led genocidal military-campaign. As part of my research, I spoke to around twenty self-identifying Mapuches about gender relations, who all referred to complementary duality as a central concept of both their cosmovision or worldview, and their cultural, political, and social organization.

As I learned from these conversations, opposite or different forces or energies mutually exist and constantly interact in a world – and therefore also in nature – that is shaped by a complementary duality. The 'duality' means that the forces/energies/poles are neither good nor bad, male nor female, sky nor earth. They rather exist at the same time, and intersect, composing the same reality in search of balance. What this means in daily life is best exemplified by the practice of spirituality that aims to establish a connection with the different forces or energies that inhabit nature and regulate life on earth. As is common practice in Indigenous communities, many important activities, events, or actions instigated by the MIBV Movement, for example, the aforementioned occupation of the Ministry of the Interior, begin with a ceremony.

Ana's perception of how territory inhabits her and travels with her when she physically leaves her communitarian space is also an example of how body and territory intersect, namely that the energies and forces of nature inhabit her body. As these energies are moving elements, the forces not only enter her body but also move with her. Thus, elements that are framed as opposites in other epistemologies, such as the dichotomy between humans or bodies and nature, are perceived as interdependent. This is "in many ways in stark contrast to Western philosophical models, which have historically tended towards an 'antagonistic dualism,' the view that the opposites are engaged in an eternal struggle for dominance" (Webb 2021, 69).

Hence, complementary duality refers to an interrelation between opposites that are not hierarchically organised but rather interdependent parts in constant motion, searching for balance in an ever-evolving, fluid process. Understanding the world as composed of interrelated opposites in search of balance disrupts the idea of static relations based on social classifications, or stratifications that enable domination. Complementary duality provides an example of how this is translated with reference to gender relations. According to the Mapuche worldview and practice, this means that feminine and masculine (energies/forces/poles) interact in "each element of nature", thus in both humans and non-human beings, as Ava, a participant in the MIBV Movement

who identifies as Mapuche, is in her early forties, and based in Buenos Aires, explains:

we understand that all these ideologies: patriarchy, machismo, feminism, are actually constructed from a quite hegemonial viewpoint, which is the anthropocentric gaze. We native women have had a philosophy, we have been part of a political, spiritual, economic, and cultural system, where we believe in complementary duality. We believe that each element of nature has the feminine and masculine force in itself, and what we have to achieve is this balance, that relationship of complementarity, of solidarity and reciprocity between us (Interview: Ava).

Ava refers to the importance of achieving balance. Here, achieving balance is a process, and as a consequence the different poles or opposing energies are not static but constantly in motion, reorganising themselves in their search for balance. While complementarity can also be found in a hierarchy, complementary duality focuses on achieving balance in a related whole. Moira explains how one's role is determined, revealing the close link to the concept of body-territory:

the spiritual forces that are within our body-territory guide us to fulfil roles. For example, in the Mapuche world we can be women-healers, these are medicine-women who are called *machis*. We can be women-*weychafes*, like me, we are warriors. We can be *kinche*, philosophers. In the Mapuche world, there is no role that is exclusively for men and another solely and exclusively for women. They are political, social and spiritual roles that are assigned by the forces that inhabit our body-territory and that define our spirit (Interview: Moira).

A political, social, or spiritual role is assigned by the forces/energies that inhabit one's body-territory and are not tied to one or more defining categories such as gender, class, or age, etc. The gender perspective reflected by the notion of complementary duality recognizes its epistemic foundation in other relationships that enable complex identity configurations – beyond binary oppositions. The role of women in traditional Mapuche society is constructed in their sociocultural imaginary as being complementary to the role of men. Additionally, in an individual, both feminine and masculine traits/energies can be identified. At the same time, there are other 'devices' that participate in this becoming that are beyond that what happens in the tangible world, such as the energies and forces of nature that determine who one is and becomes, as Moira explained above. Here too, humans and nature are not separate entities but interdependent beings.

"The consequences of colonization have been tremendously serious and violent, bringing with them the patriarchal logic which also became an organizational system within community territories" (Interview: Laura), Laura, a Mapuche in

her late thirties and active in the MIBV Movement in Patagonia, states. Her perspective shows how she allocates responsibility to the colonization process for introducing the gender concept as a tool for domination according to binary oppositions and hierarchical social categories. Some scholars, like Rita Segato, question such social idealism constructed by Indigenous actors, and point out that patriarchy and machismo also existed in ancient times, conceptualising the social and political organisation of Indigenous peoples prior to colonization as a “low intensity patriarchy” (Segato 2010, 17).

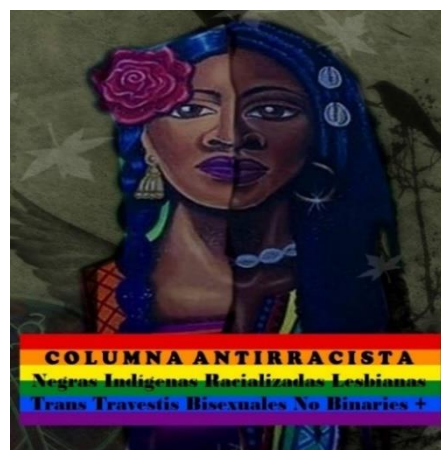
Despite this, the MIBV Movement, instead of referring to feminist theory, frames the decolonisation of gender relations as the reconstruction of a socio-cultural imaginary based on complementary duality, in order to combat the violence and oppression they experience in Indigenous communities. Machismo, patriarchy, and violence do form part of their everyday experiences, as Indigenous women participating in the movement frequently denounce in their campaigns:

to our men we say: wake up! Our anti-patriarchal struggle is an anti-colonial struggle. Review your behaviours that are permeated by this colonial, enslaved, Western mentality, which has put us in a place of submission, humiliation and abuse. Formerly we were always a complementary duality united by reciprocity and love between beings. We want to regain this wisdom that inhabits us (MIBV Movement 2019c).

This section showed that the reconstruction of the sociocultural imaginary of complementary duality is framed as an emic tool to combat racism, violence, and oppression through decolonising knowledge, relations and bodies. Although the MIBV Movement reclaims Indigenous epistemologies that understand human/body and nature as interdependent beings instead of separate entities, and do not identify as feminists, they still relate to the broader feminist movement. The last part shows how the Indigenous women form strategic alliances and bring their positionings to the ‘feminist awakening’ as a part of their anti-racist struggle.

Building strategic alliances to tackle racism

The MIBV Movement in Buenos Aires has formed alliances with other movements and participates in demonstrations and activities related to the ‘feminist awakening’. In so doing, they emphasize their Indigenous belonging: “we [I]ndigenous women have our own worldview in the face of current problems, and we want to build dialogue with all women, lesbians, transvestites, trans, and non-binaries, who fight



for a free, decolonized, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist world” (MIBV Movement 2019a). The next quote illustrates a criticism of those feminisms that do not recognise Indigenous and Black women as political subjects, and of “homogenization and argentinization” (Ibid.) that invisibilises their being and belonging. Consequently, the MIBV Movement states: “enough of racism in social struggles. Once again we question the feminisms that make invisible the political character of the protection of Indigenous cosmogony and the ancestral wisdom of Black people” (Ibid.).

In line with the wish to combat racism in social struggles, the MIBV Movement is a founding member of a contemporary strategic alliance that emerged in 2019 as the collective “Anti-Racist Column: Black, Indigenous, Racialized, Lesbian, Trans, Transvestites, Bisexual, Non-binary [people]” (Columna Antirracista 2019, my translation). This is an alliance that is based on shared struggles, “against structural and institutional racism and all oppressions and violence” (Columna Antirracista 2019c). Allied with others in the Anti-Racist Column, “Indigenous, Black, racialized and dissident women go out into the public space, meeting the women's movement and feminisms, because we are tired of being the OBJECT of political proposals... we are here and WE ARE POLITICAL SUBJECTS and we are going to TURN EVERYTHING [...] until our dignity becomes customary” (Columna Antirracista 2019b, capital letters in the original).

The alliance campaigns against “discursive homogenization”, and maintains that power is still “exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named (Mohanty 1984, 335).” Irma and Maria are critical of participants in feminist movements that frame Indigenous demands as class-based questions, reducing their position in society to that of ‘poor women’, and ignoring how categories such as race, class, and gender intersect (Fieldnotes March 2019). Such discursive homogenization resonates the “mechanisms of invisibilization” and hegemonic “discourse of national homogeneity” (Delrio et al. 2010, 148) in Argentina. Even though post-structuralist and black feminist theories offer important correctives (Motta, Flesher Fominaya, Eschle and Cox 2011, 3), a section of feminism tends to “privilege a partial, white, bourgeois, liberal perspective” (Ibid.) that exercises power over the space provided to racialised women. Instead of respecting the latter as political subjects, paternalistically ‘racialised women’ are reduced to what the Anti-Racist Column terms objects in need of political proposals.

During my fieldwork, I had the chance to accompany the Anti-Racist Column as they participated in some large mobilizations in Buenos Aires. One of these took place on the 24th of March, Argentina’s National Day of Commemoration for the around 30,000 victims of the genocidal practices of the military-dictatorship (1976-1983). The Anti-Racist Column mobilized support by calling on people to remember other genocides in Argentina, specifically those against Indigenous peoples and People of Colour. As we gathered together behind a big red banner that reads “Blacks, Indigenous, Racialized and Dissidents”, Sandra

took up the megaphone for the first rally cry. After introducing herself as “Black, Afro-activist, lesbian and feminist”, she said: “we talk about genocide, racism and identity, those issues that nobody wants to discuss. We have to put them on the table and we have to know, know and know a lot and more, so that they will never patronize us again. Black and racialized Indigenous people and dissidents are political subjects” (Rally cry: Sandra).

Pauli and Aimé, two university students active in the MIBV Movement in Buenos Aires who self-identify as Mapuche and Quechua, distributed pictures to protestors of others they also chose to commemorate, when it was my turn, they gave me a poster print of Rosa Parks, which I held up during the next few hours.



The demonstration on the 24th of March Source: Columna Antirracista 2019c

We gathered close to the Congress, the common starting point for the majority of political demonstrations, and started to make our way slowly down the imposing Avenue 9 de Julio, which cuts through the heart of the city centre. Walking alongside hundreds of thousands of people felt simply overwhelming, every moment was filled with energy, compounded by the rage felt when remembering those who were secretly disappeared, arrested, and murdered by the military-dictatorship and beyond; somebody would shout their names and uncountable voices answered “presente, ahora y siempre” (present, now and always), while raising their fists.

The multitude walked towards the Plaza de Mayo, the oldest public square in front of the Pink House, home to the government. The plaza transformed into a focal point for social protest. Since 1977, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, characterised by their white headscarves, meet to walk every Thursday in circles around the independence monument for thirty minutes in order to demand justice for their children who disappeared during the military dictatorship. On this day, they climbed the stage in the middle of the plaza to jointly commemorate los desaparecidos (the disappeared). The Anti-Racist Column campaigns for the recognition of other genocides to be memorised on

this day and beyond, and by doing so disentangles the hidden socio-historical roots of the nation-building process and the systemic racism that continues to shape contemporary times.

Hence, the MIBV Movement's alliance-building to combat racism as a pandemic consolidated their claims within the broader feminist movement and beyond. According to Gomez (2020), the movement's activism succeeded in raising questions related to being, and/or representing Indigenous women who suffer from racism.

Conclusion

The case study of the 'Indigenous Women's Movement for *Buen Vivir*' in Argentina revealed that the Indigenous women active in the movement see racism as being constantly perpetuated and interrelated to multiple forms of discrimination and oppression which reinforce each other in a "capitalist, racist and patriarchal system that is putting the life of the planet at risk" (MIBV Movement 2019e).

By focusing on the Indigenous women's resistance as body-territories, I have showed that the women that are active in the MIBV Movement interweave their struggles against racism, intersectional discrimination, and the historic violation of their bodies with the defence of their territories against extractivist resource exploitation by global capitalism. Even though the notion of body-territory does have a place in Latin American feminist collectives, the Indigenous women whose narratives, practices, and strategies are presented here, position themselves as body-territories without identifying as feminists. By exploring how they reclaim Indigenous epistemologies and construct human-nature relationalities, this paper contributes to research on the conceptualisation of the body as territory.

Although not identifying as feminists, the Indigenous women participating in the MIBV Movement build networks and strategic alliances of solidarity in order to spread their claims in the broader feminist movement, and to tackle "homogenisation" and "racism in social struggles". Allied as "Black, Indigenous, Racialized, Lesbian, Trans, Bisexual, Non-binary", the Anti-Racist Column reclaims its space in the feminist movement as a political subject. While the alliance highlights the shared nature of their struggles against discrimination, violence, and racism, the Anti-Racist Column actively tackles multiple forms of exclusion by mobilising emic epistemologies. Other social movements and actors might be inspired by such strategies, especially those involved in struggles to decolonise place, body, and the social, such as anti-racism movements or feminisms, which can be (perceived as) exclusive, as the analysis revealed.

Despite their participation in the broader feminist movement, those active in the MIBV Movement reclaim Indigenous epistemologies rather than referring to

feminist theories. The Indigenous women perceive the process of decolonisation to imply an “emancipatory potential” (Burman 2011). The reconstruction of the sociocultural imaginary of complementary duality is framed as an emic tool to combat racism, violence, and oppression in a society – and world – shaped by the ‘coloniality of power and being’. While complementarity can also be found in (social) hierarchies, in a complementary duality it refers to an interrelation between opposites that are interdependent parts in constant motion, searching for balance in an ever-evolving process. Understanding the world as composed of interrelated opposites in search of balance disrupts the idea of static relations based on social classifications, or stratifications that enable domination. This understanding of complementary duality also enables complex identity configurations, beyond binary oppositions because the notion is also perceived as an intersection and interaction between the feminine and masculine (energies/forces/poles) in “each element of nature” (Interview: Ava), thus in both humans and “earth beings” (de la Cadena 2015a).

Firmly rooted in such a relational worldview, the notion of *Buen Vivir* is transformed into the movement’s transversal proposal for a way out of the current crises-ridden times. The meaning of the human-nature relationality implied by *Buen Vivir* for the central actors is exemplified by the conceptualisations of both complementary duality and body-territory. By disrupting the boundaries between humans and nature, these notions radically question the Anthropocene narrative embodied in the hegemonic understanding of development. Because the forests, rivers, and mountains cannot be separated from the bodies of the Indigenous women, they criticise the transformation of these living beings into commodities, and frame their struggle for *Buen Vivir* as one for life itself, reflected in what Paula termed (re)constructing “the art of living *Buen Vivir* as a right” (Interview: Paula).

By exploring the movement’s proposal to (re)construct human-nature relationality and reciprocity between living beings, this paper looked at the pluriversal ways in which social actors challenge the here and now in proposing other ways of being and becoming. An actor-oriented approach in the research of transformative practices and epistemologies of social movements, facilitated by an engaged activism, enables a contribution to the debates concerning “practices of feminized and feminizing epistemological decolonization in thought, practice, and being” (Motta 2018, 124). Learning “from the pluriverse of alternatives already available” (Kothari 2020, 269) is of utmost importance in times of a global, interrelated crisis of capitalist ‘modernity’ which the COVID-19 pandemic has shed renewed light upon. Social movement studies are challenged to contribute to such debates of imagining and to construct “worlds and knowledges otherwise” (Escobar 2007, 179) by making visible the imaginaries that actors shape and practice on the ground. The relational perspective inherent to the notion of *Buen Vivir*, and the conceptualisations of body-territory and complementary duality can provide an inspiration for the necessary socio-ecological transformation towards a new relationality that also includes ‘nature’, and helps tackle racism, social stratification, and the asymmetric power relations that shape contemporary ‘capitalist coloniality’. Far

from being a utopia on the distant horizon, body-territory or human-nature relationality is already a prefigurative practice in different parts of the world.

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“Dying of starvation or dying of the virus”. The defense of territory in Latin America in times of COVID-19

Elisabet Dueholm Rasch

Abstract

In this article I use the epistolary form (Carroll 2015) to explore how COVID-19 shapes the defense of territory in Latin America, and at the same time reveals and deepens the axes of exclusion and inequality that territory defenders are struggling to transform. The defense of territory is a term that covers a loosely connected network of grassroots initiatives that organize against large scale extraction projects. Although the defense of territory as a movement is not firmly rooted in an anti-racist discourse, it questions structures that are rooted in the racism that came to the continent when it was colonized by Europeans, and it often builds on an indigenous identity that is constructed vis-à-vis a ladino or mestizo identity. The article consists of five sections that are written as personal letters to a dear friend and territory defender who passed away due to an infection with the corona virus, in itself laying bare one of the impacts of the pandemic on the defense of territory. In these letters I explore how the defense of territory is rooted in a past characterized by racism, colonialization and exploitation, the different forms of violence that territory defenders face, and how these issues have become even more manifest during the pandemic. I conclude that for territory defenders in Latin America, the pandemic is one of many other problems; and compared extreme poverty, racism and increasing levels of violence it might not be the most urgent one – but it does deepen and reveal these axes of oppression.

Keywords: epistolary form, defense of territory, racism, COVID-19, racism

Hola, hola Jere,

Y ese milagro? This is what you are supposed to say now. But you won't. You won't because you are not here with us anymore. You are with the ancestors, somewhere in the air, floating the river, scratching the treetops. You won't because you were taken away, not by one of the violent actors that you were confronted with numerous times because of your active resistance against mining and hydropower developments in Ch'orti' territory, but by COVID-19 amid the pandemic. An immense loss for your family and loved ones, as well as for the defense of Ch'orti' territory in Guatemala.

The initial idea for this article was that you (well, you don't know this yet) and I would organize a workshop with Ch'orti' territory defenders about the defense of territory in times of COVID-19 and that we then would co-author an article about how the pandemic not only shapes this struggle for land and identity, but how its manifestations and consequences lay bare, reproduce and deepen structures of exclusion, rooted in centuries of racism and exploitation (Metz 2001). Just as I wanted to propose this idea to you (I had just secured a small amount of money to organize such a workshop in a hybrid way – me here in the Netherlands, you there in Guatemala), I learned that you had fallen ill with COVID-19. The prospects were not good, and you had been hospitalized. On a morning somewhere in June I learned that you had passed away. “*Last night se nos murió*”, our mutual friend Jennifer (Cassolo) had messaged me via Signal.

I thought of your family, who had been selling tamales for weeks to cover your hospital costs. I thought of all the people that you worked with, territory defenders who are involved in resisting large extractivist projects, such a mining and hydropower projects in their territory, people that deal with violence on a daily basis because of their resistance. I thought about how such loss of life was one of the ways that the pandemic impacted the defense of territory. And like many others, I wrote a small tribute on Facebook as a way of contributing to an online memory book:

Jere, I've only known you for a couple of years, but the past few weeks the beautiful memories keep piling up. I treasure our conversations that never ended, about justice, territories, socialism, rights, life, and more. The time we shared in the house in Camotán. The laughs. Your confidence. I feel grateful to have met such a dedicated, supportive, beautiful and inspiring person. You guided me through Ch'orti' territory, together with Omar and Jennifer. We will continue your struggle and as such you will always be with us. I hope you get this enormous hug that I am sending you through the air.ⁱ

I also thought about all the plans that we had made for sharing the results of my work about the defense of territory in the Ch'orti' region. Not only with you and Omar (Jerónimo), your close friend and “partner in resistance”, but also with the territory defenders, and how the pandemic had come in-between. And I concluded that I still owe you, big time. So I will continue writing to you, sharing some reflections and thoughts about my time in Camotán, where you guided me through the fieldwork and brought me in contact with many territory defenders from different communities to talk with me about their ways of organizing and how they make sense of, and cope with, all the violence that they face in their everyday life. I will also try to link these reflections some reports that were published by Global Witness and Frontline Defenders, (social) media coverage, zoom presentations that I listened to, and, finally, some phone conversations that I had with other territory defenders in Latin America.

Hola Jere,

I don't know, if I ever told you how Omar and I met – which is relevant, because it is through Omar that I met you. During the winter of 2016, Omar visited the Netherlands. He was hosted by Peace Brigades International as part of a program that facilitated frontline defenders a three-months' stay outside their own country as an antidote to all the violence and criminalization they face in daily life. He came to Utrecht where I live and I had been invited to provide a contextual talk about Guatemala. We liked each other's presentations and exchanged e-mail addresses. A little more than a year later, in January 2018, I travelled to Guatemala for my research about territory defenders, criminalization and violence. One of the first people that I called was Omar. Somehow this idea of going to Ch'orti' territory had gotten into my head. We agreed to meet in a café at 7 am for breakfast the next day as he happened to be in Guatemala City. When I arrived, you were there, too. As we ordered breakfast, you both started to update me on community consultations, ongoing criminalization and violence in the territories. It was during that breakfast that we started to plan my first trip to Camotán.

How different was Camotán from all my prior experiences of doing fieldwork with indigenous authorities and territory defenders in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, where I had seen how indigenous authorities and community organizing had been re-instated where it had completely disappeared, and strengthened where it still was present after the armed internal conflict. Indigenous people claimed the rights that were laid down in the Accord on Identity: the right to organize their communities according to their own uses, customs, and spirituality (Rasch 2011, 2017). These forms of organization are also indirectly recognized in the constitution and in the ILO 169 convention and the United Nations Convention on Indigenous Rights (Sieder 2007).

In Ch'orti' territory these indigenous structures were hidden under drought, exclusion, hunger, poverty. I think you know Brent Metz, who has been working in Ch'orti' territory for a long time. As you might remember (but incase you don't here's a small recap), he suggests that Ch'orti' underdevelopment and pervasive poverty are rooted in the racist colonial system. Because of that system Ch'orti' people, like other indigenous peoples, have been denied rights and participation. Indigenous communities were dispossessed of their lands and excluded from taking decisions (Metz 2006, 2010). The very existence of the Ch'orti' as an indigenous group was denied in the population census. The work of (re-) instating ancestral forms of community participation and leadership was therefore a complicated process in all its facets. Of course, this is *always* a complex, negotiated, contested and dynamic process, I had seen that, but I can imagine that this becomes even more complicated when there is nothing concrete, no collective memory, to build on.

As you also explained me, concrete references to indigenous authorities are important, because the defense of territory (*a term that covers a loosely connected network of grassroots initiatives that organize against large scale extraction projects, like hydropower dams and mining*) often builds on these structures. In many cases local, indigenous authorities take part in the defense of territory and organize their participation in ways that are rooted in their indigenous uses, customs and identity (Illmer 2018). I think you would agree with my observation that although the defense of territory as a movement is not firmly rooted in an anti-racist discourse, it does question structures that are rooted in the racism that came to the continent when it was colonized by Europeans, and it often builds on an indigenous identity, that is constructed vis-à-vis a ladino identity (Rasch 2017).

During my first visit to Camotán, back in 2018, you told me how Nuevo Día, the grassroots organization in Camotán that had started the political work of organizing indigenous authorities, was founded in 2003 to organize against the Banco Rural that was confiscating the land of numerous indebted families. Little by little the work became more political, as the reclaiming of the land went hand in hand with being recognized as an indigenous group. Your work also became more political – initially you came to work there as a *técnico*, and only for three months. You ended up working there for years and being completely immersed in the political process of organizing the local defense of territory. Like other grassroots organizations involved in the defense of territory, Nuevo Día today proposes alternative forms of development that are rooted in that identity and local uses and customs. In so doing, they organize community consultations, roadblocks to draw attention to their demands, lay down claims in courts, and much more.

At the time of that first visit in 2018, the Nuevo Día office had been a lively meeting place. Of course, there was the eternal struggle for funding, but people were working, gathering, meeting, laughing, discussing in and around the green house on the top of the hill in Camotán. Two years later, at the beginning of 2020, many things had changed. Omar had already told me that he had taken you out of Camotán six months before (*“lo tengo afuera”*) to a safe place when you were accused of killing his brother – a long and painful story that I was able to only partly reconstruct with your and Omar’s help. More about that later. What I didn’t know, was that you had not been back since. The office was abandoned. No electricity, no Wifi. Stuff lying around. A broken window. Everything had just been left as was. When we arrived at Omar’s house where I would be staying during fieldwork, you went to pick up some clothes at the laundry lady’s, clothes that you had taken there to be washed six months before.

The abandoned office and you picking up your clothes at the laundry lady’s after six months opened my eyes to the enormous impact that violence and criminalization exert on the everyday organization of resistance. The defense of territory is not only about an abstract company and a group of organized community members, or communities protesting against state policies. No. It is also about these companies being part of a web that transcends local, national

and global levels. Webs that connect the state, the company, the judicial system, former militaries, hit men, drug traffickers, and many (armed) others and create an atmosphere in which it is never clear whom you can and cannot trust. A web that became impregnated with COVID-19.

Dear Jere,

Today I was thinking about the last time that I spoke to you. I think it was in October 2020 that I phoned you to hear your thoughts about how the pandemic affected the lives and work of the territory defenders. You told me that you had started going to the office again on a more regular basis, although you didn't feel completely safe doing so. This process of rebuilding the office and the network of territory defenders had ended abruptly when you were not allowed to drive to the region anymore because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

It had not been easy to get hold of you. Hurricane ETA was raging over Central America and causing many problems in the Ch'orti' area, on top of food shortage, violence and, of course, the pandemic. On my social media timeline, I saw numerous pictures of flooding rivers, broken bridges, and videos that featured people who had lost their harvest. We talked about how difficult it was to determine the amount of COVID-19 infections at that time. The problem here was of course, among other things, the health system. Indigenous peoples in Guatemala – and in Latin America in general - have poor access to health care (Meneses-Navarro et al, 2020). Many people with COVID-19-related complaints would not get tested. Many people did not get tested - not only because of the shortage of tests and disinformation about testing procedures, but also because if one did test positive with the virus, this could mean being hospitalized in Chiquimula, the departmental capital. I can still hear you say, while laughing cynically, that people would do *anything* to prevent such a situation, as that hospital was the worst nightmare imaginable. People preferred to stay inside if they would have complaints, and community leaders and indigenous authorities would make sure they would keep to this self-isolation. The time that territory defenders dedicated to regulate everything concerning the pandemic in their communities, ate into the time that they would otherwise be able to spend on sustaining in their own livelihoods and organize against mining and hydropower developments in their territories.

So, territory defenders were partly responsible for managing the COVID-19 situation in their communities, looking out for people in quarantine and trying to find information about standardized measures like facemasks and washing hands, as well as about testing. At the same time, they also ran, and still run, like you Jere, the risk of being infected themselves. Other territory defenders would be busy taking care of sick family members. Often, they preferred to heal themselves "their own way" as they do not trust the health care system. This is also the case for many indigenous peoples in the Cauca (Colombia), Nick

Middeldorp told me. And not to speak of mourning about family members who have passed away following a COVID-19 infection, like Sonia, a territory defender from Colombia, told me on the phone: *“Ay amiga, I am recovering from the virus, healing myself with tea and natural medicine. I lost seven family members, my poor mamacita, and six others”*.

We also talked about how the lockdowns that were implemented in Latin America to prevent further spread of the corona virus in March/April 2020, obviously limited the movement of people. In some places even children could go outside only twice a week. Elsewhere, children were allowed to spend a limited number of hours per day outside. In all cases travelling in public transport was restricted. As a result, small-scale farmers could only work several hours a day, and they could not travel to their plots further away from their communities, whereas extractive industries were seen as vital for the economy, working 24/7. *Ay Jere*, I still get so angry when I think about this! This deepens the enormous gap between poor, predominantly indigenous territories and the mestizo and ladino elite, the cleavages in society that are anchored in the racist, colonial history of Guatemala.

You also told me that *“many people have lost part of their harvest because they couldn’t go out and buy fertilizer”*. In addition, restricted movement makes it impossible to go out and look for temporary jobs; it is impossible to find other ways of making money. Hence, lockdown restrictions have put more people in a situation in which they do not have enough to eat. A study by Oxfam this year showed that compared to 2019, the number of households that lives in a situation of food insecurity has doubled in 2020 (Oxfam 2020). On top of that, ETA came (and later IOTA). Territory defenders are mostly farmers, so this situation also impeded their work in resistance, “it keeps them busy”. At the same time, people do not have another choice than breaking the rules of lockdown and quarantine live simply because they have to provide for food for their families. As Yurany, a territory defender from Colombia said to me on the phone *“It’s dying of starvation or dying of the virus”*.

I am sure, that you would agree with my observation is that the defense of territory is not only shaped by COVID-19 (restrictions) because it is not possible to move around and not being able to meet in person. It did have an impact, of course. Territory defenders could not meet and keep their safety networks based on informal contacts intact. Nor could (international) organizations that normally provide for presential protection travel to the territories. The only way to keep in touch was through virtual meetings and phone calls, which only happened incidentally as many territory defenders do not have access to WiFi nor have money to buy data. Sometimes they would gather and attend a phone call together, but it is extremely difficult to provide support in the communities from a distance. But what impacted the defense of territory equally were the many other urgent issues, like health, food and violence that became more manifest during and through the pandemic, revealing and deepening already present racist structures at the same time. For territory defenders in Latin

America, the pandemic is one of many problems; and compared to extreme poverty and increasing levels of violence it's not always the most urgent one.

I will write you more about the violence part tomorrow, as this is the part we also talked most about when I was on fieldwork, but I must take a break now.

Hola Jere,

This is me again – a couple of days later than anticipated. As I promised to write you about violence, I reviewed all my fieldnotes that I wrote during my stay in the house in Camotán in January 2020. They are a little bit scattered around; some are on my computer, others in the six notebooks that I filled and then took pictures of, because I was afraid that they would be stolen. And then there are still some unorganized jottings on my phone. Anyhow, going through them, I realized that I had almost forgotten how ingrained fear and feeling unsafe is in the daily life of territory defenders.

I felt that knot in my stomach, the same one that I often felt during fieldwork.

I don't think that I told you a lot about how the fieldwork stories affected me. This knot that I mentioned. was partly caused by stories of direct violence (Galtung and Høivik 1971, Bourgeois 2001). Intense, sad, tragical and frightening stories, like the case of Irma Méndez, whose husband who was very engaged in the defense of territory had died under mysterious circumstances. She was hurt when she took part in a peaceful resistance against the mine and the alleged owner of the mine drove into the group of community members. Or the story of Omar's brother who was killed after a long and complicated process of manipulation, snitching, and bribing. Stories from Ch'orti' territory that resonated with the stories that I collected in 2018 in the Western Highlands, like the one of Elena, who joined the 'defense of territory' after her husband had been tortured and killed because of his actions against a hydropower company. It helped her a lot to work together with the *compañeros/as* as a way of dealing with her sadness and my loss, but she also feared violence and imprisonment on a daily basis. For example, she couldn't leave the community when her mother fell ill because a court warrant threatened her with immediate arrest the moment that she would leave the community. The territory defenders from other parts of Latin America that we had invited to a workshop in Chile about the politics of care, shared the similar stories, like Rubén, who explained how *"they framed the death of my wife as suicide"*. His wife had been killed because of his engagement in resistance to hydropower developments in Chile. And like Nazareth who during that same workshop shared how she lost her unborn baby because she was *"beaten during a protest"*.

These stories were paralyzing, scary, and intense. They were also always narrated and embedded in a broader context of constant fear and unsafety, in a context of innumerable smaller stories about everyday coping strategies,

revealing how fear and feeling unsafe is ingrained in every small part of daily life. The daily impacts of dealing with (the threat of) violence are present everywhere in my fieldnotes from February 2018 and January 2020. They contain so many of these small, repetitive observations and informal conversations that I had jotted down. About how you, Jere, would notify every unknown car that drove around in town. How you would not get out of the car, not to be on the street even for getting lunch. About the jokes about having a price on your head after having visited a bank, employing humor to cope with the implicit existential threat. About Omar, who literally always checks the brakes of his car, and that he would have been dead if he didn't. About the constant balancing of which information to share with whom for the safety of yourself and the other. About how I wasn't left alone not for one minute for my own safety. These observations in themselves may seem insignificant, but together they show us that the impacts of direct violence reach far beyond the experience or threat itself. It becomes part of everyday life.

In addition, what makes violence so all-encompassing is that it takes place within a web spun by a variety of violent actors. Driving around in Jocotán and Camotán, you would often tell stories that reminded me of the Netflix series *the Queen of the South* (you even told me that there is actually a Queen of the South in the neighboring department of Zacapa) and when we crossed the border to Honduras to visit Jennifer, you pointed out which trucks, in your opinion, contained cocaine. The absence of the state also opens a power vacuum; hybrid spaces (Rasch 2017) or "gray zones" (Auyero, 2007) where illicit, armed groups gain ground in local communities and contest power.

You also told me that in some cases, the situation becomes so tense that territory defenders are taken out of the community, to a safe place, waiting for things to calm down. This moving around is an important strategy to keep people safe. Lockdown-related measures that limited mobility, made it a difficult strategy to maintain. Land Coalition also concludes in their report that: "*Whereas moving around is risky because it can cause an infection with the virus, not moving around turns defenders into easy targets for possible violence*". Territory defenders are now extra vulnerable because they must stay inside. Especially in Colombia there have been several cases of territory defenders that were traceable during the lockdown (Land Coalition 2020).

"*The number of threats and assaults has increased, because they know that we cannot act upon them*", you said on the phone when we talked about this in October 2020. The territory defenders could not move around in their territory, protecting themselves and accompanying others. But you could also not act promptly and adequately because you could not be on top of it from a distance. Organizations, including journalists cannot travel to the regions to provide support. Cases cannot be covered. Another reason for an increase of the number of irregularities, is that the eyes of the government are turned on the pandemic. In addition, territory defenders that normally would receive protection (or "protection" as you would say), like police patrols in the community or a

bodyguard to accompany them, now have to do without because all funds and hours are needed to implement corona regulations.

It was not a reassuring sketch of the current situation that you laid out for me during that phone call a little more than a year ago. Whereas territory defenders cannot meet because they are restricted in their movement, large scale extraction of natural resources continue. Assaults and threats towards territory defenders increase. At the same time there is an increased presence of the military, as many governments have declared (parts of) their territories as states of alerts because of the pandemic. In the past, defenders have reported that states of alerts - officially issued because of criminal and illegal activities – always have resulted in more criminalization and police intimidation for the territory defenders. Hence, according to them, the government uses this instrument as a way of controlling the behavior of territory defenders rather than that of criminals and illicit groups.

This is in line with how Latin American governments have used the pandemic as an excuse to restrict land and territory defenders' freedoms, such as the right to protest or freedom of speech. This has made it very difficult for defenders to organize against the destructive extractivist industries and other environmentally damaging projects. In line with such experiences, territory defenders express that the state of alerts that are said to be necessary to control the pandemic, are in reality meant to control the behavior of the territory defenders. To frighten them, and to serve the companies. Or as Maria Chic says in an interview: *"Who benefits from the state of alert? The transnational companies"*. I'm sure you'd fully agree.

Well, I guess that's enough about violence for the moment. The main thing that I wanted to share with you today, are my observations about how direct forms of violence – rooted in racism as a structural form of violence and a neoliberal development model - are embedded in, and at the same time, produce a constant form of unsafety and sensations of fear. I do not exactly know how we could categorize this form of violence, but it "eats" people. It makes them depressed, causes headaches, stomach aches, and sleepless nights. It is all-encompassing and further disclosed and deepened during and through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hola, hola Jere,

Bueno pues. Just one and a half years ago, this would have been the moment that we would have gone to *Las 100 Puertas* to drink Gallos and eat nachos and discuss everything that we had seen and heard the days before. This is the final letter that I am writing for the moment, and it is a short one. This, however, does not mean that the topic is closed. *Para nada.* The true impacts of the pandemic on structures of oppression, as well as on the defense of territory

remains to be seen. I promise that I will find my ways of keeping you informed and to contribute to the work that you have started in Ch'orti' territory in one way or another.

Re-reading the other letters, I think that the most important point that I wanted to make is that the restrictions related to the lockdowns also limit the everyday life of social organizing. The defense of the territory has been weakened, and that is not only because of the restrictions on movement. It is also about the meaning that these restrictions attain by being lived in the communities, where many other problems seem to be more urgent: such as violence, hurricanes, and famine. COVID-19 has deepened all these problems, and at the same time taken up lots of territory defenders' time, energy and attention.

Being a territory defender means living in a difficult world, full of fear and unsafety. It also means having a lot of courage.

I will leave it for now, Jere – *cuidate*, wherever you are.

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ⁱ Jere, solo te conocí un par de años, pero las últimas semanas los lindos recuerdos siguen amontonándose. Atesoro nuestras conversaciones que nunca se acabaron, sobre la justicia, los territorios, socialismo, derechos, la vida, y más. El tiempo compartido en la casa en Camotán. Las risas. Tu confianza. Me siento agradecida por haber conocido una persona tan dedicada, solidaria, linda inspiradora. Tú me guiaste en el territorio Ch'orti', junto con Omar y Jennifer. Allí continuamos tu lucha y así siempre estarás con nosotros. Espero que te llegue este abrazo enorme que te estoy mandando con el viento.

“El COVID-19 afecta más y agrava la situación de los pueblos indígenas”. Una conversación con Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil

Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil y Elisabet Dueholm Rasch

Abstract

Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil es Maya-Kaqchikel de Guatemala. Se autodefine como activista pro-derechos de los pueblos indígenas, y ha realizado varias publicaciones en esa materia. Es Doctor en Comunicación Social por la Universidad de Lovaina, Bélgica, y tiene una Maestría en Desarrollo por la Universidad del Valle de Guatemala. Trabajó como catedrático universitario e investigador social, como columnista en varios diarios del país, tanto como funcionario público, consultor de organismos internacionales y de dependencias del Estado de Guatemala. Actualmente está jubilado pero continua estudiando y escribiendo. Su sitio de web es: <https://www.cojticuxil.pro>

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¿Usted se identifica como un “soldado de la causa Maya”, Ud. podría reflexionar un poco sobre qué quiere decir eso?

El pueblo Maya de Guatemala está en malas condiciones de vida, en malas circunstancias. Si tú te identificas como Maya y si tú miras tales condiciones de tu pueblo, entonces es casi obligado que debes hacer y decir algo para mejorar sus condiciones. Entonces, ser soldado significa estar siempre, en la medida de tus posibilidades, digamos como activista o como voluntario, disponible para hacer algo, escribir algo o apoyar aquellas actividades o iniciativas que pudieran mejorar su condición. Esta entrega y colaboración, la puedes hacer en cualquier punto, se supone en los puntos o áreas donde eres fuerte o talentoso, o en circunstancias donde puedes dar o hacer algo.

Eso es lo que significa ser soldado; significa estar siempre dispuesto y siempre activo en favor de la causa maya. Se puede apoyar de diferentes maneras; puedes tener roles o papeles de liderazgo; roles de acompañamiento, de dador de apoyo logístico, de proveedor de insumos. Es una opción personal. Para mí es como como una obligación ética, digamos, después de darte cuenta de dichas condiciones de vida de los indígenas, pero también después de que ver que tú tienes algunas posibilidades de ayudar, mejores o mayores, que los demás.

También significa que, a través del tiempo no cambiarás de causa o de bandera, ni te arrepientes de haber sido activista en derechos indígenas. Claro que te

arrepientes de no haber hecho más, o de no haber aprovechado mejor tales o cuales oportunidades de cambio.

A la par de tu activismo, también tienes que ver cómo te ganas la vida, te ganas tus frijoles. ¿Cómo sobrevives? A veces tienes las circunstancias favorables de que tu trabajo coincide con tus ideales; y entonces eso es muy positivo pues coinciden tu militancia y tu trabajo. A veces, ambos están muy lejos, por lo que solamente puedes activar en tus horas libres, en tus fines de semana. Eso no fue mi caso, yo siempre fui empleado por aquí y por allá. Nunca hice carrera en una sola entidad. Algunas instituciones me permitieron seguir activo en favor de los derechos indígenas, otros me limitaron, o al menos me indicaron que debía tener claro en qué bando estaba: con la institución x, o con el pueblo maya. Esta puesta de límites se debe a que ninguna entidad, ni ONG, ni organismo internacional, ni dependencia pública, pueden responder positivamente a todas las demandas y reivindicaciones mayas.

Otro aspecto del ser soldado de la causa maya es que debes tener una actitud de aprendizaje permanente pues la descolonización es un proceso. Profundizas y vas mejorando la comprensión de los problemas que afectan al Pueblo Indígena en base a mejoras en tus análisis, a posibles matices en tus enfoques, los que implican cambios semánticos, conceptuales, y en base a fracasos y experiencias propias o ajenas. Por ejemplo, en los años setenta nada se hablaba de nosotros como mayas. Le dimos un sentido positivo a la palabra “indio” que se utilizaba como despectivo, como insulto (y todavía se utiliza así). Nosotros la resemantizamos, la positivamos. Luego empezamos a utilizar la categoría de “pueblo” para autonombrarnos, pues no se nos consideraba como tal sino como raza indígena. Y seguimos evolucionando hasta llegar a la actual categoría de “Pueblo Maya”. Esta evolución conceptual y legal, es parte de la descolonización, y nos permite estar en sintonía con el derecho a la autodeterminación de los pueblos, el instituido desde el 2007, en la Declaración de las Naciones Unidas sobre Derechos de los Pueblos indígenas, la cual ya fue firmada y ratificada por el gobierno de Guatemala

También ha habido un cambio en cuanto a cómo pensamos la estrategia para mejorar nuestras condiciones de vida. Antes, una parte del movimiento apoyó la revolución socialista. El conflicto armado interno durante los años setenta y ochenta terminó en un compromiso con los Acuerdos de Paz. Dicho alzamiento, donde militó un alto porcentaje de indígenas, no fue una revolución triunfante. Ello hizo que ahora, la estrategia ya no es la rebelión armada, sino trabajar en el marco de los mecanismos que tiene un sistema democrático. Luego vemos que dicho sistema es falso por estar cooptado entonces debemos cambiar la estrategia y buscar aliados consecuentes.

Un ejemplo de profundización del conocimiento y que han moldeado la lucha indígena, han sido las revelaciones de la CICIG sobre la cooptación y corrupción del Estado. Esta entidad reveló los mecanismos de cooptación del Estado (empresariado, narcotráfico), la corrupción reinante en todos los gobiernos y, por ende, en y de los partidos políticos. Las revelaciones de la CICIG han

ayudado al movimiento maya a conocer mejor a sus opresores, y, por ende, a mejorar sus estrategias de alianza y de lucha.

Entonces ser soldado de la causa maya, implica no sólo la permanencia del activismo en derechos indígenas sino también, el monitoreo de los eventos y situaciones que pueden mejorar o bloquear las luchas del movimiento.

¿Cómo ha sido su proceso personal de identificación como Maya?

Bueno, en mi adolescencia sí tuve alguna crisis leve de identidad, sobre todo por el racismo que experimenté en la calle. Éste era muy fuerte. El sistema educativo y los sectores dominantes de la sociedad (iglesias, medios de comunicación, Estado, sector privado), te presionan para no ser indígena. Entonces, como efecto de ello, uno duda un poco respecto a la valía como indígena, su propio ser colectivo, y uno se pregunta si uno es defectuoso étnicamente, ¿verdad? Pero no sufrí tanto dicha crisis como otras generaciones.

En efecto, dicha crisis depende de las generaciones. Yo recuerdo que las generaciones anteriores a mí, más adultas que yo, que ahorita estarían en los 90 años y que pasaron por la Universidad. Ellos fueron muy presionados por el contexto, para esconder o abandonar su identidad, y algunos sí la abandonaron completa y permanentemente.

Sí, se han ido mejorando las cosas en este aspecto, pero siempre hay un porcentaje de indígenas que siempre tiene esos problemas de autoestima, de auto identificación. Por mi parte no experimenté tanto racismo en la escuela, porque estuve en un Instituto Indígena creado por la Iglesia Católica. El arzobispo de Guatemala creó aquellos institutos, talvez inspirado por los internados indígenas operando en la época en Canadá y Estados Unidos (los Residential Schools, hacia 1950). Aunque el objetivo era cristianizarnos y ayudar al desarrollo de los pueblos indígenas, la verdad es que terminaron modernizándonos y latinizándonos relativamente, por lo que, al salir de los mismos, enfrentamos la vida real, sin previa preparación contra el racismo.

Los primeros conocimientos reales del racismo, los tuve de mis padres, quienes me transmitieron el miedo al ladino local por su conducta violenta anti-indígena. Pero mis vivencias del racismo criollo-ladino, las tuve al salir de ese internado. A salir de esa institución me encontré con que mi apellido, tanto como mi identidad étnica no eran aceptados ni respetados. En efecto, yo o mis apellidos eran vilipendiados o ridiculizados. Por ejemplo, en mi vida obrera y para terminar mi educación secundaria, trabajé como estibador en la fábrica Coca Cola en la ciudad de Guatemala, y mi jefe de bodega, un ladino de oriente, cada vez que pronunciaba mis apellidos, trataba de hacer bromas y trabalenguas con ellos, para arrancar carcajadas de los demás obreros ladinos que trabajaban conmigo.

La otra experiencia fue en la Universidad. Yo fui docente, y ahí hay dos puntos. De hecho, los parámetros ocultos de evaluación de un docente indígena son

diferentes a los parámetros de un docente ladino. Si eres excelente, entonces solo eres evaluado como bueno y si eres bueno, como regular. Si eres un docente regular, entonces eres malo. Entonces tienes que rendir el doble; tiene que ser súper excelente para que, al menos, te evalúen como buen docente. Todos los pueblos y sectores oprimidos padecen de estos parámetros ocultos y discriminatorios de evaluación.

Ser docente es estar en una posición de poder; por ello, en general no experimenté rechazo o descalificación abierta a tu identidad de étnica, de parte del alumnado, pero si lo hay fuera. De vez en cuando, había alguna expresión negativa contra mi persona, escrito en las paredes de los baños.

¿Usted podría explicar cuáles son las raíces del racismo institucionalizado en Guatemala?

El racismo en Guatemala tiene sus raíces en la construcción del Reino de Guatemala, subordinada a la corona española. Ya existía desde la conducta de los invasores españoles hasta acá. En 1524 se inició la invasión hispana dirigida por Pedro Alvarado. Y en dos años, en el 2024, se cumplirán los 500 años de aniversario de dicha invasión. Desde los orígenes de la actual Guatemala, ha existido esa jerarquía de razas, de culturas, jerarquía de pueblos. Nunca ha habido algo serio de parte del Estado para poderlo reducir o eliminarlo.

Guatemala es uno de los países más racistas de América Latina, conjuntamente con Perú. Por ello, lamento que no exista un sistema internacional que clasifique los países por indicadores de racismo. Nos ayudaría mucho porque podríamos hacer comparaciones con otros países. En Guatemala se han aplicado contra los indígenas casi todos los tipos de racismo que existen: genocidio, segregación, eugenesia, y asimilación.

¿Cuáles son los ámbitos en donde se manifiesta más este racismo en la sociedad guatemalteca?

El racismo es multidimensional, se manifiesta en todos los campos. Es una enfermedad que está muy naturalizada, y a veces ya no se mira, ya no se reacciona contra él. Por ello, algunos hablan de racismo inconsciente, porque uno no se da cuenta de lo que está haciendo o diciendo. El racismo se puede confirmar en todos los campos; los indicadores de pobreza, de desnutrición. Siempre va a resultar que los indígenas están en las peores condiciones.

En el campo académico, inclusive entre los progresistas o de izquierda, y entre los activistas en Derechos Humanos, se confirma el racismo en la interpretación de los hechos históricos y en la imposición de dichas interpretaciones: Por ejemplo, en el día de la independencia patria (15 de septiembre de 1821), para los indígenas no hubo independencia alguna pues lo que hubo fue un cambio de amos colonizadores: del colonialismo español se pasó al colonialismo criollo-ladino. En cambio, para los ladinos, sí hubo independencia de España. y por

ello, aceptan la periodización oficial, por lo que hablan de la época colonial y la época republicana. De la misma manera, para los indígenas, no hay cabida para los llamados estudios postcoloniales pues no hemos gozado de algún grado de independencia colectiva. En cambio, dichos estudios y enfoques sí son válidos para los pueblos hegemónicos en cada Estado, excolonia.

¿Usted considera Guatemala como un país multiétnico y plurinacional?

En la composición de la sociedad, Guatemala es multiétnico, multicultural y multilingüe. Pero ya en los mecanismos de representación y en las estructuras del Estado no hay dicha multiétnicidad. Así, como participación y representación indígena en el Estado, no existe ninguna institucionalización, y en cuanto a la legislación y políticas públicas aprobadas, no se cumplen. Por ejemplo, existe una política contra el racismo y a favor de la convivencia ((La Política Pública para la Convivencia Ciudadana y la Eliminación del Racismo y la Discriminación Racial), una Ley de Idiomas Nacionales (El Decreto Legislativo 19-2003), un Acuerdo de Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas, etcétera, pero no se han cumplido o apenas. Casi todas las evaluaciones de cumplimiento de los Acuerdos de Paz, vigentes desde 1966, concluyen en el Acuerdo Indígena es el menos cumplido.

Guatemala es un país con colonialismo y racismo internos. Colonialismo y racismo son consubstanciales. Hay muchas personas, muchos escritores, que no analizan bien el uso de las palabras y con facilidad, dicen en Guatemala conviven o cohabitan diferentes idiomas, diferentes grupos étnicos. De hecho, no hay una convivencia armoniosa, lo que hay es una guerra de baja intensidad, un conflicto silencioso, en la cual los indígenas están perdiendo los marcadores de su identidad, la cultura viva como lo son sus idiomas e indumentaria. Estamos en desventaja en relación a varios puntos. Ese conflicto, esa fricción tiene como resultado que tengamos siempre más de lo malo y menos de lo bueno.

Tener menos de lo bueno significa que en los departamentos y regiones indígenas, no hay o apenas hay servicios públicos, y los que hay no atienden con pertinencia lingüística y cultural. Significa tener menos infraestructura como carreteras, electricidad, etc. Tener más de lo malo significa tener más desnutrición, más pobreza, más analfabetismo. etcétera. Eso es tener menos de lo bueno y más de lo malo.

Después de la guerra interna recién pasada, 1960 – 1996, donde 14 de las comunidades étnicas mayas, sufrimos genocidio abierto y directo, ahora, nuestra situación actual es la de sufrir un genocidio indirecto. De más en más, hay personalidades e instituciones que aceptan la idea de que también hay genocidio cuando un pueblo es colocado y mantenido en condiciones de hambruna, de insalubridad para que no sobreviva y para que se extinga silenciosamente. Ese es el caso de los indígenas: cerca del 80% de la población indígena vive en situación de pobreza y pobreza extrema. Este genocidio

indirecto existe a la par del etnocidio directo, vía el racismo asimilista, practicado por y en instituciones públicas y privadas.

¿Cuáles son las prácticas y las políticas del Gobierno guatemalteco que reproducen estos mecanismos racistas?

No decidiendo y no trabajando a favor del bien común sino sólo a favor de los empresarios. No atendiendo a sectores sociales y pueblos marginados desde siempre. No aplicando la legislación y las políticas públicas existentes y que favorecen a los pueblos indígenas.

Casi siempre, la distribución del presupuesto, la explotación y concesión de los bienes y servicios del Estado, se aprueban en función de los intereses de los diputados, de los potentados, y financistas de campañas electorales.

Las instituciones del Estado y del sector privado, toleran más la existencia de población pobre y marginada, pero no la existencia de pueblos indígenas mayas colonizados y discriminados.

¿Qué es lo que usted entiende por el racismo interno?

Bueno, eso va ligado al concepto de colonialismo interno. El colonialista necesita del racismo para poder justificar sus privilegios. Mientras haya colonialismo interno, hay y habrá racismo interno. Es un concepto aún no bien elaborado, pero puedo dar un par de casos donde se manifiesta este racismo de tipo interno, y que tal vez sea propio de Guatemala. Firmar y ratificar convenios internacionales para el consumo externo, pero ignorarlos a nivel interno. Firmar públicamente el Convenio internacional contra el Racismo y la Eliminación de todas las Formas de Discriminación, pero al mismo tiempo, cometer genocidio contra el pueblo maya. Honrar y glorificar a los mayas que vivieron hace 2,000 o 3,000 años, y que construyeron las pirámides, pero discriminar y descalificar a sus descendientes directos vivos de la actualidad. Cultivar en todo tiempo y espacio el racismo asimilista contra las culturas indígenas, pero tomar algunos de sus elementos culturales para caracterizar la identidad nacional y demostrar tolerancia y pluralismo hacia ellos (folklorismo). Nombrar unidades militares con el nombre de héroes de la resistencia maya contra los invasores hispanos, pero utilizar dichas unidades para masacrar a los indígenas actuales. Crear ventanillas indígenas en el Estado para dar participación y atender a los indígenas, pero mantenerlas marginadas y discriminadas, y mantener inamovible la estructura y ambiente mono-étnico de las dependencias del Estado. Etc.

Es posible que solo en Guatemala se de ese tipo de conducta cínica gubernamental y estatal, así como ese tipo de políticas atrapa-bobos, o atrapa-tontos.

¿Cómo se relacionan estos temas con el tema del folklorismo?

En los años 70 el movimiento indígena cuestionó todo el concepto del folklor y las prácticas folklóricas. Vimos que los gobiernos organizaban Festivales folklóricos y generaban homenajes a la “raza indígena”, pero a la vez nos mantenían en una situación de servidumbre y de hambruna. El Festival Folclórico Cobán es una manifestación de arte colonial y de arte racista, en primer lugar, por los que lo organizan y ejecutan que son criollo ladinos que utilizan el poder coactivo del Estado para convocar. En segundo lugar, porque el jurado calificador es predominante ladino, utilizando criterios estéticos occidentales, etc.

Todos los países y culturas tienen su propio folklor. Pero la diferencia está en el enfoque y objetivos del folklor, y las condiciones en que se encuentran los ejecutores. En una situación de colonialismo interno como la de Guatemala, el criollo-ladinismo folkloriza elementos de la cultura indígena para descontextualizarlo y ridiculizarlo. Para ello, son los mismos ladinos los que se travisten en indígenas, o bien, utilizan a los mismos indígenas para que se autofolkloricen con el enfoque colonial. Si los indígenas fuésemos autónomos, tendríamos nuestros grupos folklóricos, pero para descolonizar y para revitalizar lo propio. Ya hay algunos grupos artísticos indígenas que tienen esta última orientación.

¿Y cuál es el papel de los académicos en reproducir racismo, cómo podemos no caer en la trampa de reproducir el racismo, pero contribuir a cambiar la situación?

En el mundo académico, puedo mencionar tres formas dentro de la reproducir el colonialismo y del racismo contra los indígenas. Una es adoptando los puntos de vista oficiales del Estado y de los empresarios, tal como lo han hecho los historiadores que han escrito la historia oficial del país. La otra forma es estudiando aspectos propios de los indígenas, pero no devolviendo los resultados de las investigaciones a los indígenas estudiados. Esto fue el caso de varios lingüistas que estudiaron los idiomas mayas y nunca regresaron y popularizaron los resultados de sus estudios con los interesados. La otra forma es el extractivismo epistémico y el plagio. Hace ya varios lustros que pasaron por aquí las empresas farmacéuticas indagando sobre las cualidades curativas de las plantas medicinales, y se llevaron las fórmulas y recetas, sin reconocimiento ni retribución alguna a los indígenas conocedores e informantes.

Hay varias categorías de estudiosos escribiendo sobre Guatemala y los indígenas: hay europeos, norteamericanos y académicos de otros países. Y cada uno de ellos tienen diferentes grados de independencia para escribir. Los cooperantes si tienen más presión de adoptar los puntos de vista del Estado y del gobierno de turno. Adoptando esos puntos de vista, se reproducen el colonialismo contra los indígenas. Aquellos que sean independientes pueden tener una visión más equilibrada, más balanceada de la realidad. La academia

extranjera tiene algunos méritos. La cultura en general, los idiomas indígenas y la epigrafía Maya, digamos, fue estudiado principalmente desde afuera, desde la academia extranjera. Pero a la vez, tuvieron una falla: no se preocuparon porque esos conocimientos se difundieran, al menos en castellano, para los pueblos indígenas. Recuerdo que encontré un libro que hablaba sobre varias gramáticas de idiomas indígenas, pero estaba en inglés, no estaban en español. No había posibilidades de conocer esos temas. Siempre ha sido un reclamo eso de que hay que devolver la información a aquellos a quienes han sido objeto de estudio.

La academia ladina en Guatemala no estudiaba el tema indígena. Ha tenido más dificultades porque ellos, salvo excepciones en la actualidad, son víctimas de su racismo y del colonialismo que impera dentro del país. Por lo tanto, ellos tienen más dificultades para, digamos, deshacerse de esos prejuicios y estereotipos. Tienen ojos, pero no miran a los indígenas pues su mente ya está programada para el enfoque colonial. Incluso a nosotros los indígenas, nos cuesta liberarnos del enfoque colonial. A veces, se dan cuenta de la realidad agravada y diferenciada que viven los indígenas, pero no lo reportan para quedar bien, para no meterse en problemas. O bien, niegan su existencia como sucede con los maestros de escuela, negación que les sirve para impedir que entre la educación bilingüe en su escuela.

Otro tema que se debate es el extractivismo epistémico del que hablan los indígenas de América del Sur. Un sector de estudiosos está a la búsqueda de conocimiento indígena y luego lo expropian, haciéndolo suyo. Lo ideal es respetar los derechos de propiedad intelectual que tienen los indígenas. En los años finales de los 80 los indígenas tenían mucha relación con la academia norteamericana que estaba en Guatemala, que estudiaba lenguas indígenas. Y entre los temas que hablamos fue que era necesario no solo que devolvieran los resultados de los estudios a los indígenas, sino que además deberían formar personal académico indígena, al más alto nivel posible. Muchos de ellos respondieron positivamente a esa sugerencia, otros no.

¿Cómo la pandemia refleja, profundiza y reproduce las estructuras de racismo que existen en Guatemala?

Los indígenas, por sus malas condiciones de vida, son las víctimas predilectas del COVID-19. Los altos grados de desnutrición, la mala alimentación, la carencia de servicios de salud, la falta de información y conocimientos. Están abandonados a su suerte para enfrentar la pandemia.

En mi región, en Tecpán, hay mucha diabetes, cáncer, derrame cerebral, infartos. Eso son indicadores de que hay mala alimentación y son enfermedades preexistentes, así que predeterminantes de una debilidad ante el COVID-19. Este ataca principalmente a los ancianos. A los pueblos indígenas eso nos está doliendo el doble en el sentido de que no solo se pierde a un familiar y a un miembro de la comunidad, sino también porque se pierde un líder, una autoridad comunitaria, se muere una biblioteca comunitaria.

Incluso lo hemos hablado con algunos compañeros, imagínese aquellas comunidades lingüísticas, donde ya solo quedan 8-10 ancianos que hablan su idioma. Si se mueren esos ancianos, se murió dicho idioma. El COVID-19 afecta más y agrava la situación de los pueblos indígenas.

¿Cuál es la importancia de la educación bilingüe en el proceso de sobresalir el racismo?

Se puede ver la educación bilingüe desde dos ángulos. Puedes ver la educación bilingüe como una mejora con relación a lo que preexiste en el sistema educativo. Por ejemplo, nada de escuela, nada de educación escolar, ese era el pensamiento en los años 50. A los indígenas no hay que darles educación porque se vuelven rebeldes, porque se vuelven comunistas, y entonces hay que mantenerlos en la ignorancia de la lectoescritura. Segundo, si les damos educación escolar, démosle la educación que corresponde a un alumno ladino, de manera que sean buenos guatemaltecos. Entonces toda la enseñanza se daba y se da en castellano. De allí los programas de castellanización.

Ante eso, la educación bilingüe es una mejora en el sentido de que utiliza el idioma indígena en la enseñanza y, claro, varios estudios han demostrado la mejora del desempeño, retención y promoción de los niños indígenas cuando se les atiende en su propio idioma. En ese sentido, es una mejora. Pero no es una mejora si continúa siendo colonial y racista. Hay dos tipos de educación bilingüe, el sustractivo y el aditivo. El bilingüismo sustractivo consiste en que se utiliza tu idioma indígena para enseñarte mejor el idioma dominante y una vez que ya lo sabes, se te quita el tuyo. Es decir que es una educación bilingüe asimilista pues el alumno debe abandonar su idioma materno. En el caso de Guatemala, seguimos con la educación bilingüe sustractiva, pues en las pocas escuelas donde se atiende con educación bilingüe, se utiliza el idioma indígena hasta 3er grado de primaria, y luego, en el resto de grados, ya solo en castellano. Desde un punto de vista colonial, lo puedes ver como un progreso y desde otro punto de vista democrático y pluralista, es un caso de racismo asimilista. Por su lado, el bilingüismo aditivo, agrega el idioma castellano y otros idiomas al idioma materno, por lo que constituye un enriquecimiento. Este tipo de bilingüismo no existe en Guatemala.

¿Se maneja un discurso de antirracismo en Guatemala?

Yo creo que un movimiento en el sentido del que vio en Estados Unidos como el Black Lives Matters, no, no existe. Creo que la razón principal es que el contraste de colores de piel entre indígenas y ladinos no es muy diferenciado. El mestizaje biológico existe tanto en ladinos como indígenas. Esta situación ha permitido que muchos indígenas, con crisis de identidad, se disfrazen como ladinos. En cambio, muchos ladinos se parecen físicamente a los indígenas, y según su formación e interpretación, estarán bien consigo mismo, o se sentirá incómodos. El otro punto es que, como el racismo es un mal quinto-centenario,

ese largo período de existencia lo ha naturalizado en la mayoría de ladinos y hasta en los indígenas (racismo internalizado). Se mira como un hecho natural, obvio, ya no se percibe, ni se protesta. Es un automatismo.

No obstante, lo anterior, desde hace 20 años existe un abordaje del racismo en el país, y en las páginas de la prensa, en las redes sociales. Ello se debe a la llegada de columnistas indígenas en esos periódicos, también porque en el mundo ladino hay un porcentaje mínimo de personas que se han abierto al tema y que han aceptado la existencia de racismo y la rechazan por ser fuente de desigualdades e injusticias. Escriben, publican y actúan contra dicho mecanismo de opresión. Eso es un elemento positivo y nuevo en la sociedad criollo ladina.

Dentro del Estado se creó la Comisión Presidencial Contra el Racismo (CODISRA) en el año 2002. Pero rápidamente se deterioró porque en Guatemala las instituciones públicas son manipuladas por los partidos que gobiernan. La CODISRA inició como una institución bipartita en la cual las organizaciones indígenas, luchadoras de Derechos Humanos proponían una terna al Gobierno y el Gobierno seleccionaba. Entonces era como un mecanismo de participación indígena dentro del Estado. Y los comisionados presidenciales se debían tanto a los indígenas como al gobierno. Todo eso ya no existe, ahora solo se deben al gobierno pues ya no existe el aspecto bipartito en la selección de los candidatos. Por ser sólo empleados públicos, no pueden cuestionar y atacar el racismo de Estado ni el racismo estructural. Solo han actuado contra el racismo practicado por personas individuales y pequeños empresarios.

Con la enorme necesidad de empleo decente que hay en Guatemala, parte de la población indígena busca obtener empleo mediante su militancia en uno u otro partido político. En caso de ganar, obtienen un puesto de trabajo, y tienden a ser más fieles al partido de gobierno que los empleó y no leales a los intereses de los indígenas.

¿Es posible cambiar el sistema desde adentro o es más importante reforzar los movimientos sociales e intentar cambiarlos de esta afuera?

Es un tema de debate este asunto. En el mundo donde yo me movía, se decía que los cambios no se podían hacer desde afuera, sino que más desde adentro. Mi experiencia me enseñó que sí se pueden hacer cambios desde dentro cuando tienes el apoyo de las autoridades pero que no son sostenibles en el tiempo

Si quieres hacer cambios desde dentro, primero, es mejor que tengas tu plan de trabajo y tu visión de Estado plurinacional, tu visión de nación cultural, de la Guatemala de los 4 pueblos. Si no tienes eso, lo único que haces es dar seguimiento y refuncionalizar las estructuras y políticas de las dependencias del Estado. No lo llevas hacia ningún lado, pero al menos, los mantienes tal como están.

Ciertamente, no todos los indígenas somos iguales. Hay gente más comprometida y definida con la causa, y hay gente que va solamente por el sueldo. Entonces hay mucha heterogeneidad entre nosotros. Pero en el caso mío, por ejemplo, entramos para empujar la educación bilingüe. Lo negociamos y como consecuencia, pudimos avanzar y hacer lo que se pudo hacer. A pesar de tener todo el apoyo de las autoridades, enfrentamos limitaciones diversas para avanzar tales como la legislación vigente, la falta de presupuesto, la resistencia al cambio de los empleados públicos, etc.

En el Estado de Guatemala es muy difícil mantener políticas públicas de Estado por la forma de hacer política de los partidos políticos. Casi sólo hay políticas de Gobierno y políticas de ministros, digamos de autoridad pública. Supongamos que la cartera de educación cambia tres veces de ministro, es posible que cambien tres veces las políticas públicas o los énfasis de dichas políticas. Cada autoridad va con su política, su énfasis, sus programas, y su personal; y a la vez, paraliza o bloquea programas de sus antecesores. Por ello es que los cambios buenos, no son sostenibles a largo plazo. Pero también está claro que el Estado solo funciona para dos sectores, para los empresarios y el Ejército Nacional. De esa cuenta, de todo lo que avanzamos nosotros en el gobierno de entonces, ahora existe poco de todo ello, o allí sigue sin progresos.

Entre los mayores avances que han tenido los indígenas dentro del Estado están los avances en legislación y los avances en institucionalidad. Pero estos avances tienen su talón de Aquiles pues las leyes no se cumplen o no se aplican. Y las instituciones indígenas que se han creado dentro del Estado empiezan bien, luego, poco a poco van perdiendo apoyo y valor, por el racismo institucional del Estado contra lo indígena.

¿Usted todavía trabaja como activista social?

En este momento sigo activo. Pero soy menos productivo. Sigo activo desde mi campo, desde mi área, sigo escribiendo sobre temas de actualidad, y colaboro con algunas programas y proyectos allá en Guatemala. Ahora que todo es online. Apoyo proveyendo información o insumos a quienes lo necesitan en un u otro campo, u opinando sobre uno u otro comunicado, documento.

Ahora, por la pandemia, sigo escribiendo con base en los libros y documentos que están digitalizados, en lo que existe en internet, es decir que lo que no está en las nubes, no existe. No podemos ir o enviar a alguien a la biblioteca a consultar libros. No podemos hacer estudios de campo, mucho menos.

¿Hay un poco de esperanza para el futuro?

Es un poco deprimente. Hay que ver que la influencia norteamericana es muy poderosa. La interferencia de Trump fue muy fatal al eliminar el trabajo de la CICIG. Con la llegada de Joe Biden en EE. UU. hay esperanzas, sobre todo en la lucha contra la corrupción. Esta lucha no es una bandera indígena, pero es una

bandera guatemalteca porque todos los miembros de la sociedad nos beneficiamos con gobernantes decentes, honestos.

A este respecto, el punto estratégico de Guatemala es que, si se mantiene a los indígenas en esas situaciones de pobreza y de miseria o de genocidio indirecto, el país seguirá generando y expulsando emigrantes, lo que no gusta a los Estados Unidos. Digamos que no le conviene el actual Estado fallido guatemalteco, cooptado por el Pacto de Corruptos, conformado por Narcos, Militares, grandes empresarios, y partidos políticos.

A nivel interno del país, se acercan las elecciones generales, hay esperanzas si los movimientos sociales y los partidos políticos decentes y progresistas se unen para formar un solo bloque, y si el Tribunal Supremo Electoral no está cooptado por el actual Pacto de Corruptos. De lo contrario, seguiremos en más de lo mismo.

Model minority allies or comrades in solidarity? South Asian American activism in Summer 2020's Black uprisings

Maya Bhardwaj

Abstract

This article explores South Asian anti-racist action in the US following the death of George Floyd in May 2020, during a period dubbed by some activists the Black Uprisings or Black Summer. Though there has been limited South Asian American participation in Black Lives Matter since 2014, and in collaboration with Black-led and multiracial organizing prior to these dates, the summer and fall of 2020 represented an unprecedented amount of activism in South Asian American communities in anti-racist social movements. Much of this activism explicitly challenged the notion of the model minority myth, or that South Asians are, in Vijay Prashad's words, a "solution" to what white America terms the "problem" of Black resistance, and these movements attempted to interrogate South Asian diasporic placement in US racial and class hierarchies. This article explores to what extent this discourse, and the resulting on-the-ground and online activism, represents forms of solidarity that emphasize shared history between Black and South Asian communities. It argues that the rise of this organizing stands in contrast to rhetoric around allyship by class and caste-privileged South Asians, who adopt models of antiracist action from white communities and Afro-Pessimist arguments for separate activism from Black activists but through their actions ultimately erase marginalized South Asians and reify notions of racial hierarchy. This article also explores the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns and digital activism on these varying forms of organizing, through research conducted on online forums, events, and in one-on-one ethnographic interviews conducted with key organizers and social movement organizations propelling South Asian anti-racist organizing, and draws from the author's ten years of experience in South Asian and multiracial organizing in the US. Ultimately, the article argues that the movements most powerfully building meaningful solidarity between South Asian Americans and Black Americans employ a form of "queered solidarity from the margins," building off of Shailija Paik's margin-to-margin Dalit-Black solidarities and Robin DG Kelley's joint struggle through world making. It argues that protest movements that embody queered notions of transformative solidarity in multiracial organizing against anti-Blackness offer the most hope for upending US-based institutional racism and white supremacy.

Keywords: South Asian America; solidarity; allyship; queer politics; Black liberation

Introduction

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the summer of 2020 yielded some of the US's largest-ever racial justice mobilizations. Sparked by the police murder of George Floyd, nationwide uprisings indicted both the long history of police brutality and criminal injustice against Black communities as well as the disproportionate impact of Coronavirus and lockdowns on Black communities and communities of color. While these protests built on a long history of Black resistance to American empire and institutionalized racism, participation of non-Black communities of color was vastly expanded in comparison to previous years. The South Asian American (henceforth SAA) community, a diverse grouping of immigrants often erroneously grouped and depoliticized through the model minority myth, participated in activism against anti-Blackness in ways that were vastly more visible than in prior years of Black Lives Matter and wider Black-led organizing. However, the forms of activism by SAA widely differed, with some primarily engaging in interrogations of SAA anti-Blackness through digital activism and community-specific panels and workshops, some participating in militant Black-led direct action coalitions and emphasizing the linkages between South Asian caste oppression and American institutional racism, and some employing combinations of these tactics and more. This article explores what these divergent trends in SAA activism reveal about the politicization and racialization of South Asian Americans, how South Asian Americans (and the varied groups within South Asian America) view their role in multiracial activism against institutional racism, and what fractures or divisions this highlights within SAA conceptualizations of solidarity.

This article argues that fractures in SAA activism, particularly in anti-racist struggles and organizing against anti-Blackness and institutional racism, highlight the divisions in caste¹ privilege, class positionality, faith, and subcontinental politics and migration trends. Largely privileged Hindu Indian-Americans have transplanted white anti-racist allyship politics onto their activism against anti-Blackness. This reifies the constructs of the model minority myth and perpetuates racial politics that place Black Americans at the bottom. Conversely, I argue that marginalized South Asians have leveraged a substantially more generative “transformative solidarity” that I analyze through Robin D.G. Kelley’s theoretics of solidarity and worldmaking (Kelley 2019) and Shailija Paik’s Dalit and Black women’s margin-to-margin solidarity (Paik 2014). By discarding the model minority myth and caste-privileged politics, and instead appealing to shared struggle against racial capitalism, solidarity activism by marginalized SAA show true possibility for upending American institutional racism and ushering in a transformed understanding of SAA activism for racial justice.

¹ A system of hierarchy and oppression stemming from Hindu scripture but extending throughout South Asia and the diaspora; see Zwick-Maitreyi et al (2018) for context in the United States.

This article makes this argument through four core sections. The first section traces the (de)politicization of South Asian Americans, and the formation of a racial identity that separated SAA from Black resistance efforts. This section historicizes the impact of the model minority myth and contextualizes modern efforts towards rupture. The second section assesses SAA anti-racist activism in the summer of 2020 through a lens of allyship, and identifies where the usage of white anti-racist politics reify racial hierarchies and diminish SAA radical resistance. The third section analyzes SAA activism in the summer of 2020 through a lens of transformative solidarity, world-making, and margin-to-margin solidarity. The final section explores a queered model of solidarity that prioritizes kinship and community care within queer of color spaces, and builds on a long history of queer Black feminist scholarship and politics.

The research in this article draws from nine ethnographic interviews that I conducted with SAA activists during the summer of 2020, which were facilitated through personal relationships and snowballing. It also draws from my archiving and analysis of SAA social media forums and online events that related to BLM uprisings, racial justice organizing, and anti-Blackness in the summer of 2020. Interview participants who preferred to remain anonymous have been pseudonymized. However, in accordance with the wishes of some participants, I have retained select names and organizational affiliations in order to protect the visibility of and the credit due to their labor. The analysis also draws on my own 10 years of experience as an Indian-American community organizer and activist myself, and the relationships I have built through these years. Echoing Minai and Shroff's (2019) and Shah's (2017) arguments for co-production of knowledge through positionality as both researcher and co-conspirator, this research leverages my insider-outsider positionality as a SAA activist as well as an archivist and scholar of these movements. I attempt to use these frames to center the analysis driven by my interlocutors and by activists themselves. It is important to note that my own positionality as an academic and activist with caste and class privilege complicates this analysis. However, I have particularly attempted to center the assessments and words of caste-oppressed, working-class, non-Hindu, and otherwise marginalized South Asian Americans. Leaning on these systems of co-production of knowledge with activist comrades was an experiment in creating research, and opening space for interviews, that attempt to facilitate co-strategizing around SAA resistance, multiracial solidarity, and transformative organizing for racial justice.

Tracing and troubling the model minority myth

Reading SAA involvement in anti-racist organizing in summer 2020 within the context of the model minority myth is critical. This myth, as Vijay Prashad explores in his 2000 book *The Karma of Brown Folk*, perpetuates the belief that South Asian migrants in the US – and Asian immigrants more broadly – are uniquely hard-working, quiet, and acceptable to whiteness due to their depoliticization. As Prashad says, this myth made Asians a “solution” to the “problem” of Black American resistance. The myth holds its roots in concocted

history. South Asians in the US were involved in leftist organizing for centuries, from California's anti-colonial Ghadar party (Ramnath 2011) to visits by Quit India organizers like Ram Lohia and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay to the Highlander Center to partner with Black liberation activists (Slate 2010) to historic ties between Dalit activists like Ambedkar and the Dalit Panthers with Black organizers (Soundararajan & Varatharajah 2015). Some of the earliest South Asian immigrants to the US, largely working-class Muslim, Sikh, Dalit, and Bahujan men who made their livelihoods as peddlers, ship-workers, railroad-builders, and agricultural workers, found respite from white supremacist terror by settling alongside and marrying into Black and Afro-Puerto Rican communities in cities like New York, Baltimore, and New Orleans, as Bald (2014) unveils in *Bengali Harlem*. Brah (1996) argues that these spaces of cultural intermingling – particularly between South Asian and Black diasporic communities – can be read as “diaspora space” (81), where diasporic subjects from varied homes meet, intertwine, and create new politics, racial identities, and homes.

But this history was largely erased both through the efforts of white America to assimilate South Asians, as well as from South Asians with caste and class privilege themselves. As an organizer with South Asian Americans Leading Together told me, “the model minority myth is told *by* South Asians...to oppress each other.” Bhagat Singh Thind appealed to the US Supreme Court in 1923 for citizenship rights on the basis of being caste-privileged, ergo Aryan, ergo white (Snow 2004). Later, Khan and Mazumdar testified to the US Congress on the merits of immigration reform to admit South Asians due to their status as businesspeople, scholars, scientists, and engineers – workers who would conform to racial capitalism, distance themselves from Black America, and eschew political resistance (Bald 2014). This logic was enshrined in the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act's selective acceptance of only South Asians who had prior advanced technical qualifications, increasing the likelihood that these largely caste-privileged migrants would assimilate into white communities or self-segregate, and stay away from Black-led organizing and racial politics. Iyer (2017) argues that even in later working-class South Asian migrant communities, South Asians distanced themselves from Blackness as a means of protection and capital accrual. Many similarly sought to distinguish themselves from “bad Muslims” through self-policing and internal fragmentation in response to Islamophobic targeting after the 9/11 attacks (Mishra 2016). These acts represent a wielding of the model minority myth that both perpetuated class, caste, nationality, and Hindu fascist dynamics that existed in the subcontinent, and applied them to American racial politics that placed Black Americans at the bottom, thus sacrificing a South Asian political resistance in exchange for material gains (Prashad 2000). As Thara, an Indian-American activist and facilitator said, “the model minority myth kept us safe in exchange for our dignity.”

However, particularly following 9/11, many working-class, Muslim, Dalit, non-Indian, and otherwise marginalized South Asians have challenged the model minority myth. As Das Gupta (2006), Gupta (2008), Maira (2002), and Sharma

(2010), trace, these newer immigrants, often coming from histories of political engagement in their home countries, were similarly “unruly” in the US, joining worker unions like the New York Taxi Workers Alliance and enacting hip hop as a language of political resistance in cultural spaces. Others formed political and self-help groups like Sakhi for South Asian Women, SALGA (the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association), and TriKone (a Chicago-based queer SAA organization) (Kukke and Shah 1999). Clashes proliferated between caste- and class-privileged older SAA migrants, and, often, the newer caste-oppressed and working-class SAA migrants who they exploited (Gupta 2008, ASATA 2009). Similar to the first SAA migrants, these newer migrants in the 1990s and 2000s at times formed natural ties with Black Americans in the urban spaces where they settled, though others still relied upon the model minority myth to create community separations.

Though SAA anti-racist activism in summer 2020 existed across class, caste, faith, and national lines, these historical separations – rooted within the model minority myth and American racial hierarchies – provide critical context to understand how different SAA engaged and understand activism and solidarity. The subsequent sections analyze this engagement through exploring my primary research on SAA participation in the Black-led uprisings against police brutality and institutional racism in the summer of 2020. Below, I contrast varying frames of political solidarity with Black resistance in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic. To bound the activism explored in this article, I look at Black liberation movements as activism that goes beyond police and prison abolition to encompass wide issue-oriented and systems-oriented struggles, drawing on conceptualizations by the Black Panthers and Black Lives Matter (BLM). This includes education, food, health, housing, prison and police abolition, gender justice, queer justice, and other issues that affect Black peoples’ ability to live with dignity and thrive (Umoja 1999, Clark et al 2018). As the Panthers’ Shakur (1987) and BLM’s Garza (2014) emphasize, Black liberation does not focus only on criminal justice: it requires systems transformation. South Asian Americans, in emergent activist spaces, have oriented to and engaged with these struggles in various forms. I explored this engagement through interviews with activist interlocutors listed in the table below, as well as through archiving and analysis of social media, digital forums, online events, and other digital activism spaces. Understanding these diversities sheds light on SAA identity, American racial politics, and the possibility of multiracial anti-racist struggle. The following sections are structured by my assessment of the largest forms of activism against anti-Blackness and institutional racism evinced by SAA, derived through the words of my interlocutors as well as through my analysis of interviews, group participant observation, and digital activism spaces.

US Interlocutors

| Name | Pronouns | Age | Identities named | Organizational Affiliations named | Types of Organizing named |
|----------|-----------|-------|----------------------------|---|--|
| Haleema | She/her | 20-30 | Indian, Muslim | South Asians 4 Black Lives, Malikah, Alliance for Girls | Gender justice, anti-Islamophobia, BLM solidarity, political ed, South Asian |
| Har | She/her | 20-30 | Punjabi, Sikh, Indian | South Asian Solidarity Initiative, YKR, trans* & queer spaces | Prison & police abolition, queer & trans justice, South Asian, arts & culture |
| MH | She/her | 20-30 | Pakistani, Muslim | SAALT, Justice for Muslims Collective | South Asian, advocacy, anti-Islamophobia |
| S | They/them | 20-30 | Tamil, Indian Hindu | SAALT, various queer & arts spaces | South Asian, advocacy, arts & culture, queer & trans |
| Preet | She/her | 20-30 | Punjabi, Sikh, Indian | South Asians 4 Black Lives, Bay Area Solidarity Summer | BLM solidarity, political education, South Asian |
| Priyanka | She/they | 20-30 | Indian, SE Asia diaspora | Right to the City, Bay Area Solidarity Summer, ASATA | Housing justice, political education, South Asian |
| Sasha | They/them | 30-40 | Sri Lankan, Sinhalese | CAAAV, Queer South Asian Network, National Queer API Alliance | Housing justice, police & prison abolition, queer SAA spaces |
| Sharmin | She/her | 20-30 | Bangladeshi, Muslim | Equality Labs, Black Brunch, Bangladeshi Feminist Collective, ALP | Anti-caste, anti-Hindutva, South Asian, gender justice, queer & trans, BLM solidarity |
| Thara | She/her | 30-40 | Indian, Keralite, Catholic | The Wildfire Project, 18 Million Rising, OSU, YKR | Anti-oppressive facilitation, pan-Asian, arts & culture, BLM solidarity, queer & trans |

Allyship: solidarity predicated on privilege

SAA engagement with US-wide Black-led organizing in summer 2020 can be largely separated into two forms of action: some through a framing of transformative solidarity, which I explore later, and others through a political and theoretical framing of allyship. Here, allyship refers to actions where one group supports the liberation of another but also works to dismantle their own privilege (Leonard & Misumi 2016, Erskine & Bilimoria 2019). Specifically, Erskine and Bilimoria define allyship as:

...Individuals in a position of power who use their privilege to disrupt inequitable systems in order to support groups that their ascribed status—or social position determined solely by demographic characteristics established at birth, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and/or country of origin—gives them power over. In addition, allyship has been described as an expressed sense of responsibility and commitment to using one's racial privilege in ways that promote equity, engage in actions to disrupt racism and the status quo, on micro and macro levels, create learning, lay the groundwork for slow but ongoing organizational and social change...Allyship is best considered not as a noun...but as a verb. (Erskine and Bilimoria 2019:321)

Allyship in these terminologies often draws from white anti-racist movements (*ibid*, Berg & Carbin 2018, Bae & Tseng-Patterman 2020). Allies inherently have privilege, and wield this privilege in support of the other, who lacks it. Allies practice solidarity by attempting to dismantle hierarchical structures and privileges, like in McIntosh's (1988) invisible knapsack. Being an ally, as Erskine and Bilimoria explain above, is a constant process, or for Kluttz et al (2020), it is "not a permanent designation" (52) and is rather in opposition to binary identity frameworks. Allyship within the context of whiteness often draws on morality (Scholz 2008), mobilizing "white guilt" (Steele 2006) and "white fragility" (DiAngelo 2018) into being allied with the directly-impacted, who is the other (Kluttz et al 2020). This also echoes Afro-Pessimism's notions of anti-Blackness's inevitability (Wilderson 2016), meaning that non-white groups are never similar comrades but always allies in the fight against Black people's global subjugation.

In the summer of 2020, many Asian diasporic groups – particularly those with caste and class privilege – wrestled with Asian anti-Blackness (Iyer 2020) and complicity in white supremacy (Prashad 2000). But particularly for South Asians with class and caste privilege, many employed an allyship model that saw Asian as agents who had profited off of anti-Blackness and did not experience shared struggles in institutional racism. Therefore, before – or rather than – joining in struggles against white supremacy and institutional racism, the solution to good allyship was education and acts of support by SAA. South Asians for Black Lives is one group that conducted much of their activism in this way, through conducting multiple workshops, political education sessions, and creating digital resources to educate on anti-Blackness in the SAA community for SAA. As one of their educators said, "we had to shed our complexities to fit into the MMM, so [we]...focus on SAA history first. Then... institutional and interpersonal anti-Blackness, and finally solidarity." Here, she articulates that the process of allyship requires internal focus on SAA community first – and only then is action in solidarity with Black liberation possible. This echoes the concerns that Kluttz et al (2020) and Ghabra and Calafell (2018) raise with allyship, that it can devolve into inward-looking actions rather than finding spaces for solidarity against shared targets, and thereby reifying, rather than challenging, racial hierarchies. It also echoes Afro-Pessimist theories that all non-Black communities inevitably reify anti-Blackness, making true solidarity largely impossible (Wilderson 2016) by approaching anti-Blackness in SAA communities as an incontrovertible barrier to anti-racist activism until fully understood, trained on, and dismantled, thus requiring SAA to focus on internal activity to be allies rather than responding to demands from Black communities leading struggle.

Many groups, in online trainings and political education spaces, referred to SAA activism in support of BLM as "service" in online training workshops on anti-Blackness, and emphasized that SAA – particularly those with caste and class privilege – owed Black communities for the profit SAA had accrued. This idea of debt, rather than political solidarity, was what formed the requirement for discussing anti-Blackness with SAA peers. This rhetoric was echoed in posts on

South Asian social media pages like Little Brown Diary and Subtle Curry Traits. Each of these pages hold multiple thousands of members who posted frequently in support of BLM in summer 2020 but fell on differing sides with regards to looting, police abolition, or more militant solidarity. Rather, these posts emphasized “allyship” with BLM, “South Asians for BLM,” South Asians against anti-Blackness, and the importance of standing up for Black Americans due to their role in immigration reform that paved the way for South Asian immigration. Other posts frequently emphasized the importance of peaceful protest, or drew ties between Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Allyship in digital activism was frequently contextualized through rhetoric that emphasized transactional support: Indian-Americans argued to support BLM not merely for reasons of justice or opposition to institutional racism but because anti-Blackness had afforded them the privileges they hold. But fewer rhetoric interrogated the structures of racial violence that allowed Indian-Americans to amass large wealth in the US while Black Americans remained relegated to ghettoized communities.

Alongside workshops and social media posts, a number of largely caste- and class-privileged Indian-Americans compiled over fifteen collaborative Google documents that collated articles and statistics about the relationship between Indian Americans and Black Americans, and shared tools for talking to South Asians about anti-Blackness and BLM. Many of these resources focused on talking with family members and elders, with titles like “*How To Talk to South Asian Parents about Systemic Racism and Our Privilege*,” “*Letters to South Asian parents on anti-blackness*,” “*Engaging South Asian Immigrants in anti-racist solidarity through Whatsapp content*,” “*South Asian Families for BLM*,” and “*How to speak to your parents about anti-Black racism (resource compilation)*.” The focus on family and elders belied (not necessarily accurate) assumptions that young South Asians were more enlightened about racial politics and anti-Blackness while older immigrants were not. This framing often went as far as talking to family members about the history of anti-Blackness and perhaps attending protests with signs, many emphasizing the importance of peaceful protest. Fewer covered logic for police and prison abolition or discussed militant protests tools. Articles like those from South Asian Americans Leading Together’s former ED Deepa Iyer (2020) argued that SAA, in order to support BLM, must first turn inward to confront SAA-perpetrated anti-Blackness.

These resources and digital posts made important interventions into otherwise hollow SAA support for BLM, and recognized SAA complicity in anti-Black structures and acts. Their popularity was enhanced during COVID-19 lockdowns, where many SAA with class privilege were house-bound in often majority-white suburbs and were far removed from protests going on in person. Positively, digital engagement through sharing resources and posts provided a way for readers and sharers to feel connected to actions without risking safety or COVID-19 spread. They also opened up engagement methods for disabled and immunocompromised people in ways that traditional actions without disability justice frameworks at the center often overlook. Online tools also provided a

digestible on-ramp of political education and discourse around anti-Blackness that could appeal to less radicalized SAA. Easy-to-share clips, guides, and images were tailored to Whatsapp groups and other intergenerational communication methods in Desi diaspora, and provided rhetoric that was pushed back against the extensive Whatsapp campaigns used by the Hindu right (Chopra 2019).

Unfortunately, many of these resources and online activism also homogenized SAA as unilaterally holding privilege, catering primarily to caste- and class-privileged Hindu Indian-Americans but referring to these groups as indicative of South Asian Americans as a whole. This rhetoric thus erased working-class, caste-oppressed, non-Hindu, and other South Asian American and Indo-Caribbean work alongside Black comrades. This reified internal divisions and further marginalized already marginal SAA while disregarding the linkages and solidarity that do exist between these groups and Black liberation struggles. Moreover, these resources often stressed internal SAA community-based work as a prerequisite before practicing solidarity in the streets, creating a hierarchy of activism that meant newly politicized SAA could share posts without ever engaging with Black activists or Black-led organizing.

These types of actions fall prey to the critiques of allyship that Kluttz et al (2020), Clark (2019), and Ghabra and Calafell (2018) discuss – they focus more on the identity of showing support, rather than the actions of organizing and activism that can meaningfully confront and shift power. Rather than attempting to change situations, these social media posts by SAA showed the viewpoint of those sheltering at home in suburbs during COVID-19 lockdowns, away from the multiracial mutual aid and organizing work conducted by working-class SAA (Gurba 2020). Instead of traveling to protests or engaging deeply in Black-led organizing, the act of posting online or creating a conversation tool could assuage feelings of guilt and allow actions to stop there. Thus, SAA with privilege could feel like allies through actions that ultimately didn't challenge community or societal norms, and thus escaped the difficult work of transformation that Kluttz et al (2020) emphasize. As Dalit, Muslim, and working-class writers and activists like Soundararajan (2020), Hossein (2020), and Malhotra (2020) rebut, this language often reified Savarna² Indian-American privilege and emphasized respectability politics and reformism rather than systems change, thereby erasing the actions of radical working-class, Muslim, Dalit, and other marginalized South Asians in longstanding and deep partnership with radical Black liberation organizing.

Transformative solidarity and shared struggle

Conversely, other SAA groups expressed their solidarity with Black-led organizing through a framing of “transformative organizing.” Sasha, an organizer with CAAAV, a historically Chinese working-class group in NYC but

² Caste-privileged.

now a pan-Asian organizing group with significant working-class Bangladeshi and other South Asian membership, spoke to me about what transformative solidarity meant to them and how it showed up in their organizing as a queer Sri Lankan American organizer. In their description, they reference DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving), a working-class South Asian and Indo-Caribbean organizing group based in Queens, New York, whose interpretations of solidarity include their work to make links between the state surveillance of and violence against Muslim South Asians post 9/11 to the history of COINTELPRO and other programs that target Black American organizing (DRUM 2019, Mallapragada 2013). In describing how DRUM and CAAAV see solidarity, Sasha told me,

Transformative Solidarity from DRUM distinguishes between showing solidarity, in a transactional way, versus embodying it, versus whole communities making decisions at real material cost to them... at CAAAV, our members won't take this thing that's beneficial for us if it's harmful for others.

In practice, they described how CAAAV's working-class Asian members made principled and political decisions to stand with the family of Akai Gurley, a Black man who was murdered by a Chinese-American policeman (Fuchs 2016). Instead of siding with tense communal ties, CAAAV members conducted extensive political outreach in Asian communities in New York to highlight the linkages between anti-Black policing and the anti-Asian and white supremacist violence that led to CAAAV's inception. CAAAV members also called out the internalized white supremacy inherent in the logic of Asians supporting the police. Similarly, Fahd Ahmed, the executive director of DRUM, described instances of transformative solidarity in practice in a summer 2020 panel that focused on Asian solidarity against anti-Blackness. Ahmed described how DRUM had participated in campaigns against policing in schools, rejecting the calls from some Asian parents for cops to provide protection against bullying and instead arguing for the importance of abolition to protect against both anti-Black and Islamophobic institutional violence.

Sasha and Fahd's framing of solidarity diverges from Erskine and Bilimoria's allyship. Here, groups do not operate from a place of privileged allies who are standing up for Black communities due to morality, indebtedness, or guilt, as Erskine and Bilimoria (2019) and Kluttz et al (2020) describe. Rather, they articulate how CAAAV and DRUM mobilize Asian working-class politics into solidarity with Black liberation fights because of shared experiences of white supremacy, institutional racism, and racial capitalism. Through this invocation of working-class, Muslim, Dalit, and Bahujan SAA identity, these activists push back against the model minority myth and instead reveal larger shared experiences between marginalized SAA and Black Americans. They also echo Mishra's (2016) analysis that the divisions of class, caste, and nationality between various South Asian migrant groups results in political and cultural fractions often larger internally than between various SAA and other groups – in

this case, the marginalized SAA that Sasha, Fahd, and other speak of find more shared political ground with Black Americans than with SAA with privilege. Finding this solidarity through shared experience echoes Robin D.G. Kelley's framing of solidarity as transformation and world-making where diverse groups share both experiences of marginalization as well as similar political articulations of how to get to a better world, broadly termed "joint struggle" (Kelley 2019: 583).

Kelley particularly explores solidarities between Black Americans and Palestinians in this framing, focusing on how shared experiences of colonization, police violence, and carcerality yielded both declarations of solidarity in principles and statements as well as in sharing of best practices for resisting tear gas attacks and other forms of colonial and white supremacist warfare. But these explorations of solidarity through joint struggle also ring through for marginalized SAA, from experiences of racialization and Islamophobia post-9/11 to histories of oppression in the subcontinent and diaspora through class and caste. In Sasha and Fahd's statements, and in Kelley's political theoretics, solidarity is not just shared principles that inspire action (Arendt 2006); it is action itself, where groups work together due to shared experiences of oppression, in order to create a new world that liberates both communities. As Lila Watson (1984), an Aboriginal elder, organizer, and theorist similarly indicates, in this framing of solidarity, groups' liberations are "bound up with one another." Groups may struggle with one another, but they are linked through ideology, dialectics, and praxis (Kelley 2019). This also draws on notions of class solidarity in the Marxist sense (Marx & Engels 1967), Weber's (1946) political solidarity through shared interest, and collaborations between workers in unions and social movements through social movement unionism (Waterman 1993). Sasha also invoked Gramsci's (2000) united and popular fronts in this exploration of joint or shared struggle, where varied groups have diverse identities and employ diverse tactics, yet collaborate through shared identity in struggle as "comrades" (Robinson 2000).

Many Dalit, Bahujan, and other caste-oppressed SAA also framed their solidarity against anti-Blackness through a lens of shared struggle. Sharmin, who at the time was the political director of Equality Labs, a Dalit-led anti-caste organizing group in the US diaspora, discussed with me both the long parallel histories of oppression from caste and race that Dalit and Black communities share, as well as the rich histories of solidarity. In her analysis, she echoed the arguments from Soundararajan (2020), Malhotra (2020), and others who found caste- and class-privileged SAA solidarity with BLM to be shallow in its disregard of the linkages between casteism and anti-Blackness. As Sharmin said,

Dalit leaders have always had deep relationships with Black leaders, from the Dalit Panthers and their relationship with the Black Panthers, to Cornel West learning & teaching Ambedkar, to collaborations in Say Her Name protests between Dalit Feminists fighting against caste rape and Black organizers

protesting the state-sanctioned murders of Black women. Dalit activists have always built authentic relationships with Black leaders that weren't transactional but were rooted in transformative solidarity.

In emphasizing this shared history, Sharmin's words recall Paik's (2014) articulation of the possibility of "margin-to-margin" solidarity between Black and Dalit women due to shared experiences of patriarchy and racism/casteism within a heteropatriarchal and racial capitalist system. Paik, like Kelley, refers to a solidarity of "world-making," where groups converge across varied identities due to shared struggles that breed solidarity through shared resistance. This type of solidarity is not a market exchange (Kelley 2019) that requires equal repayment for tactical support, nor is it an exhortation of guilt or repaying debts: it is collaboration for shared liberation. As Sharmin continued,

BLM has brought up a lot of guilt for South Asian Americans across the country, where some feel they have to say or do something now, but often without... the reading or the deep studying to be able to talk about these issues in a concrete way. So, for me, solidarity isn't just talking about things...it's your relationship...For Equality Labs, those relationships allowed us to jump into formation with M4BL and BLM's platforms to do abolitionist solidarity work quickly.

As Sharmin describes, Savarna guilt often mirrors the knee-jerk actions of allyship that practiced by white activists that scholars like Steele, Tseng and Putterman, and Klutts et al critique. Instead, Sharmin frames solidarity not as discrete acts of support, but as processes of building deep relationships that both generate solidarity with external groups and also provoke transformation and change internally within South Asian spaces. This, more than talking, yields solidarity that challenges structures of racial and caste hierarchy and recognizes shared experiences of oppression faced by marginalized SAA and Black Americans – but also recognizes the anti-Blackness within normative SAA communities that make solidarity difficult.

Similarly, Har, an organizer who is active with spaces that include the South Asian Solidarity Initiative in New York, argued that privileged SAA turned out for BLM but not for caste as a way of shirking complications within the community. She said,

It's easier...for SAA to stand in solidarity with Black Lives, because...the blame is on white supremacy, [whereas] caste involve[s] challenging family, customs...we reproduce anti-Blackness because we are reproducing caste.

Therefore, rather than mobilizing white or Savarna guilt, these interpretations of solidarity from marginalized SAA seek to dismantle SAA anti-Blackness and

leverage shared experience, struggle, and relationship. They recognize shifting positionalities and privilege in different spaces, as Sharmin emphasized the importance of “stepping back” and “following the leadership of Black organizers” but also spoke about the importance of stepping into organizing on the ground alongside Black comrades. This often occurred in specifically SAA organizing spaces like Sharmin’s Equality Labs, Har’s SASI, and Fahd’s DRUM. These groups and others conducted political education in SAA community, both digitally and in-person with long-term members. They also called out South Asian and SAA celebrities who pledged support for BLM but remained silent on Islamophobic and casteist state sanctioned violence through Hindutva, the CAA-NRC, and the Kashmiri occupation (Soundararajan 2020), and demanded a dismantling of the model minority myth. Outside of SAA space, these groups joined in coalition with Black-led groups through formations like the Rising Majority, a national anti-racist BIPOC organizing coalition led by the Movement for Black Lives and with membership from BIPOC-led organizing groups across the country. In these larger multiracial spaces, my interlocutors described how SAA-led groups built solidarity with Black-led and other POC-led organizing groups to articulate shared strategies to defeat racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy, yielding shared strategies like the BREATHE Act that the Rising Majority and the Movement for Black Lives platformed in Congress in response to summer 2020’s uprisings.

Organizing by non-normative SAA also occurred in multiracial organizing groups that focused on specific issues that affect both working-class Black Americans and SAA, like housing organizing, migrant justice work, and more. Priyanka, a queer Indian-American who organizes around tenant rights and housing organizing, told me that these multiracial spaces made sense to her because “it doesn’t matter whether I’m in India fighting for my identity...or here doing Black solidarity work organising with renters...colonialism and empire are oppressing my people too.” She also noted that her non-traditional migration history, including growing up as part of marginalized South Asian communities in East Asia, and her queer identity, meant normative SAA diaspora spaces in the US felt alien to her and replete with “toxic heteropatriarchy...elitism and Brahminism,” whereas organizing alongside other Black and Brown activists allowed her to find a pathway to “transformative justice [and] queer leadership” that fulfilled her desires to “break systems down, vision and dream” in tandem with Black-led abolitionist organizers. Similarly, Har described finding solidarity through working-class Black and Brown spaces in New York City, and said that juxtaposing her experience of homelessness and growing up “in the hood” with wealthy SAA “politicized me around the model minority myth,” thus yielding solidarity with other working-class queer and trans youth of colour activists. Sharmin and Thara also described finding political solidarity in multiracial and Black-led organizing spaces that focused on working-class and queer struggle, thus appealing more to their identities than dominant and class-privileged Indian-American diaspora spaces. This in turn yielded solidarity through shared experience.

Some traditionally privileged SAA groups also invoked notions of transformative solidarity. Organizers from SAALT (South Asian Americans Leading Together), a historically caste-privileged-led SAA group, told me that they were attempting to wield and transform their groups historic privilege by “putting solidarity from the margins into organizational structures... supporting Congressional policies that Black-immigrant organizations and Dalit groups support, and rejecting ones they don’t.” Here, they speak for a mobilization of privilege that diverges from Paik’s (2014) margin-to-margin solidarity but lies deeper than Erskine and Bilimoria’s allyship by arguing for a transformation of power relations. And while Har, Sharmin, Sasha, and organizers from SAALT recognize the privilege that SAA hold in American institutional racism, their statements argue for a theoretic of solidarity that transcends oppression Olympics and instead mobilizes shared experiences to combat white supremacy and racial capital.

Critically, much of this work predated the summer of 2020, and was built on years and decades of collaboration before moments of crisis. Moreover, mutual aid efforts expanded in response to the harms of COVID-19 in working-class SAA neighborhoods meant SAA activists were in the streets alongside working-class comrades, and likely had been in relationship in years prior (Hossain 2021, Gurba 2020). While some working-class and marginalized SAA were newly politicized in summer 2020, they were led by the efforts of SAA activists who, as Sharmin, Har, Sasha, Fahd, and others describe, had already been organizing within SAA communities and through multiracial vehicles like the Rising Majority for years. Thus, the type of organizing exhibited by these groups showed a divergence from acts of allyship done by privileged actors, to a genuine shaking of structures by distinct groups organizing together. This shows that SAA are claiming a space in fights against racialized and marginalized existence in the US, instead embracing diasporic politics to combat anti-Blackness and institutional racism.

Queering South Asian solidarity

A vocal contingent of SAA organizers and activists practicing solidarity with BLM noted their queerness as an integral factor to their politics and their relationship to wider queer-of-color and specifically Black liberation struggles. Simply, Har said that “queer South Asian Americans are overrepresented in organizing spaces and it’s brilliant.” Thara, a queer SAA activist, told me that “being Queer and South Asian [includes] losing a feeling of belonging” and she connected this to “carv[ing] my identity as POC on the heels of queer black feminism” in a way that shapes her multiracial activism and solidarity with Black liberation struggles today. Thara continued to articulate how queerness had closed off normative SAA spaces to her, and in many ways forced a separation between her political and cultural identities. Relating to Fortier’s (2001) analysis of the formation of queer homes that exist in diaspora but not in the home culture, and arguing that for queer SAA solidarity often forms out of finding home in Black, Latinx, and other queer-of-color spaces, Thara said:

I feel like my Indian identity and my political identity were really separate for the past 5 years, and that's wild because my political identity is so central to who I am – but I have to constantly remind myself that the way I do things is Indian. I have to remember that I exist because my ancestors have the audacity to exist. Remembering my way forward feels really integral to being a queer South Asian because we were queer before we were colonized. Whereas my siblings, they really just like deny themselves to be safe. And as a queer person, that was never available to me. I was never going to be able to keep up with the Joneses.

Thara's words recall Das Gupta, Maira, and Kukke & Shah's explorations of SALGA's ejection from normative SAA space, in the form of the 1997 India Day Parade. They also recall Adur's (2018) scholarship on queer South Asian activism in the US that reveals the tensions between caste, class, and queerness in dominant – as well as queer – SAA spaces. While activists and scholars like Soundararajan (2020), Maitreyi-Zwick (2018), and Dasgupta et al (2018) have argued that even queer SAA spaces can reify hierarchies of caste and class and silence marginalized SAA, Thara describes how finding political home in multiracial spaces allowed her to traverse the gaps she felt between her Indian and queer identities, thus rejecting normative Desi politics even in queer diaspora spaces. Thara's argument that queerness in SAA diaspora makes normativity unattainable and often forces politicization most clearly parallels Gayatri Gopinath's (2005) explorations of queer South Asian diasporas in the US and the UK in her book *Impossible Desires*. Here, Gopinath theorizes that queerness fundamentally shifts South Asian diaspora space and diasporic culture-making in a way that is inherently political. Gopinath (2005:11) writes:

Suturing “queer” to “diaspora”...becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora...and [disrupts] heteronormative and patriarchal structures of kinship.

In Gopinath's interpretations, queerness can disrupt the Islamophobia and casteism of Hindutva, thus eschewing the forms of homonationalism or pinkwashing of nationalism practiced by dominant queers that Puar (2006, 2008) indicts. Gopinath's explorations show that queer Desi diasporic identity can also reject expectations of reproduction of culture that ask SAA to stay insular and far away from Black American politics. Patel (2019), too, traces queer South Asian women's navigation of culture in the home and in queer spaces, finding that emphasis on family ties, culture, and honor can push queer South Asian women out of acceptance in home and community, but can also distance them from white-dominant queer and lesbian spaces that treat them as other. Thus, as Thara argues, many queer SAA practiced solidarity with Black liberation struggles both during and far prior to 2020 because those were the spaces where they found kinship and political home. Thara and many other of the activists I spoke with referenced queer Black activists and theorists like

Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Carolyn Cohen, and the Combahee River Collective as key influences in their political thinking, activism, and solidarity. Preet, a queer SAA activist who organizes with a political education collective that builds solidarity between South Asian and Black Americans, described how her political formation and solidarity activism grew out of queer and particularly queer of color spaces in university:

I took a student-led [class] called fem-sex... about gender and sexuality [and]...taboo topics that we didn't discuss otherwise, within a framework of social justice and solidarity, like I am doing now with SA4BL [a South Asian and Black solidarity political education group], because you can't move to activism and allyship and solidarity without knowing who you are and how those things have developed into politically charged issues. Fem-sex was a really queer space...I taught that class for two years, because a South Asian woman facilitator brought me in and...was a South Asian queer mentor for me, and I did the same thing with another South-Asian-American woman in my class...that was a really sweet mix of South Asian and queer identity.

Preet's quote articulates both how finding queer political space allowed her not only to meld her queer and SAA identity and politics, but also how it led her to solidarity organizing with BLM. Learning about her queerness led her to an analysis of sisterhood or solidarity that Lorde (1981) and hooks (1986) invoke between Black American and women in the Global South, where shared experiences of homophobia and heteropatriarchy can yield political collaborations across borders. Cohen (1997) describes how this solidarity between marginalized queers can emerge in action:

I'm talking about a politics where the nonnormative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work...[where] radical potential [in] the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics...[is] located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin. (Cohen 1997:438)

Cohen uses the terminology of coalitions, which is later troubled in her (2019) indictment of whether the radical potential of queerness truly exists. Cohen finds that coalitions can yield transactional spaces where marginalized queers are tokenized and overrun by white, cis, able-bodied, and class-privileged gay men and women. But Cohen's logic for mobilizing the "...radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics" (Cohen 1997:440) has more clearly found its outlet in modern Black queer and queer-of-color politics. While Cohen indicted the transactionality of coalitions, Garza and Khan-Cullors, in their status as founders of BLM, have frequently referenced their queerness alongside their identities as working-class Black women as central to their politics. This

radical queer politic has resulted in solidarities built through deep relationships with other queer-of-color groups that Har and Thara referenced. Instead, Kelley's solidarity through joint struggle, Fortier's queer home, and Lorde's and hooks' queer sisterhoods provide spaces for queer SAA to find home alongside other queer-of-color struggles. Spira (2014) similarly traces how queerness yielded solidarities between queer Black-American and Chilean feminists in the 1970s, where the language of solidarity grew out of the language of pleasure, politics, and sisterhood.

As Thara said, queer-of-color space allowed her to unite her queer and SAA identity. Similarly, MH, an organizer with a national SAA advocacy group, said that queer SAA being "more bold and visionary...comes from the demands of Black folks" and referenced the impact of the Black feminist Combahee River Collective's articulation of "...struggl[e] against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression...[with] our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (1983: 272). In practice, this intersectional solidarity and anti-racist activism took many forms in summer 2020. Sasha, with the Queer South Asian National Network, wrote and trained on a 2015 curriculum responding to the police murders of Mike Brown and numerous other Black people, specifically targeted towards South Asian Americans across community and age, which was used frequently by trainers and activists in 2020. Sharmin described her engagement with Black Brunch, a direct action collective that disrupted brunches in gentrifying majority-white restaurants located in Black and Brown neighborhoods by reading out the names of Black people murdered by the police. Sharmin's Equality Labs joined forces with the Movement for Black Lives in several direct actions and led several political education spaces that lifted up the links between casteism and anti-Blackness, and highlighted anti-Blackness and Hindutva in the subcontinent. One of Equality Labs' key organizers collaborated in creating the abolitionist 8 to Abolition platform and political education tool. Thara collaborated and trained in a series of online workshops that trained SAA on how to respond to anti-Blackness and offered in-person suggestions for supporting Black-led abolitionist organizing in-person and remotely, and also participated in efforts to unite SAA organizers across issues in support of abolitionist organizing. Har's SASI and SAA base-building groups like CAAAV and DRUM participated in helping organize direct actions and protests across the US, and took key roles of solidarity like marshalling, de-arresting, and creating flanks to intervene with the police. MH's SAALT and other national advocacy groups directed organizing efforts to Congressional bills like the BREATHE Act, measures to defund police, and legislation for caste-protection alongside dismantling the prison industrial complex. All these examples, largely led by queer and marginalized SAA, represent a hybrid solidarity from the margins that challenged SAA respectability politics and the model minority myth, and put SAA bodies on the line against anti-Blackness and white supremacy.

In explaining these and other forms of activism, many of the activists I spoke to lifted up the importance of finding joy through relationship in queer Black and

Brown spaces, referencing Black queer activist and scholar Adrienne Marie Brown's (2019) more recent work on pleasure activism and its linkages to Lorde's (1981) work on the importance of queer erotics. Har linked this presence of queer pleasure, joy, and visions to her work in multiracial Black and Brown spaces in New York City, echoing Gopinath's (2018) explorations of queer visions. When we discussed her organizing in the summer of 2020, as well as her longstanding organizing against the prison industrial complex in queer-of-color spaces, Har said:

Patriarchal organizing treats the work like it is war. Queerness shows how organizing is also a project of conceiving, creating, birthing a new transformative world...queer people always have had to do that. There is more camaraderie and intimacy to organizing brought by queerness, more dreaming and visioning.

In Har's analysis, as well as in Gopinath's, Cohen's, Brown's, and Lorde's, queerness – and the marginalization as well as the intimacies and pleasures formed through queerness – allow for solidarity with Black liberation through the creation of non-normative political homes that dream up a new world. Queer SAA thus engage in solidarity through activating queer radicality (Cohen 2019) and centering pleasure rather than martyrdom at the core of activism (Brown 2019, Lorde 1981). COVID-19, too, enhanced the importance of forming alternate homes and kinship structures to provide structures of mutual aid. The governmental emphasis on creating "pods" during lockdown in many ways normalized the sort of home and alternate kinship-forming that have been widespread in Black, Latinx, and other queer-of-color space in the US, supercharging the queer spaces that SAA and Black activists have sustained for decades. The massive leadership of queer SAA in solidarity organizing with BLM in summer 2020 thus shows that queerness is a critical strand in how SAA form and conceptualize solidarity and activism against anti-Blackness. For queer SAA as for other queer-of-color groups, intimacies become the vehicle for solidarity between South-Asian-American and Black activists through a tapping into shared history, interrogating shared marginality, emphasizing care, healing, family and home, and centering visions of transformative queer liberation.

Charting a path forward: ongoing SAA activism against anti-Blackness and institutional racism

The diverse forms of anti-racist action and activism against anti-Blackness practiced by South Asian Americans in the summer of 2020 reveals multiple important threads, about multiracial solidarity work, politicization and racialization in the South Asian diaspora, and the impact of privilege on activism. Particularly during a time where COVID-19 has heightened the gaps between those with privilege and those without, the various forms of activism that occurred during the Black uprisings of summer 2020 show the widening divisions between those in SAA who hold class, caste, and other privilege and

those who do not. SAA secluded in white-majority suburbs in the US, able to shelter safely at home and continue their work remotely, did in fact express anti-racist action and activism against anti-Blackness in largely unprecedented ways following the police murder of George Floyd.

This activism was strongly impacted by the increase in digital discourse in SAA spaces about anti-Blackness in the SAA community. Much of this discourse also emphasized the large impact of Black liberation struggles on South Asians' ability to migrate to the US. SAA joined panels, posted images, attended workshops on dismantling institutional racism in the US, and engaged in conversation with elders about anti-Blackness over Whatsapp and phone in ways hardly seen following the murders of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown nor prior. Social media and digital spaces provided a fruitful platform for SAA political education. These spaces rejected language around respectability politics and Desi depoliticization, and attempted to challenge SAA anti-Blackness. The preponderance of shareable graphics, tweets, Facebook discussions, and Google Drive-based resource compilations can be in part explained by COVID-19's impact on confining white-collar workers to their computers. Moreover, many of these more privileged SAA lived in (often suburban) spaces where in-person organizing and even relationships in general can be scant, and connections with Black-led organizing were often been slim.

But this activism often stopped with supportive posts or turning out to Black-led protests with protests proclaiming the support of "South Asians for Black Lives." This self-focused rhetoric failed to truly shake the hierarchies of privilege that South Asian Americans – and particularly caste-privileged Hindu Indian-Americans – hold due to the model minority myth and American racial capitalism. For some, the posts provided useful political education, but they often focused internally on SAA knowledge, and failed to provide clear pathways for deeper involvement that challenged structural anti-Blackness and casteism. Thus, while this wave of anti-racist action built both off of constraints due to COVID-19 as well as politicization following prior waves of BLM and abolitionist action, these acts of allyship focused more on the identity of being supportive and woke rather than on ways to fundamentally attack white supremacy.

Conversely, the transformative margin-to-margin solidarity practiced by marginalized SAA illuminates a divergent space of Desi anti-racist action. This activism creates shared struggle building off of shared experiences of marginalization under race, class, faith, and caste, and leveraged the long political and community ties that Muslim, Dalit, Bahujan, working-class, and queer South Asians have held with Black Americans for decades. Most importantly, this transformative solidarity shows the variety of united front formations that SAA are active within. SAA activists – largely with marginalized identities – are present in and leading national coalitional vehicles, grassroots direct action collectives, and mutual aid networks fighting the dual impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and institutional racism on Black, South Asian, and other racialized communities.

These activists, both my interlocutors and others, articulate a solidarity that exhibits Paik's (2014) parallel experiences of marginality, Kelley's (2019) explorations of world-making and visioning better futures, Gopinath's (2014) queer Desi rupture of normativity, and Cohen's (1997) radical queer politics. And this solidarity both recognizes anti-Blackness within SAA communities in the US, the toxicity of the model minority myth, and the linkages between anti-Blackness, caste, and Islamophobia. These activists targeted actors of white supremacy and of Hindutva alike, calling out conservative and liberal Desi politicians and celebrities for their complicity in state violence in the US and India. This hybrid solidarity from the margins shows a strand of political radicalism within South Asian American communities that holds hope for multiracial challenges to the model minority myth, white supremacy, and institutional racism. This activism holds hope for new solidarities practiced through united fronts that unite marginalized communities in the US and attempt to truly challenge structures of violence and oppression, and usher in abolitionist futures. Particularly led by working-class queer-of-color intimacies, anti-normativities, and queer visioning of transformative politics, these South Asian Americans practice solidarity alongside Black comrades to reimagine American futures and birth a new world.

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Why abolition now?

Reflecting on 2020 with scholar-activists Brianna Byrd, Camilla Hawthorne, and Dylan Rodriguez

California Economists Collective¹

Keywords: abolition, police, care, scholar-activism, looting, philanthropy

Introduction

In late 2020, the California Economists Collective (CEC) sat down with Brianna Byrd, Camilla Hawthorne, and Dylan Rodriguez to reflect on the mobilizations for Black life that exploded in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, a movement which the *New York Times* has speculated may be the largest, by protest numbers, in United States history (Buchanan, Bui and Patel, 2020).

CEC asked Byrd, Hawthorne, and Rodriguez to reflect on their scholar-activism as abolitionists. While CEC interviewed each one-on-one, below we have integrated the transcripts thematically, which we believe adds additional insight across the topics. (The interviews were filmed and will also be part of a multi-media project by the same name.)

The conversations are structured as follows: (1) Scholar-Activist Profiles, (2) The Police as a Capitalist Institution, (3) Abolition Now, (4) Pedagogy and Spaces of Abolition, (5) Reparations, 'Looting,' and Philanthropy, and (6) What Is (Next) to be Done?

Scholar-Activist Profiles

California Economists Collective

Can you please introduce yourself in a few sentences?

Brianna Byrd

My name is Brianna Byrd. I'm a Feminist Studies PhD Student, and I study practices of care in the midst of situations of apocalypse. And I basically situate apocalypse to be a series of encounters with racial violence and settler

¹ The California Economists Collective members involved in conducting interviews include Ian Ross Baran, Kenton Card, Grecia Perez, and James Sirigotis. Additional support from Katie Butterfield, Bernadette Austin, Araceli Moreno, Hayley Steele, Tyler Brown, and Marcus Renner.

colonialism. I'm really interested in this particular year of 2020, of course, as there's been a lot of interactions between the state and people of color. And I center Black² women's narratives, in that search for: *How do we take care of ourselves?*

Camilla Hawthorne

My name is Camilla Hawthorne. I'm an Assistant Professor in Sociology and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies at UC Santa Cruz. I moved to Santa Cruz after finishing my PhD in Geography and Science and Technology Studies at UC Berkeley. And my work broadly looks at questions of diasporic Blackness and the racial politics of citizenship in Southern Europe. And so my kind of intellectual and political commitments have taken me to Italy primarily, where I have been doing the majority of my work and political activism since 2012.

Dylan Rodriguez

I'm Dylan Rodriguez. I'm a faculty member in the UC system at the Riverside campus. I've been doing different forms of pedagogy, organizing work, activism intervention, insurgency, and rebellion, which is focused on the abolition of the US prison industrial complex and the carceral regime. I was one of the founding members of the Critical Resistance organizing collective, which started in the Bay Area and is now national and to an extent international. And I work in close partnership and affinity with all kinds of folks all over the place, especially people who are interested in undertaking an abolitionist politics and abolitionist struggle.

The police as a capitalist institution

CEC

Reflecting from across various campuses of the University of California in 2020, a year of global uprisings for Black life, could we begin by asking you to define the police and situate its role as an institution in capitalism?

Byrd

What is the police on and off campus in 2020? I think we understand it to be very much an extension of a white terrorist organization, a.k.a.³ the Ku Klux Klan. But I also think that on campus they represent the affiliation with the

² Editorial note. We capitalize Black throughout, following Harris (see 1993, p. 1710).

³ I.e. 'also known as.'

state. There is this way in which the university, UC in particular, portrays itself as a public institution, as a vanguard, a series of innovative places. But the police lurking around reminds us that all of their 'innovations' are for the state. And the state has always been at our expense as Black and brown folks.

I think what I'm hoping for this year is that more people understand police as protecting private property, not for safety, but at the expense of providing other means of safety. Policing, for me, really looks like the investment in control, rather than liberty and liberation. It's the control of how you walk, how you arrive in places. It's the surveillance of who can be in places. That culture can be passed on to students and passed on to community members. So it also inhibits our ability to trust in our neighbors and really be able to show up for one another kindly.

For example, think about the Resident Assistant⁴ system, where you have to report these fellow undergrads, whom for whatever reason, are drunk. Rather than center care practices of holistic healing, or therapy, they're disciplined before they can understand themselves in this way. That is not benefiting people of color. It's not benefiting folks going towards their true passions. But it's really going to maintain the status quo. So, policing looks like surveillance in and out of the classroom, and it looks like literal police, and it looks like all of the systems of control that we have at UC Santa Cruz: for example, to surveil our fellow students. So it looks like the regents, whom have nothing to do with education, but are overseeing us. Overseeing. *Do I have to spell it out for you?*

There was a *Vice* article about how during the COLA student protests of 2019-2020 the UC had deployed military surveillance, coordinated with the FBI to get technology to do so.⁵ And so we knew the whole time, very literally, that we were being watched.

But I think there were times in which we would feel like pretty down, our technology wouldn't work, and we would kind of convince ourselves that – this ain't that big of a deal. *Right? Like, we're not really up to no trouble?* We're just students. *You know?* Oh, we did the respectable thing. We're sitting down in civil disobedient, non-violent protest. *What is the need for this?* And I think what that surveillance has revealed to me over time – this is my first year in California – was just how synchronized and how conjoined this police state, surveillance state, and the UC are in just dealing with their everyday students.

Hawthorne

The police is an institution that exists to uphold a particular narrative about abstract 'public safety,' a narrative in which the violence we see is merely an

⁴ Editorial Note: Resident Assistants are hired by universities to enforce campus rules, especially for those living on campus.

⁵ I.e. 'Cost of Living Adjustment.' For the *Vice* article, see (Gurley, 2020).

aberration from the central mission of policing, which is supposedly the ‘general good.’ I am inspired by 400 years of Black feminist radical theorizing and action, understanding the police as an institution that – particularly in the US settler colonial context – came into being in its modern form, as a way to uphold property relations that reinforce the structures of racial capitalism and reproduce settler colonialism. So, I understand policing as an institution that exists to maintain racial capitalist hegemony, such that violence is baked into the institution, rather than something we can reform our way out of.

The role of the police on campus is inextricable from the functions that police serve outside of the university context. And when we're thinking about – “*Why are we talking about abolishing UCPD?*” – it is because there are very similar structural problems and critiques with both institutions. For example, in the city of Santa Cruz, we know that the number of calls that police respond to that are actual emergencies, in which people's lives are in danger, is miniscule.

The uprisings of 2020 have been really inspiring because I think it's suggesting that when we shift a focus away from the logics of punishment and retaliation. “Where life is precious, life is precious.”⁶ There are other kinds of possibilities for us to relate to one another. And I think that often when we take policing for granted as an institution, we come to look at our community members as potential sources of danger. And when we start to look at the police as the actual sources of danger, and each other as sites of community building and connection, there're beautiful possibilities that emerge from that.

Again, I also think an important dimension of policing is the work that it does to maintain private property relations and regulate access to space. Particularly in a community like Santa Cruz with such a large unhoused population, so much of the police's effort is about imposing a kind of forced mobility on unhoused people. In light of this, the possibilities of reclaiming space and reclaiming a kind of commons is really powerful. When you know land is a common resource, and the privatization of land is not being maintained by armed agents of the state, once you sort of open up that box, there are a whole lot of really exciting possibilities for social relations.

Rodriguez

What we're seeing in the summer of 2020 moving forward are localized and global rebellions against policing. As such, these are rebellions, insurgencies, demonstrations and for that matter, kind of counter-warfare against the police that recognizes that its foundational structure of existence is premised on,

⁶ A phrase used by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, e.g. see Kushner (2019).

particularly, the evisceration, the policing, the surveillance, and the selective terrorizing of Black people.

Policing as a foundationally anti-Black institution. It is also tied into and closely linked with colonization. A conquest of heteronormative patriarchy, transphobia, and other forms of oppression is foundationally an anti-Black chattel institution. It is a direct outgrowth of the chattel institution in this hemisphere, meaning the Americas.

What I think we are seeing in this particular moment is a global rebellion against that logic of policing. It is not just against police. It is not just against police brutality. It's not merely against police killing or police violence. It is a rebellion that is at the bare minimum seeking to radically disestablish the police, and at its best is thinking about creative and collective new ways to abolish the police altogether in favor of other forms of community that are not premised on anti-Black policing and anti-Black violence.

The other thing I will say about the police as an institution is that it is inseparable from what I would call domestic warfare. This is not some kind of concoction of my imagination. It is exactly how the state, exactly how the police – for that matter: elected officials, district attorney, and popular culture – those voices announced the presence of police as a war making apparatus. The difference is that it is waging war on particular people, particular populations, particular geographies. And so, the problem with that is most folks don't want to recognize it as domestic war. Primarily because they imagine that the way the police are waging the domestic war is in service of them. And so we got to get our heads around how it is that in every structure of war it's also a cultural structure. There's a way that the waging of domestic war tries to convince as many people as possible that the war is being waged on their behalf.

Now, we need to be analytical about that. We need to understand how it is that policing is primarily intended to service racial capitalism. It's intended historically to service white men, propertied white people. It's intended to service those people who are in positions of authority: who have class power, who have state power, and so forth. It is there to kind of reproduce a particular social order, over and against the potential and actual rebellions of those who are oppressed by the same social order. So it's a state of war.

Anytime you have the police, it is an actual state of domestic war. And so what that then calls on us to do is, number one, recognize it as such. We recognize it as domestic war. Once we do that, it should alter everything we do in terms of how we recognize, talk about, and organize against the violence of that structure. You don't reform domestic war. You can maybe defund domestic war if you're really good about getting a redistribution of where that militarized infrastructure and resources are going to go. But really, the only thing you can really do with domestic war is end it. Or in other terms, abolish it, liberate yourself from it, and exterminate it. That to me is what the policing actually is:

foundationally anti-Blackness, foundationally and persistently a structure of domestic war.

Abolition Now

CEC

What is abolition and why abolition now?

Byrd

Abolition has a true history and allyship with insurrection. I really take to the practices of idols like Harriet Tubman whose trip transverse borders in order to provide freedom. For me, abolition is rooted in the true belief that your people will be free and you will move to do that. People are saying: "Enough of doing it alone." We are ready to take on the mantle again of community care that settler colonialism stole from us by slavery, stole from us in the workplace.

Getting police off campus is like cutting off one of the heads of the hydra. If we can just get the police off campus right here, it's not going to get rid of the hydra, but it will definitely give us a means to slow it down until we can get more people to, for example, sue the school for accessibility. Just comfort all, just comfort everyone's net. And if money is the way you're talking, you owe a lot of people money. And we know that so many of the UCs are on stolen land – all of this, all of this – and the police help protect that right.

I'm excited to see through the Cops Off Campus campaign more conversations about policing, and also the histories of why we 'need' police in these environments. And if we can get to the root of that, we can start unpacking well: *Why does a university – who has targeted in advertising to 19 to 23 year olds – need armed guards?*

These sort of policing tactics build fear. Considering that they use the military to surveil us. I just want to point it out that I see a lot of parallels in the way that we're encouraged to be disciplined here through policing.

Hawthorne

What the data suggests is that if there's one predictor of murder at the hands of the police it is contact. It is contact between communities of color and unhoused communities with police that actually result in violence. On a very practical, statistical level, the way to reduce fatalities at the hands of police is to abolish police altogether. Because police are basically sanctioned to carry out violence on behalf of the state. And it's not something that can be regulated.

As for the question: *why abolition now?* In this particular moment, we've witnessed the ways in which, on so many different levels, institutions that are ostensibly about practicing care are actually reproductive of violence,

particularly against marginalized communities of color. And we saw this both with the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. Institutions that are supposed to be carrying out this goal of care and public safety are actually resulting in anti-Black violence and death. And so I think that those contradictions have really come to the fore in a really powerful way, such that, the language of abolition has entered into the mainstream lexicon. It sort of unlocked people's radical imaginations in a way that really did not seem feasible before.

Abolition, as a project, is more than just abolishing police and abolishing prisons. I think in the US context that has become the focus or the starting point of abolition and abolitionist analysis because of the particular role that policing of prisons have played historically in upholding racial capitalism and settler colonialism. But when we read, especially Black feminist abolitionist work, we understand that carceral logics are tentacular in the ways that they reach out into so many other institutions: social services, education, and health care. This abolitionist framework, which starts with a kind of critical reconsideration of policing in prisons, necessarily then implicates all other institutions in our society.

I think one of the things – thinking again about how abolition is this capacious project that's not just limited to policing and prisons – that has been really inspiring are the conversations about mutual aid and community care that have not necessarily been a part of these discussions. I think about Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and other abolitionists, who talk about the fact that abolition is not just a negative project, but it's a positive project. *What are we actually building?* And it's these new systems of support and care that are really inspiring. I see them talking about strategy and movements. The way that these practices of care are playing out in the way that meetings are being organized, in the way that coalitions are being built, and the way that people are looking out for each other, the practice of bringing and distributing food at different events.

I've been really inspired by the conversations about the defunding of police. I think that they've been really important, rhetorically and politically, for making abolitionist ideas accessible. But I also think that it's important to understand that abolition is not just a matter of budgetary redistribution. That's an important starting point. And there's a whole host of other questions about how abolitionist politics relate to the state. I tend to have more anarchist leanings. An abolitionist vision is also one that is necessarily at odds with the state. Ultimately, it's about creating local networks that are democratic and consent based, but don't rely on downward redistribution of resources from the state.

Rodriguez

Abolition is a collective creative pedagogical tendency. I don't think it needs to be a mass movement. I certainly don't think abolition should or ought to be a vanguard. I think abolition is also a form, a method of waging Black liberation

guerrilla warfare. And thinking guerrilla warfare in all its rich totality from the pedagogical to the paramilitary, to the infrastructural, to the community building. Everything from flight to burning the fucking plantation down. These are all expressions and practices of guerilla war, abolitionist guerilla war within that tradition. So, I don't think it is useful to try to house or stuff this collective creative tendency, this collective pedagogical tendency of abolition, into some kind of pre-formulated social movement, mass movement, or vanguard box.

I want to affirm the fact that we are in a dangerous political moment. In part, because the term, concept, and rhetoric of abolition has in fact gotten so much momentum and traction now. What you see are fuckers that not that long ago were absolutely anti-abolitionist – were absolutely religious about their reformism, people who would laugh at you, pathologize you, denigrate you, even criminalize you, for pushing an abolitionist analysis and practice – are now jumping onto this conceptual rhetorical bandwagon and calling themselves abolitionists. That's a dangerous moment.

At the same time, it's also a beautiful moment because what that now means is that all these radical people, from the youth to the elderly, from across different communities, are following the example of Black-led, and Black radical abolitionist struggle that is unfolding before our very eyes. In our very presence folks are finding themselves invited into that political identity in a real way.

At the same time, we have the danger of folks expropriating and appropriating that term and deforming it and turning it into bullshit. You also have profound possibility: with crowds and crowds of all people who you would never expect who are curious. They are what you might call 'abolition curious.' There are other folks who are actually 'abolition proximate.' What they're struggling for, what they're thirsting for, is more community, more abolitionist community, more information, more analysis, more shared conversation.

There's a tension between the appropriating, liberalizing, hijackings of abolitionists' work. And then this kind of building critical mass of people that is deeply curious, and deeply, I think, committed to the notion that existing forms of reform – policy change, incremental institutional change – are not only insufficient, but they're actually part of the problem. Those things are actually part of what kills people.

The existence of jails, prisons, detention centers, youth facilities, facilities for people who are disabled, mentally ill, etc. That prison, carceral, jail, detention regime is the direct product of a spate of reforms that went the spectrum from the liberal left of conservative right. It was a bunch of reforms that were carried out through rigorous compromise, dialogue, and debate across that spectrum. Those things are the direct outcome of reform. So the thing that we're in now, the form of domestic war we're in now, is actually produced by reform.

This is what we need to understand when we're actually offering our support. I would say there's a phrase that a lot of abolitionists use – folks that are my teachers from Ruthie Gilmore and forward, Rachel Herzing over at Critical

Resistance and now Center for Political Education. They use the phrase ‘non-reformist reforms,’ which I find very useful.⁷ Recently I’ve also been kind of linking that to the idea of ‘abolition-friendly reforms,’ or ‘abolition-adjacent reforms.’ But again, that’s not an automatic. There’s nothing guaranteed about that. We have to have an abolitionist analysis.

The thing that remains persistent is that we have to wage a counter-war against reformism because reformism is actually the counterinsurgency. The leading edge of the counterinsurgency are all these people who want to either hijack the notion of abolition, and sneak into reformism, or be just explicitly reformers and want to tell you that the only possible change are changes to an existing system. That’s the counterinsurgency. And we’re in a moment of profound creative collective genius of actual insurgency that can transform all that shit.

Pedagogy and spaces of abolition

CEC

Reflecting on being a student or faculty member, in the classroom, on campus, and a scholar-activist, what role do universities play in this historical moment?

Byrd

I’ve been in a couple different pedagogy courses that have approached teaching as ethical instructors: taking the time to know your students, know the classroom, treat it as an engaging space, but also really following bell hook’s *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and situating the classroom as a place of dynamic encounter with everyone. I was expecting the classroom to be a battlefield: like super racist all the time, coming up against everyone’s beliefs all the time, and still trying to educate, but not take offense and understand it’s not personal. However, teaching can contribute to a really awesome experience for the students, and centering Black and brown voices can be transformative, and create not a safe space, but a secure enough space for folks to still stay engaged. So I’m really excited to be engaging in pedagogies that are anti-racist and center Black feminist practices of care, because it seemed like it worked and was fun.

I think one of the ways that I’m trying to think with my professors and faculty and the Feminist Studies community is: *How can we allow folks to show up differently?* Considering everything being digital online during Covid-19

⁷ On non-reformist reforms see Berger, Kaba, and Stein (2017), and poster by Critical Resistance, “Reformist reforms vs. abolitionist steps to end imprisonment,” http://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CR_abolitioniststeps_antiexpansion_2021_eng.pdf, Last accessed on 5/26/21.

lockdowns, and now that we're back in our home spaces, not knowing what people's home spaces look like. People not really caring structurally about how to make accommodations. I think that's also it: we have international students who are still having to show up for our three-hour seminars close to midnight.

I think the UC demands that you show up in a way that sacrifices your health. We've had many scholars go through that here. We had the "Academia Kills" banner here because of that. I remember one of the dining hall actions we had headstones of folks who have passed during their time as a scholar, or as affiliated, with diseases and complications during their time at UCSC. Stress kills. So I definitely think, in particular, we have to create ways of care.

Settler colonialists don't want you to be healthy. *Why would that be their goal?* They're not going to pay you for your healing.

Hawthorne

It's certainly complex being a faculty in this context. When I teach social theory classes, especially to undergrads, we read Antonio Gramsci, bell hooks, Marx, and Du Bois together, and we have a lot of conversations about social reproduction, ideological reproduction, ideological state apparatuses, the university as a site for the ideological reproduction of capitalism, what it means to actually use the classroom as a transgressive pedagogical space and whether or not that's possible. And so something that my students and I think about all the time: *Can we act within the confines of this institution?*

As much as you want to idealize the university, in many ways, it's a way of either warehousing surplus labor, a way of producing a particular kind of disciplined labor, or ideologically reproducing capitalism. Within that framework: *Can pedagogy still be transgressive? Can we actually do something radical in these classroom spaces?*

This quarter I've decided to teach my undergraduate senior seminar as a class on Black geographies and abolition. Teaching theoretical texts, activist texts. Connecting students to organizing that's happening on campus, as well as what's happening across the UC, with the understanding that political education is important. It's crucial to activism. If I can offer an opening then that's the best thing that I can do.

I think that there's a fundamental contradiction in the university, at least as we have idealized it as a space for promoting critical thinking and radical reimaginings of the world as it is and as it could be. And then there are violent crackdowns against students who are actually acting on, or putting into practice, that knowledge. There's a whole host of contradictions in terms of the university as a space of inquiry, the regulation of protest, that is actually politicizing that

pedagogical process, as well as the contradictions at the heart of the liberal discourse of free speech.

I've been using the language of radical imagination a lot. And that's because I've been in a lot of community meetings where it's become clear that the kind of 'there is no alternative' to neoliberal dogma has had this really stultifying effect on our ability to imagine a different kind of world. Or to only think about solutions within the framework of what already is. And this summer, I found so much inspiration in reading speculative fiction, especially Afro-futurist speculative fiction, both because by rendering the world slightly unfamiliar it denaturalizes the stuff in our existing world. But it also gives us a way to start doing a kind of creative imaginative act of world building that can then be a template for reimagining society. So I just think that reading fiction is actually really good political practice.

Rodriguez

What I think the moment of COVID-19 does is it brings disability justice to the center. I think a lot of us – including me, who historically had been by default ablest in all of our methods and strategies – are now compelled to place disability justice in a radical way. Not just an inclusive way, but in a radical way: meaning a liberation of the position of disability from all of those oppressive restrictions that are normalized in everyday life. That is now at the center of all forms of organizing under the conditions of the pandemic. It's going to change the way I organize for the rest of my life. We have to have disability access to all those things. So whether it's closed captions, whether it's ASL interpreters (American Sign Language), whether it's an analysis that is placed at the center of that teaching or that event.

So I think that's what this period has done. It raised the fact that even those forms of vulnerability – being immunocompromised vulnerability – are deeply racialized. They're deeply colonial. Black folks, native folks, trans folks, etc., are, as always, the most vulnerable to severe suffering and death. Over being immunocompromised, we see it now, in indisputable ways empirically. It's a disability constituted by all of these other forms of violence and power all the time.

CEC

How do dynamics of hierarchy and leadership play out?

Rodriguez

The best elders will step back. They'll say: "There needs to be some other voices at the table right now because y'all heard my wisdom. As an elder I've got my capacities and skill set. I've also got my limitations." And the most ethical elders

that I've ever worked with, and who I try to emulate, are very reflexive. They're very analytical. They are very self-aware. And they look at the room and they say, "We don't want to become hegemonic here. We want to take leadership and responsibility, but we don't want to become hegemonic." That's the difference. And so it's a tense play between these things: between who steps forward and who steps back, between the need for leadership and the need to take responsibility for leadership, and then the need to cede the position to other kinds of voices.

I do think that there's an obligation and responsibility for folks who have the analysis and experience to intervene on things that might be slipping back into reformism. To be honest, I find myself doing that a lot with folks that are well meaning, and that identify themselves as on the road toward being abolitionists, but who don't identify as such. The only formula folks are raised with is a reformist formula. They're raised with the notion that the way you deal with the police is to form yet another fucking Community Review Board. The way you deal with the anti-blackness of the UCR Police Department over the last 60 years is to form another task force on campus safety that presumes the existence of the police. And then folks buy into it: "Well I feel like we need to be at that table." *What if being at a table lends credibility and reinforces and then reproduces the very thing that two seconds ago we were saying needed to be abolished?*

That is the interplay that we need to have. Because then those of us that are there, when we see that happen, we have to interrupt that. We're obligated to do that. At the risk of being criticized for being hierarchical or overbearing. At a certain point, I think it's necessary just to cause a little bit of productive disruption when things are falling back into a certain kind of reformist paradigm. So it's a tension that we navigate all the time.

Reparations, 'Looting', and Philanthropy

CEC

How might we think differently about reparations?

Byrd

I think when we talk about dollars, and reparations: *where can that come from?* I want the police budget. I want their money. Give me that \$10 million increase please. I think that's beautiful. Why not take the money that you use to harass these communities, that you use to enslave these communities, to fund them. And so they can do whatever they want with it.

Abolition means reparations for me too. And I think it really comes down to the ability to liberate ourselves the land simultaneously. It's not just about getting

the police off campus. We want police off campus, so that we can get rid of the fact that they're feeding the jails. And then get rid of the prisons. All of it. The whole nine yards

Hawthorne

I had a conversation with one of my students recently about how we think about how an abolitionist framework forces us to think about reparations differently. I think that's another example: *how do we envision reparations not as a downward redistribution of resources from the state, but actually as our obligations to one another?*

CEC

How might we think differently about 'looting' and philanthropy?

Rodriguez

My objection to the term looting is towards its mainstream usage. And if people insist on saying – to the extent that it has that kind of cachet and gravity to it – I'll use looting against you. Again, this is another tool, like a martial arts kind of kind of maneuver, a gorilla kind of maneuver. So if you're gonna say looting and let's really talk about why it's so different than notions of crime and murder and killing.

Looting is a fucking cop, plantation owner, cracker phrase. We don't say that word. If we do, we do it with a sense of irony. Looting means violation of the sanctity and religion of property. There is a kind of rudimentary ethics behind that. Looting is not a term that I would use in public in any way other than then ironically or sarcastically. Looting – in the way that it's mainstream meaning – is something that I would apply toward things like what the university does to contingent faculty. That's looting. *Right?* I would say that's what wealthy people do to social capital and the tax base. They loot the rest of us by paying \$750 in tax, or nothing, when they're supposedly billionaires.

I just had this conversation with a group of foundations yesterday. They had this big conference, and they asked: "*What can foundations do?*" I said, well what you can do is invest resources in proliferating the right kind of leadership, meaning abolitionists leadership, people who have credibility in different communities as freedom fighters and as abolitionists. Like you can support them with your infrastructure, with the resources, and then get the fuck out the way. No strings attached. Get out of the way. That's what you can do. You are not in leadership.

That's a hard thing for a lot of these folks to hear. Because the whole premise of philanthropy – if you even look at the etymology of the term – is that the folks who are rendering the philanthropy are interested in actually shaping the

outcome. So that's kind of a paradigmatic shift – I don't know if it's a rupture altogether – because they can always take it back. But it's a shift.

Billionaires looting is what happens when people privatized, exploit, expropriate, and destroy the natural environment. That's looting. Looting is what happens when medical doctors in conjunction with the state go and forcibly sterilized people. That's looting.

What Is (Next) to be Done?

CEC

What does on-the-ground abolitionist organizing look like going forward?

Byrd

I think we have to get rid of individualism and come together. It'll be hard. Nobody says it's going to be easy. But I think the time is now. “We've always been,” as June Jordan says, “the ones we've been waiting for.”⁸ You know: “We have nothing else to lose, other than our chains.”⁹

Bringing demands and doing direct action, complemented with care – is how I see it escalating. I've been saying that I'm ready to go to the governor as soon as somebody else is. I've been saying it since day one. I really just believe that we can go for it. We can build up our momentum in any way we want to. Considering the way that things are online now, I think that people have a lot of time in their house to sit and think, and see what our message is, and writing, writing, writing through.

Hawthorne

When it comes to questions of practical on-the-ground organizing: I often struggle between, on the one hand, a radical investment in disruption, and then, that stubborn liberal voice in my head that's like, “let's sit down and talk to people we disagree with, bring the facts and engage in storytelling.” And I often wonder – *Do I need to kill the liberal in my head?* – to use Althusserian language. Or is there still something to be said for that really difficult work of translation.

We had created a sort of space where, amongst ourselves, abolition was sort of taken for granted as the analytical framework. And we were learning more about

⁸ June Jordan, “Poem for South African Women,” 1978, <http://www.junejordan.net/poem-for-south-african-women.html>, Last accessed on May 18, 2021.

⁹ See Marx and Engels (2005).

it and then figuring out how to actually do that work in practice. And by the end of the six weeks, we thought: “Okay, well now we're all talking to each other. And we all speak the same language. *What do we do with this information that we have?*” And that's where the idea for the Abolition Fair came about.¹⁰ *How do we translate abolition?* How do we make this accessible to a wider community that has been sort of fed a set of narratives about what police reform can and should look like?

I was asked in an interview with a colleague in Italy about whether protest works, or whether disruptive protest is alienating. *You know what I realized?* When it comes to mobilizations, especially Black mobilizations against police violence, there's actually no way that we can protest will not alienate racists and white supremacists. Sitting, kneeling, peacefully marching, holding signs – all of these things are going to be painted as disruptive regardless.

So, planning protest from the starting point of trying to preserve white fragility, or appealing to the preexisting biases of folks who are invested in these institutions of white supremacy, your movement is dead before it even gets off the ground. And I think that if we look historically at colonial struggle, we could start with Fanon. But there's so many other places that we can look to, for example: anti-apartheid mobilizations in South Africa. Disruption is necessary because it denaturalizes situations that have been taken for granted for so long.

We held an Abolition Fair: had a combination of online and offline events. So we had a virtual discussion about the practice of revolutionary study and political education. We've been talking a lot about the relationship between abolition and mutual aid. We had some groups from Santa Cruz, some members from Santa Cruz Community Fridges, do a whole workshop and create a set of resources about how to set up a community fridge in your neighborhood.¹¹

Last night there was a BIPOC liberation bike ride, where folks biked through town to raise awareness about abolition. There's going to be a presentation about cahoots because there's actually a lot of interest in trying to institute some kind of cahoots-type alternative Emergency Response Program. We had a folk herbalist who did a workshop about abolition and the nervous system. So again, thinking about alternatives to calling the police. And strategies of self-care can also mediate individual stress responses that result in escalation of conflict.

CEC

What role does reform play in regards to the police?

¹⁰ See Abolition Fair Recap here <https://abolitious.org/> Last Accessed on 5/29/21.

¹¹ See <https://www.instagram.com/sccommunityfridge/?hl=en> Last accessed on 5/26/21.

Rodriguez

We're in that moment right now where people are recognizing that reform is both ultimately insufficient and in the immediate sense may be a central part of the problem. So let's now distinguish between reform and reformism because that's a central part of what I think we have to analyze.

Reform is a logic that presumes the existence of the very same institutional system or structure that you are trying to adjust. Reform can be militant. You can have people who die, who risk life, limb, community and being over reform. Militancy has nothing to do with it. It has to do with the logic of what it is you're struggling for. So what reform is trying to do is to institute some form of change to an existing system. But it presumes the existence of the system. That's reform. Reformism is the thing we got to fight.

Reformism is a dogma. At best, it's ideological. But it's closer to dogma. It's the notion that those very same institutions and systems *must* continue to exist. It's to address those institutions and systems: policing, racial capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc., we could go on all the way on down the list. Reformism says that those things *will* and really *must* continue to exist because my world will fall apart if they don't. So to the extent that those oppressive systems, those asymmetrically violent systems, continue to exist, then the very limitation of my worldview for change is reform. And that is it. Anything beyond that needs to be smashed. That's the kind of dirty tacit aspect of reformism: it is actually a militarization against abolition, it is a militarization against anti-colonialism, against revolutionary struggle, even against radical struggle. It actually criminalizes those forms, by saying, those are outside the horizon of what is pragmatically possible and justifiable.

Reformism is the thing we need to fight. Now, we can do that at the same time that we are developing a serious perpetual and rigorous abolitionist analysis of specific reform struggles. If I take my own analysis seriously, which is to say that the United States is a condition of asymmetrical domestic war. That's what the police do. It is what they represent. It's what policing is as a broader cultural structure and social form. It extends beyond the police. That is a state of domestic war. If I take my own analysis seriously, then what reform can be, if I support it, is a method of casualty management.

You can actually have genocidal and asymmetrical war making structures in place that are extracting, massive targeted, geographically concentrated, casualties by particular people in high places – Incarcerated people, homeless, homeless Black folks, trans people, etc. – concentrated targets of evisceration and violation. What a reform might help you do is to minimize those casualties. Now the challenge we have, as abolitionists, if we're going to bring an analysis that is serious to the table, is we need to address whether a particular form, to the extent it does the work of casualty management, might by design, or even unintentionally, contribute to an expansion of those very same structures of state violence. The existence of the police as we know it now is the direct product of reform.

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The California Economists Collective (CEC) launched as an interdisciplinary network of scholars and advocates working across the University of California, with partners at Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, and Santa Cruz campuses. CEC aims to advance struggles for justice via institutional changes to the economy with scholar-activist research, public education, and film projects.

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Figuring out protest in the movement to opt out of standardized tests: the experiences of students from a predominantly White and affluent U.S. suburb

Maravene Taylor-Heine

Abstract

This study explores how high school students from a predominantly White and affluent U.S. suburb understood their participation in the U.S. movement to opt out of state-mandated, standardized tests. Based on qualitative interviews of 13 former high school students who protested the Colorado Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS) and one school's "CMAS Protest" Facebook page, this study's findings suggest that the student protestors were evoking figured worlds of protest in the context of their organizing. Analysis of how these former student protestors had related, and continued to relate, to figured worlds suggests they were exploring a space of protest, trying on the role of protestor and navigating the extent of their commitment to valued actions, such as defying authority and struggling. These findings have implications for understanding how relatively privileged students imagined protest activity and engaged in forms of protest in ways that may have effected change, but also reinforced a competitive and unequal education system.

Keywords: opting out, standardized tests, student protest, figured worlds, privilege

This study explores how former student protestors understood their participation in the U.S. movement to opt out of state-mandated, standardized tests. In Spring 2015, over 500,000 students in the United States opted out of federally mandated standardized tests (Fair Test, 2016). Generally, reasons to oppose the test include protecting students from test anxiety; resisting corporate interference in public education (with test-making companies, such as Pearson, financially benefiting from the tests); resisting federal interference in public education (through the Common Core standards,¹ which many of the tests were designed to measure); protesting over-testing in schools (as opposed to hands-on, exploratory learning); and defending the rights of teachers (who have been, in some cases, assessed via the tests scores). Some social justice opt-out activists argue that state-mandated tests disproportionately damage low-income communities of color by focusing too much on individual performance (of students and teachers) and not enough on systemwide injustices, such as

¹ A 2010 U.S. education initiative identifying what students K-12 should know for each grade level in English Language Arts and mathematics

inequitable school funding mechanisms (Au, 2010; Dianis, Jackson, & Noguera, 2015). For example, for the national group United Opt Out, the goal is broader than ending tests: They seek “an equitably funded, democratically based, anti-racist, desegregated public school system” (United Opt Out, 2016).

Although the broadest portrayal of what has become known as the “opt-out movement”² may emphasize equity, opponents have argued, on the other hand, that the movement takes away from efforts to collect critical data, data that point to education inequities (Bennett, 2016). In 2015, civil rights groups, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Council of La Raza, released a statement: “When parents ‘opt out’ of tests—even when out of protest for legitimate concerns—they’re not only making a choice for their own child, they’re inadvertently making a choice to undermine efforts to improve schools for every child” (Leadership Conference, 2015). Opponents have also observed that rates of opting out (refusing to test) are highest in wealthier districts where the consequences of opting out are less acute: Wealthier districts are less dependent on federal funding and, therefore, do not feel the consequences of high-stakes accountability reforms that rely on test scores (Morial, 2015). Observations such as these raise questions such as whose interests are shaping the opt-out movement and education policy in general. They also raise questions about how opt-out activists understood, and continue to understand, their participation in the movement.

For such study, a “figured worlds” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) approach is useful. As Urrieta (2007) explains, the analytic power of figured worlds is that they can help illustrate the ways in which “people ‘figure out’ who they are in relation to those around them” (p. 120). In this way, figured worlds analysis can help us understand the role of privilege in a movement, a central concern of this study. This study suggests there is a relationship between White³ privilege, middle-class privilege, and figured worlds of protest that led to a particular kind of activism.

At the height of the movement, in 2015, there were particularly high numbers of opting out in the states of New York,⁴ New Jersey, Washington, and Colorado (Fair Test, 2016). In Colorado,⁵ where this study was centered, only five (of 181) school districts had participation rates of 95 percent, the cut-off for federal funding eligibility (Engdahl, 2015). Also in Colorado, the protests began as early as November 2014, with students protesting, specifically, the Colorado

² The term “movement” is widely used in media reports of opting out. In this paper, I understand the widespread protest of state-mandated, standardized tests as a “movement,” following Jasper’s (1997) definition: “when a collection of groups and individuals perceive themselves (and are perceived by others) as a force in explicit pursuit of social change” (p. 86).

³ Throughout this paper, I capitalize references to racial identities (e.g., “Black,” “White”) to recognize them as indicators of “personhood, culture, and history” (Mack & Palfrey, 2020, para. 3).

⁴ In the United States

⁵ A state in the Western United States

Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS), a test created by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). PARCC, a multi-state effort, funded by the federal government, designed new tests, such as CMAS, to assess whether, and how well, high school seniors had learned the Common Core standards.

In November 2014, during the two-day CMAS testing window, as reported in Wilson (2018), seniors from several high schools across Colorado organized walkouts. The walkouts were most prevalent, with widespread local media coverage, in Washington School District (WSD),⁶ the focus of this study. At Hamilton High School, in WSD, only nine of over 500 seniors took the test. Numbers were similar at two other similar-sized WSD high schools: At Madison High School, two students took the test, and at Jefferson High School, 10 students took the test. In addition to organizing a walkout, students from WSD wrote letters to state legislators; produced a video advocating for changes to testing policy; and wrote, signed, and distributed a letter making a case for the walkout to the general public. This open letter was written by two members of a core organizing group at Hamilton but was circulated to other high schools and contained hundreds of signatures from Colorado high school seniors, alumni, and underclassmen (the majority of the signatures were from WSD seniors). The letter outlined five overarching reasons to protest CMAS: (1) “Excessive standardized testing is harmful to our learning”; (2) “[t]he CMAS standards do not represent the material taught in Colorado high schools”; (3) “[s]tudies have repeatedly shown that standardized testing does not accurately measure teacher or student performance”; (4) “[w]e as students are subjected to these tests at the same time as Colorado is seeing cuts in education funding”; and (5) “[t]he CMAS standards are created by a for-profit corporation, not educators.”

Following the CMAS protest, as reported in Wilson (2018), there were more protests across the state of Colorado. In Spring 2015, Colorado high school students—juniors, this time—protested the PARCC Math and English Language Arts (ELA) exams. At Hamilton, just eight juniors took the PARCC ELA exam; at Madison, just two juniors took it; and at Jefferson, zero juniors took it. In Spring 2016, in Colorado, nearly 25 percent of all ninth graders opted out of the PARCC ELA test, and only 58 percent of all high school students took the PARCC science test. In 2017, due to increasing pressure from education stakeholders, Colorado began its transition away from PARCC, replacing the ninth grade PARCC test with the PSAT (Garcia, 2017).

In 2016 and 2017, in Colorado, opt-out numbers varied widely from district to district, but one identifiable trend is that suburban schools, in aggregate, had the highest opt-out rates (Wilson, 2018).⁷ WSD, a suburban district, fell in line

⁶ While I name the state of Colorado (because the particular policy context is central to the case), all other district, school, and other proper names (students, teachers, etc.) are pseudonyms.

⁷ And yet, in 2016 and 2017, some of the highest rates of non-participation were actually in small, rural districts. These differences reflect different accountability pressures, and inequities, across districts (Wilson, Moses, Taylor-Heine, & Hastings, 2020).

with this trend: There was broad community support—from parents, teachers, and administrators—for the WSD protests (Wilson, Taylor-Heine, Mommandi, & Hastings, 2020). WSD is, moreover, a relatively affluent and mostly White school district, one whose students have a history of generally high performance on state-mandated tests (Wilson, 2018). As a result, some WSD students, parents, and teachers viewed the state tests as unimportant because they believed that students should focus, rather, on tests that directly affected college admission outcomes, such as the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT), SAT, and Advanced Placement exams (Wilson, Taylor-Heine, Mommandi, & Hastings, 2020).

The context of the CMAS student protest was one of race and class privilege:⁸ concentrated in a White, affluent, suburban community, with the support of parents, teachers, and administrators. This study seeks to better understand the emerging identities of privileged students engaged in a protest for education reform.⁹ This goal shaped the study's research question: *How did high school students understand their participation in the protest of a state-mandated, standardized test?*

Figured worlds as analytic tool

This paper makes use of a “figured worlds” (Holland et al., 1998) approach in order to explore the question of how participants understood their participation in a protest. By “figured world,” Holland et al. (1998) mean a “socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which a particular set of characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52). They are “as if realms” (Holland et al., 1998), or “imaginary worlds,” and so a useful analytic tool for showing where, and how, students tried to figure out what it meant to be protestors; how they took on orientations to participate in a protest; and how their organizing was mediated.

Figured worlds are “figured” by people participating in historically, socially, and culturally organized activities. They develop through time as people make

⁸ While this paper focuses on race and class privilege, students can be privileged in other ways, for their sexual orientation, gender identity, and documentation status, to name a few social identifiers. In the words of Swalwell (2013), “privilege represents a context-dependent, mediated process by which fluid dynamics produce complex, sometimes contradictory, identities” (p. 6).

⁹ By “privileged” here, I refer to “net beneficiaries of privilege” (Swalwell, 2013, p. 7), meaning “people who, in general, garner unearned advantage in most situations and who more often than not can claim association with elite groups.” While this word is useful (verbally efficient), it is also problematic: Its passive verbal construction denies agency, eliding recognition that those who benefit from privilege (due to race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or documentation status, to name some social identifiers) are oftentimes complicit in the preservation of their own privilege (Swalwell, 2013). Furthermore, the word “privileged,” positively valenced, can “reinforce feelings of superiority” (Hernández Sheets, 2000, p. 19).

sense of their engagements with one another. Examples of figured worlds are that of a traditional classroom or a school walkout. Accompanying every figured world is its own set of characters, conceptual understandings, valued actions, and artifacts. In the figured world of a traditional classroom, a character would be a teacher who exercises decision-making power at all times, a conceptual understanding would be the belief that grades matter, a valued action would be obeying the teacher, and an artifact would be a gradebook. Central to figured worlds analysis—and a distinguishing feature of it—is a focus on artifacts; artifacts can serve as “pivots” whereby figured worlds are “open[ed] up” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 61) for participants.

Figured worlds analysis also focuses on improvisations, or “the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set response” (Holland et al., 1998, pp. 17-18, their emphasis). With the word “habitus,” Holland et al. (1998) borrow from Bourdieu (1989), his word for the “attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of those inhabiting one’s social world” (MacLeod, 2009, p. 15). This concept has been used to study social movements (Haluza-DeLay, 2008; Horton, 2003; Tejada, 2016). Another Bourdieusian concept, “field,” has been used to analyze the social structure of class privilege in social movements (Husu, 2013). A field is a “structured social space” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 40) where people are positioned in relation to one another and vie for power (e.g., judicial, journalistic, political, and intellectual fields). These two concepts, “habitus” and “field,” are interdependent and help explain the strategies people use to secure different forms of capital, in what Bourdieu calls a “logic of practice” (Bourdieu, 1990).

Figured worlds are like fields. They, too, are structured social spaces made of people who are positioned differently and often competing for power. People interpret their activities by drawing on the simplified interpretive lens of a figured world—proposing characters, beliefs, actions, and artifacts—to make sense of their own behaviors (and those of others) and assign value (Jurow, 2005). Evoking figured worlds, people shape them. In this way, figured worlds can be described as “social constructions of cultural worlds as envisaged by the people involved” (Choudry & Williams, 2017, p. 5). These social constructions are informed by the larger social structure, but also shaped locally by participants in activity. Here, scholars have argued that figured worlds go beyond Bourdieu by “offering more possibilities for envisioning world making and agency” (Choudry & Williams, 2017, p. 5).

From a sociocultural perspective, figured worlds, as sites for improvisation, imagination, and play, develop “zones of proximal development” (ZPDs) (Vygotsky, 1930/1978): what “defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow, but are currently in an embryonic state” (p. 85). In other words, figured worlds create ZPDs for stretching and expanding what is already known, for practicing identities, and creating opportunities for participating in, say, a school protest. From this perspective, participation in social movements can be full of

contradictions and behaviors that are not predictable (Bernstein, 2002). Individuals are often butting up against and moving in and out of more than one figured world, sometimes within one moment of interaction (Holland et al., 1998; Jurow, 2005). Here, figured worlds analysis is an alternative to other concepts commonly found in social movement research, such as “cultural repertoires” (Lindgaard & Zimmermann, 2016), in that figured worlds “highlight the importance of activity and improvisation” (Urrieta, 2007, p. 120) over “more essentialized and traditional perspectives of culture that look for behavior patterns.”

Figured worlds analysis is also an alternative to the concept of “radical imagination,” rooted in social movement research. Haiven and Khasnabish’s (2013) conceptualize “radical imagination” as the “spark of *radical* social movements” (p. 481, my emphasis), or social movements seeking to “overcome the ideological and material structures of power and are able to imagine and fight for a different reality” (p. 482). Figured worlds analysis is a way to examine imagination as it operates in protest contexts that are not radicalized, but, rather, normalized. According to Meyer and Tarrow’s (1998) “social movement society,” the normalization of social movements in industrialized societies, such as those in North America and Europe, is, in fact, a trend.¹⁰

Identity development, or who one is becoming in participation, figures prominently in figured worlds analysis. Urrieta (2007) used a figured worlds approach to identify features of community practice that supported actions, values, and identities that mediated the development of what he calls “activist identities” in four groups of participants, all of whom self-identified as “Chicana/o Activist Educators”: (1) undergraduate students planning to enter the field of education, (2) teachers K-12, (3) education graduate students, and (4) education professors. Figured worlds have also been used to help illustrate how youth built understanding “in and through interpretations of their experiences” (Jurow, 2005, p. 39): which valued actions became more salient; which valued actions became less salient; and how students navigated, tried on, and shifted roles in the context of their organizing. Such analysis can raise awareness about valued actions and role-playing in youth organizing with implications, more broadly, for better understanding the function of privilege in youth organizing.

Researchers have documented the problematic phenomenon of privilege reinforcing privilege in the context of formal schooling (Eckert, 1989; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Howard, 2008; Khan, 2011; Lareau, 2011; Stoudt, 2009). For example, Lareau (2011), in her book titled *Unequal Childhoods*, observes the ways in which teachers and school administrators reinforce, and subscribe to, a “cultural logic of child-rearing” (p. 31) that aligns with the parenting style and values of parents from middle-class families,

¹⁰ And borne out by the social movements of the early 21st century, such as the Tea Party and Occupy movements (Meyer & Pullum, 2015)

translating into greater perceived achievement in the classroom for middle-class children (versus working-class and poor children).

We need to disrupt such forms of social reproduction in the context of privileged youth—for social justice. Understanding the interaction between movement participation, figured worlds, and privilege can facilitate such disruption. In this context, I was on the lookout for ideologies of Whiteness in my analysis.

Ideology of Whiteness

By ideology of Whiteness, I draw on Leonardo and Manning's (2017) conceptualization: "a socio-historical process that works to ensure White racial domination through various social institutions and through the maintenance of a white racial common sense" (p. 16). "Common sense" is challenging to eradicate, as it is omnipresent, operating through individuals and institutions, and accepted without question (Haney-López, 2003). This study is relevant to ideologies of Whiteness because the opt-out movement is one with White activist leaders protesting the very instrument that has been used to highlight inequities in the U.S. education system (Bennett, 2016; Morial, 2015). White opt-out activists run yet another risk: of seeing, and projecting, themselves as superior to those choosing to take the test, many of whom are people of color.¹¹ In this context, CMAS student protestors risked participating in, and perpetuating, a "color-blind" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) ideology—not talking about race or failing to acknowledge its material and ideological effects, and not appreciating the full complexity of the choice to take the test, especially for students with different school realities.

There are opt-out activists explicitly fighting racism—protesting a test, they argue, that is inherently racist, with racist consequences: e.g., the test as a mechanism for charter school take-over, usurping local control and undermining the democratic purposes of public education in, primarily, low-income communities of color (Au, 2010; Dianis et al., 2015). But even social justice activists are in danger of perpetuating ideologies of Whiteness. Ideologies of Whiteness are, by definition, pervasive.

Research design

This study is one of former high school students who participated in varying ways in a protest in order to answer the question "How did high school students understand their participation in the protest of a state-mandated, standardized

¹¹ Testing has been used to identify schools for restructuring or replacement by privately managed charter schools, a sign of insidious neoliberal education reform from the perspective of many opt-out activists. The on-the-ground reality for parents and students from urban communities of color, however, is that charter schools are sometimes the best option for attaining a quality education, making opting out a complex choice (Taylor-Heine & Wilson, 2020).

test?” Criteria for participation in the study included anyone who protested the Colorado Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS) through activities that extended beyond staying home on test days. These activities ranged widely. They included signing the open letter to the community; encouraging classmates to opt out by distributing opt-out materials (e.g., an opt-out letter for parents to sign); and/or speaking publicly on the topic (e.g., at a rally, as part of a forum, to the media). I treated these activities as protest activities, as they were all activities that had the purpose of interfacing with others through a process of justification and/or persuasion.

Background to the study

This study is embedded in a larger project studying the contested rights and values in debates about standards in public education as well as questions about the extent of parents’ and students’ rights to refuse aspects of public education.¹² I worked as a researcher on this team. Our team pursued a variety of lines of inquiry, exploring, for instance, the civic potential of protests for young people (Wilson, 2018); the diverse and contextual reasons parents offered for opting out (Wilson, Taylor-Heine, Mommandi, & Hastings, 2020); and how opt-out leaders and organizing groups (local and national) negotiated tensions of race and power in the movement (Wilson, Contreras, & Hastings, 2021). I conducted my study of CMAS protestors in the context of this broader analysis.

Participants

I used three recruitment strategies for identifying former high school student protestors to interview: (1) scanning local (Washington) media coverage from Fall/Winter 2014-2015 in order to find names of those students who participated in the CMAS protest; (2) following up with participants from focus groups the research team facilitated in Spring 2019; and (3) “snowball sampling” (Weiss, 1994), following leads I got from interviews. I focused on interviewing former high school students from the Washington area because, as described in the introduction, Washington School District (WSD) had one of the highest opt-out rates in the United States. I focused on interviewing those who participated in the Fall 2014 CMAS protest because it was a concentrated moment of opt-out activity and close to 2015, the height of opt-out activism, when over half a million students opted out of state-mandated tests nationwide (Fair Test, 2016). Study participants were interviewed during the period from May 2018 to November 2019, a span ranging three and a half to five years after the CMAS protest.

For the purpose of analysis, I grouped the study participants into one of three levels of participation: “high,” “middle,” and “low”: Participants with a “high”

¹² The project has been funded by the Center for Ethics and Education, the Spencer Foundation, and internal university grants. I have Institutional Review Board approval through the team’s proposal.

level of participation were the leader/co-leader of their school protest (Spencer, Neil, and Oliver) or, if from Hamilton High School, participated in the activities of what two former Hamilton protestors, Tara and Karl, referred to, respectively, as the “core group of planners” and “core organizing team” (Kristina, Benton, Becca, and Sarah). Activities of this core organizing group included participating in discussions about how to protest CMAS, such as whether to organize a school walkout, and then, when the decision was made to organize a walkout, justifying the walkout to the public by participating in Hamilton’s YouTube protest video and/or helping to write the open letter to the community. Participants with a “low” level of participation protested by signing the open letter, participating in a school walkout, and/or protesting the test as a member of a state youth council (SYC) (Lisa, Natalie, Tom, Brian, and Karl). SYC made K-12 standardized testing policy recommendations to the state legislature. Participants with a “middle” level of participation—just one, Tara, from Hamilton—participated in a way that was more active than just participating in a school walkout, signing the open letter, and/or serving as a member of SYC, but not as active as being a protest leader/co-leader or a member of the Hamilton core organizing group. (See Appendix A for a table with details about each interview participant.)

The majority of the study participants were from Hamilton High School: eight out of 13. This high Hamilton representation can be attributed to the participant recruitment strategy of “snowball sampling” (Weiss, 1994) and to the popularity of the Hamilton protest, both in terms of student participation and media coverage. In other words, there was a large pool of former Hamilton protestors from which to choose, and former Hamilton protestors were easier to find (due to the extent of media coverage of the Hamilton protest).

The popularity of the Hamilton protest could have been due, in part, to strong adult—parents, teachers, even the district administrator—support. All the study participants who attended Hamilton described a protest context where there was not only lack of opposition to their protest activity, but also tacit—and, in some cases, active—support for it. Located in Washington, an affluent and mostly White community, the Hamilton High School community’s alignment with opting out fit national trends (as described in the introduction).

Data sources

The primary source analyzed for this study is interviews with 13 young adults who, as high school students, participated in a CMAS protest during Fall 2014. In addition, Oliver, one of the co-leaders of the CMAS protest at Jefferson High School, invited me to the Jefferson “CMAS Protest” Facebook page, which was shared with Jefferson seniors a week before the Jefferson protest. Analysis was also informed by the findings of the larger opt-out research project. Understanding of the national context was critical when it came to thinking about the significance of this study’s findings in response to the research question “How did high school students understand their participation in the

protest of a state-mandated, standardized test?”—situating the talk of the study participants in broader U.S. realities and trends.¹³ For example, my work on the larger study primed me to be on the alert for the role of Whiteness in the movement, as we understood cross-race coalition building to be a challenge for the movement (Wilson, Contreras, & Hastings, 2021).

Analytic approach

I used semi-structured interviews, following an interview protocol designed to draw out how former high school protestors understood their participation in the CMAS protest while also raising new questions, as they came up over the course of the interview, in order to establish a “research relationship” (Weiss, 1994) and follow the lead of participants (e.g., when they raised their own interests and concerns) in the service of in-depth understanding. All participants consented to my audio-recording the interview, and all the audio-recordings were transcribed.

During my first readings of the interview transcripts, I noticed that participants were trying to figure out how to think about themselves and their actions in relation to protesting a test. They seemed to be navigating a space of uncertainty. I decided to make use of a figured worlds approach to see how students were orienting to the context of their protesting (Holland et al., 1998). Figured worlds analysis helped me see, and code for, what kinds of values, actions, characters, and artifacts—including transforming and overlapping ones (Juwon, 2005)—were evoked by the participants in their descriptions of, and reflections on, participation in a protest.

When analyzing the Jefferson Facebook page, which came to me later in the study (after I had conducted the interviews), I looked for evidence—confirming and disconfirming, rethinking my hypotheses, and seeking out negative cases (Becker 1998)—of the figured worlds I had noticed while beginning to analyze the transcripts. I approached the artifacts on the Facebook page as “pivots” (Vygotsky, 1930/1978) that people use to “shift into the frame of a different world” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 50), or a figured world. More generally, the Facebook page facilitated analysis of how youth used social media to inspire, discuss, and coordinate their protest activities.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it relies on interview data about protest activities that occurred three and a half to five years prior. During this period, there was opportunity for not only memory lapses, but also a conflation of reasons, beliefs, and attitudes from the time of the protest organizing and the time of the interview. From interview transcripts, I cannot always distinguish

¹³ Trends whose dates track, by and large, the dates of the larger project: 2016–2019 (as defined by the year we started applying for grants and the year we stopped collecting data)

current reasons, beliefs, and attitudes from earlier ones (i.e., of participants' high school selves). It is also likely that, if asked, the participants themselves would not have always been able to make such distinctions. This study's findings may or may not apply to emerging identities in, exclusively, participation in a protest, then; they may also apply to identities years after a protest, still in formation, in response to a range of experiences and a variety of forms of participation outside the CMAS protest context. Also, the sample size of the primary data source is small: interviews with just 13 former student protestors. This study's findings still can, however, contribute to a general understanding of what kinds of conceptual understandings, valued actions, and tensions are potentially in operation among youth who engage in the work of protesting, in both the moment of participating and the moment of remembering.

Understanding protest: navigating figured worlds

This study suggest that the youth drew on figured worlds of protest in the context of protesting the Colorado Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS). They described a process of exploring unknown territory, improvising in and butting up against the valued actions of figured worlds. Specifically, they wrestled with the question of to what extent they should, and were willing to, defy authority figures and forgo privilege, or struggle, to advance their cause. In the analysis below, I draw on interviews and social media to show how the youth drew on figured worlds of protest to explain their participation in the movement.

Figured worlds: images and artifacts

Every figured world has its images and artifacts (Holland et al., 1998). For insight into what images and artifacts—and, thus, what figured worlds—were invoked during the CMAS protest, we can look to the Jefferson “CMAS Protest” Facebook page: to start, its header image of raised fists. The raised fist has a long life in the history of social movement organizing, particularly as linked to Black consciousness and Black power (Joseph, 2016). In one of its most iconic forms, it is the gesture of Tomie Smith and John Carlos receiving Olympic medals in Mexico City in 1968 to protest racism around the world. It has since come to take on a more generalized meaning of “racial, cultural, and political solidarity” (Joseph, 2016). Around the time of the CMAS protest, it was a symbol used by hip-hop artists revitalizing Black political radicalism and Black millennials protesting racist policing. As portrayed on the Facebook page, against a red background, the fists take on the connotation of socialism and movements against capitalism (protesting the U.S. wealth gap and wealth inequality). In fact, the raised fist was deployed by the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, just a few years before the CMAS protest (Cushing, 2011).

Also on the Facebook page was a song playlist posted by a student in response to the suggestion that “it would be really cool,” the days of the protest, to “play songs that kind of help the cause like protest songs”:

Excerpt 1

I dunno, something like We're Not Gonna Take it by Twisted Sister is the first thing that comes to mind. No More Weapons By Steel Pulse, Them Belly Full by Bob Marley and the Wailers, April 29th 1992 by Sublime, Revolution by Authority Zero, Ball And Chain by Social Distortion, Anything by The Sex Pistols, Anything by Bad Religion, War Pigs by Black Sabbath, Anything by Rise Against would be more suggestions. I would say Another Brick In The Wall Pt. 2 by Pink Floyd, Fuck Da Police by NWA, and Bad Reputation by Joan Jett but it would kinda defeat the purpose.

This list invokes the musical genres of heavy metal, reggae, ska punk, English rock, hip-hop, and punk rock, with punk rock most heavily represented. Punk, at its height in the late 1970s, and most visible in the United Kingdom and the United States, has been defined as “a subculture best characterized as being part youth rebellion, part artistic statement” (Sabin, 1999/2009, p. 2). Strong representation of male artists (just one female artist, Joan Jett) in the playlist suggests that, for this student, a figured world of protest was, moreover, gendered: i.e., men fighting oppressive structures and institutions.¹⁴ Also, the majority of the bands listed in the playlist are no longer together, suggesting that, for this student, there was a nostalgic quality to their ideas about participating in a protest.¹⁵

The first song on the playlist, “We’re Not Gonna Take It” by Twisted Sister, is described by the playlist creator as “the first thing that comes to mind,” perhaps because the music video to the song was posted the day before. In the video, the song is prefaced by a nearly 3-minute narrative: a fantasy of escape from middle-class, White, suburban life, with the lead singer of Twisted Sister, in the form of his boyhood self, exacting revenge, with the help of his mother, on his abusive father who yells at him for not cleaning his room, not standing up straight, and playing the guitar—a barrage of accusations culminating in the thunderous question “What do you want to do with your life?!” And then the song begins. Framed by this question, the song is eerily suggestive of the anxiety potentially induced by a standardized test: anxiety about the test as unjustly predictive of one’s future and controlled by a brute and unforgiving force, such as test-making companies (like the father featured in the video).

¹⁴ Punk subculture is associated with gender-transgressive behaviors and identities, however, so the “man” invoked in this figured world of protest is also, importantly, potentially gender-transgressive.

¹⁵ Throughout this article, I use a plural, gender-neutral pronoun (e.g., “them,” “their”) to refer to a person when I do not know their gender identity.

As revealed by the Jefferson “CMAS Protest” Facebook page, the CMAS protestors were invoking figured worlds through their participation in a protest. Like the Chicano/a activists of Urrieta’s (2007) study of “activist identities,” who took up the Mexican flag and indigenous clothing, the Jefferson CMAS student protestors took up cultural artifacts, too, as part of a process of identity production in the context of their organizing. The cultural artifacts on the Facebook page suggest that the CMAS protestors were orienting to figured worlds of other social movements, such as the Black Power movement of the U.S. civil rights era and the punk subculture movement, positioning themselves as oppressed, fighting for the broad cause of social justice, and resisting oppressive and conventional social structures.

Exploring figured worlds: improvisation and contradictions in practice

Improvisation

As mentioned in the conceptual framework, Holland et al. (1998) discuss the important role figured worlds have to play in leading to improvised actions. Figured worlds, by facilitating improvisation, and play, create ZPDs that stretch participants’ understandings and identities. A finding from this study is that some of the protestors improvised actions within a figured world of protest in the style of “sticking it to the man.” The phrase “sticking it to the man” is typically used to describe resistance to authority—male and usually White—in the face of oppression. It has roots in the 1960s and 70s and has been linked to a host of social movements, including feminism, Black Power, and gay liberation (Nette & McIntyre, 2020). Two of the study participants used the phrase in a way that suggested they tried on the role of sticking it to the man, moving in and out of a style of protesting, in an improvisatory mode.

Lisa, a former Hamilton student, who signed the open letter to the public and refused to take the test (but did not participate in Hamilton’s student-organized walkout), used the phrase “sticking it to the man” to describe the role she played, and how she felt, protesting the test. In the following excerpt, she attempts to recall arriving home on the day of refusing to test:

Excerpt 2

Lisa: I’m sure I walked through the door and was, like, “Guess what I did?”¹⁶

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, nice.

Lisa: Stick it to the—

Interviewer: to the man.

Lisa: That’s what it felt like. It felt pretty cool. I didn’t do it—I didn’t participate as much as some of those guys, but it did feel kind of good to be able to voice

¹⁶ See Appendix B for transcript conventions.

your opinion at school where you're almost always just told—like, like that was kind of the beauty of it, now that I think of it. Because we didn't receive personal grades or anything. The chance was sort of there to not go, you know what I mean?

There are several aspects of this excerpt of talk that suggest that, for Lisa, sticking it to the man was an identity she was trying on. First off, the words “I'm sure” (line 1), an extreme case formulation, indicate she is, rather, not entirely sure. She is trying to remember: trying the memory on, in the moment of the interview. In this sense, her proud return home, after refusing to test, is an act of construction, a performance of sorts. In addition, the memory itself is suggestive of a performance in that, in it, she is quite literally calling out to an audience: “Guess what I did?” (line 1). She is underscoring that her protesting is worth noting and getting noticed.

Furthermore, in Excerpt 2, Lisa suggests that protesting the test was an opportunity to suspend, temporarily, the reality of school. She notes her participation in the protest was limited (“I didn't participate as much as some of those guys,” lines 5-6), but she, nevertheless, values the feeling of it, how it felt “kind of good to be able to voice [her] opinion at school where you're almost always just told—” (lines 6-7), and here she interrupts herself, but the implication is “where you're almost always just told” *what to do*. In this sense, protesting the test was a bounded, fleeting moment when Lisa could pretend to be someone who didn't care about the consequences of a school test. Her refusal to test facilitated a temporary suspension of some of the sober realities of school, where “you're almost always just told” (line 7) what to do; you “receive personal grades” (line 8); and attendance is obligatory (you don't have the “chance ... to not go,” lines 8-9).

Lisa seems to be conjuring a “counter-world” (Holland et al., 1998), one in opposition to a figured world in the style of sticking it to the man: a counter-world of traditional school. Counter-worlds, as described by Holland et al. (1998), “show us what should not be, what threatens us” (p. 251). Improvising the actions of a figured world seems to help Lisa formulate a critique of the counter-world of traditional school: its mechanisms of control and externally imposed obligations. In this sense, a figured world in the style of sticking it to the man gave Lisa an identity, a place of belonging, and some solace (“it did feel kind of good,” line 6) in the context of an emerging understanding about the ways in which school life can be oppressive.

Oliver, who led, with a friend, the CMAS protest at Jefferson High School, also used the phrase “sticking it to the man” to describe his protesting: “But I remember that was a big topic of conversation as graduation approached was, um, was how we as a senior class really toppled the system. It was like—it's like the whole ultimate childhood, you know, stick-it-to-the-man ((laughs)).” With “ultimate childhood” before “stick-it-to-the-man,” he suggested that sticking it to the man was, for him, a childhood dream or fantasy. And with his laughter, he suggested that “toppl[ing] the system” and “stick[ing] it to the man” were

hyperbolic, indexing the dramatic aspirations of his former, 17-year-old protestor-self. Like Lisa, then, Oliver had positive associations with this style of protest, one he, moreover, characterized as a temporary stance and as a bit playful.

The idea that Oliver was trying on a role in the context of his protesting also comes through in his description of his and his co-organizer's initial interaction with the school principal:

Excerpt 3

So, uh, we sat down with the principal, Dr. Jenkins. Uh, I believe that was her name. Um, and we, we definitely did it as you would expect a 17-year-old kid to do it. We walked in, and we were pretty, uh, pretty aggressive and just flat-out said, "The, the student body isn't going to do it. We're not going to do it. Uh, it's ridiculous that you're gonna make us do it." We expressed a lot of pushback.

Later in the interview, I asked Oliver if he knew, during this encounter with his principal, that the other seniors weren't going to take the test. He responded with laughter:

Excerpt 4

Oliver: No ((both laughing)). We just came and in, uh, and we were guns blazing, ready to go, ready to fight—

Interviewer: Ah, that's funny ((laughing)).

Oliver: Which I'm shocked she didn't see right through, but.

While confronting his principal, Oliver admits, he did not know if he would be able to follow through on his threats to organize a test boycott. Furthermore, with "guns blazing, ready to go, ready to fight" (lines 1-2), Oliver casts himself as the hero of an early twentieth-century Western. That we are both laughing supports an interpretation of Oliver's self-portrayal as intentionally full of humor and self-effacing—as if calling himself out for, quite literally, playing a part, one generated by his younger, naive self. And when Oliver says, "Which I'm shocked she didn't see right through, but" (line 4), he explicitly recognizes he was playing a role with his principal. When someone can see "through" you, they can see past the artifice—"through"—to another version of self that is presumably more real, more true (and, also, of course, historically, institutionally, socially, and culturally shaped). In this case, Oliver implies, his principal failed to see "through" him: failed to see, or call, his bluff.

Both Lisa and Oliver described a sense of personal mobility in their ability to move in and out of a figured world, to play with the protest style of sticking it to the man. Such freedom underscores their privilege, as linked to both race and

class (Lisa and Oliver presented as White,¹⁷ and we know they came from a community of class privilege, given the demographics of Washington). It is well documented that schools with “Zero-Tolerance” policies and philosophically aligned policies are more commonly found in inner-city schools serving a majority of students of color (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Under Zero-Tolerance policies, a school administrator facing Oliver’s self-described entrance—“guns blazing, ready to go, ready to fight,” albeit figurative—may not have the options of Oliver’s high school principal. Zero-Tolerance policies require that school officials consistently deliver harsh punishments. In these conditions, Oliver would likely have been suspended or expelled (Gjelten, 2020).

Contradictions in practice

Figured worlds analysis is attuned to the ways in which individuals not only move in and out of figured worlds, but also come into tension with figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998; Jurow, 2005). The young adults described their participation in the CMAS protest as a process in which they both oriented to and bumped up against the valued actions of figured worlds of protest, experiencing contradictions in practice. These contradictions can be seen in the context of, specifically, two valued actions: defying authority and struggling.

Valued action: defying authority. In a figured world of protest, students seemed to ask “To what extent should I defy authority?” For example, Oliver, his initial aggressive approach with his principal notwithstanding (see Excerpt 4), described ultimate alignment with his principal about how to organize a protest: “She wanted us to do it in the right way and process it in the right way.” Here, Oliver suggests he agreed with his principal about the “right way” to organize a protest. He went on to describe what this “right way” looked like: “[W]e brought a lot of paper and pens and envelopes, and we were writing letters to the state government that, that put this test in order. We were doing homework, we were applying to colleges.” As described by Oliver, his organizing, in the end, took a form akin to student council or study hall where students had the option to, also, work on homework and college applications.

Oliver’s principal likely helped plant the seeds for this alignment through her receptive response to Oliver and his friend during that first meeting about the test. As Oliver recalled this meeting, his principal told him and his friend she would prefer if they, and the other Jefferson seniors, took the test, while adding, “Well, we can’t compel you to do it [take the test]. ... [W]e can’t force you not to [organize against the test].” In the end, as Oliver remembered it, his principal

¹⁷ Throughout this article, I operate on the premise that race is not always a matter of self-definition. It is also socially, historically, and interactionally constructed, and so how one is perceived, racially, matters (Omi & Winant, 1994).

in fact facilitated their organizing, giving them a designated space in the school to meet and plan.

When it came to the actual work of organizing, Oliver quickly came to share a definition of “right way” (of organizing) with this principal. This shift in Oliver is what Urrieta (2007) calls a “shift in procedural identity production” (p. 131), shifts in participation reflective of a new worldview. Oliver’s first instinct—to bust into the principal’s office, “guns blazing”—is transformed, conformed to the practices of traditional school: a hybrid study hall/letter-writing campaign, materials provided. Oliver also experienced a process of what Urrieta calls “conceptual ‘re/figuring’” (p. 126), a shift in perspective that implicates oneself in relation to others. Oliver took on a new role with this principal, refiguring his relationship with the most proximate, accessible figure of authority to defy in the context of his protesting.

Further evidence of Oliver’s alignment with school is how he answered students’ questions in the context of Jefferson’s “CMAS Protest” Facebook during the week leading up to the protest. In one instance, a student asked, “Does the school’s officer know about this? In case some people try to disrupt the whole thing,” to which Oliver responded, “Carlton [the name of his co-leader] and I talked to Mrs. Jenkins, and Hamilton students cleared it with the superintendent. School officers know what is happening.” In his response, Oliver suggests he is in-the-know of key adult figures at the school (the school principal and the district superintendent) and seems to be speaking on their behalf. To the extent that Oliver aligned with figures of authority at his school suggests his organizing was “schoolified,” a term Doherty (2007) uses to describe a process of receiving knowledge from adults, as opposed to learning “through direct experience and experimentation” (p. 7).

Tom, who participated in—but, unlike Oliver, did not lead—the protest at Jefferson, also expressed alignment with authority in the context of his protesting. Responding to the question of whether he had to negotiate any points of difference with other protestors, he said, “I don’t think so. ... I mean, everybody, uh, protested on the same day, so at least in, uh, there, there wasn’t any, you know, graffiti, or any kind of, um, improper conduct during the protest.” This reference to graffiti is ironic in the context of the figured worlds invoked on the Jefferson Facebook page, including the Black Power movement of the U.S. civil rights era. By drawing the line of proper conduct at graffiti, one of the key components of hip-hop culture, Tom, who presented as White, disassociated from and in fact seemed to condemn hip-hop “resistance practices” (Lamotte, 2014) calling for social change. One possible interpretation of Tom’s talk, then, is that his definition of improper, here, was based on cultural values of Whiteness. What is improper, according to Tom, privileged some forms of protest over others and was racialized, suggestive of a code of conduct he culturally inherited and assumed as correct.

Of all the study participants, Sarah, one of the Hamilton protest organizers, most explicitly and self-consciously described a process of organizing that involved navigating the question of how far to go in defiance of authority. She

described a process that was, on the one hand, defiant of authority: of, specifically, the district superintendent, by not following his advice to send emails to state legislators and meet with his suggested contacts in lieu of a school walkout. Sarah remembered her response, and the response of the other Hamilton student organizers, this way: “[W]e will try these avenues, but we're concerned that people aren't gonna listen to us if it's just a bunch of 18-year-olds writing letters to congressmen. So, like, how do we make them pay attention to us?”

At the end of the interview, however, when asked what she learned through her organizing at Hamilton, Sarah said,

Excerpt 5

Understanding—like, like, the humility of understanding that you're 18, and you don't actually know that much about the education system. But you're also the one experiencing it, right? So, like, learning how to balance being the person with the direct perspective and then also understanding that the people that you're speaking with are a lot more experienced with—than you. And, like, trying to hear and, like, act on their opinions and, like, their thoughts, um, and, like, really understanding where they're coming from.

In this excerpt, Sarah articulates her understanding of what she learned through her organizing at Hamilton as a lesson of “balance” (line 3): balancing recognition of the limited knowledge of her 18-year-old self with recognition of the validity of her “direct perspective” (lines 3-4) as a high school student with proximity to the experience of taking a standardized test. While describing a process of complex navigation, Sarah lands on the side of deference to authority, with the word “humility” (line 1) at the front of her talk and repetition of the word “understanding” (four times: lines 1, 1, 4, and 6), which she directs at, in the first two instances, her limitations as an 18-year-old and, in the latter two instances, “more experienced” (line 5) others.

Valued action: struggling. Those students who were most supported and protected by the adults in their community—namely, the Hamilton students—wrestled with the dissonance between the valued action of struggling for a cause, as linked to a figured world of protest, and the reality of their protest context.

Of all the high school contexts that were part of this study, the Hamilton context stands out for the extent to which students received adult support. By all the accounts of the eight former Hamilton protestors interviewed, Hamilton parents, teachers, administrators, and even the district superintendent assured students they would suffer no negative consequences for organizing a protest against the test. By the memory of Tara, a former Hamilton protestor, it was in fact a Hamilton teacher who planted the idea for a protest. As Tara recalled the

origin of the protest, a teacher asked Tara and her classmates if they knew about the new state test, students responded in outrage, and then the teacher jokingly brought up the idea of a protest: “And someone joking—oh, our, our teacher was the one who said, ‘Ha ha, it would be really funny if you all, like, opted out altogether.’” Kristina and Sarah remembered meeting with the district superintendent, who tried to get them to consider other options, such as writing to state legislators, before making the more extreme choice to stage a school walkout. But in the end, he assured them, as remembered by Kristina, a walkout would be “not a violation of district policy.”

Other study participants remembered Hamilton teachers actively supporting their organizing. Becca remembered a teacher offering her classroom and even class time for protest organizing. As Sarah recalled, all the Hamilton protestors had a “trusted adult” to whom they could talk. For her, that trusted adult was a teacher who seemed to support her in a context of “facilitation” (Kirshner, 2008), as advisor (but not joint participant): helping her “figur[e] out who to talk to and how to talk to them,” “how to not sound like a whining teenager,” and by “providing perspective on what the other side of it is.” Benton recalled having to make a concerted effort, in fact, to communicate to his classmates that “students are running this, so that it's not just a teacher-led effort, but it's a student-led effort.” When asked if she faced any resistance, Kristina replied, “You know, not a ton. Um. I think, like, now that I think back to that, I’m, like, surprised we didn’t get more resistance honestly.”

Against this backdrop of adult sanction, there is evidence that some of the Hamilton protestors felt unease, that they valued struggle in the context of a protest and understood that their actions did not qualify as such. Kristina drew a contrast between her own protesting “where, like, we knew that, like, no harm would possibly come to us from it” and protesting that is “meaningful” and “sacrificing”: “like, meaningful, right, like, there’s some people who, like, would be, you know, actually, like, sacrificing something by not taking a standardized test.” By raising up the figure of sacrificing protestor, Kristina distinguished her own protest activity from the more “meaningful” act of sacrifice, or struggling for a cause.

In addition, Kristina, at one point in the interview, seemed to overtly critique the adult support she received. In the following excerpt, she describes her response to the media’s praise for the open letter she was largely responsible for writing:

Excerpt 6

I remember, like, there was, um—I think *Washington Daily* had done an article, and they were, like, “a seven-page letter with,” like, “with footnotes.” And I was like, “Well, of course (I’m gonna put in) footnotes. Like, I’m citing stuff.” Like, “That’s what I’m taught in school. You cite stuff. You use footnotes.”

One reading of this quotation is that Kristina felt condescended to by the journalist. More generally, her response is a negative one and seemingly connected to a show of adult and institutionalized (in the form of the media) support. In this sense, Excerpt 6 is further evidence supporting a reading of Kristina as ambivalent in the face of all the adult sanctioning of her protest activity.

Benton, another Hamilton protest organizer, spoke directly to the process of navigating the extent to which he was willing to struggle in the context of his protesting. On the one hand, he evoked a figured world of protest in which suffering was a valued action. Recalling the Hamilton walkout, he described how cold it was—“zero degrees Fahrenheit,” “unbelievably freezing”—and revealed that discomfort was a feature of what he thought a protest should involve: “[I]t also, in a way, helped our cause because it looked like ‘Well, we’re, we’re still doing this. Even when it’s not comfortable for us.’” As Benton saw it, his protesting was rendered all the more valid to others for being “not comfortable.” Benton revealed himself as in tension with this valued action, however, when he recalled a conversation with this father:

Excerpt 7

Benton: And he [*a teacher*] wanted me to be the head of it [*the Hamilton walkout*], which my father asked me not to do, um, because he was afraid that this was going to backfire. Uh, and that it was gonna paint me in a negative light (during) the college application process, which, um, to him, I was—he was very adamant and would not let me be the head—kind of the physical face of, um, I guess, martyr, uh, in a way, but not so much.

Interviewer: Like scapegoat, maybe?

Benton: Scapegoat, in a way. Um, so I opted to help out in the background. So, I worked with my friends, and we kind of decided not to have really a face. So, it was a group of us that worked together instead of one single head of it, and we all did different—we all did different tasks.

Here, Benton seems to align with his father’s view about the importance of college. He also seems to draw a boundary around his protesting, defining the degree to which he is willing to relinquish his privilege. Within a figured world of protest, he seems to be bumping up against his own desired future of getting into college.

The Jefferson “CMAS Protest” Facebook page is also revealing of student protestors butting up against the valued action of giving up privilege, imagined futures. Many of the posts on the Facebook page are related to questions of procedure and official permission: e.g., questions regarding the logistics of turning in the parent letter of approval and the parameters for student behavior during the protest (“This is not going to be a party,” replied Oliver, a Jefferson protest co-leader). The Facebook page shows student protestors wanting assurance that school administrators wouldn’t “punish” them and that other

negative consequences would not ensue, such as a rescinded college acceptance. In an exchange seemingly initiated by Oliver posting guidelines for behavior during the protest including “They [school administrators] CAN BE VERY SERIOUS if we do not act in this manner” (his emphasis), a student responded, “What does VERY SERIOUS mean?” (their emphasis). Carlton, the other Jefferson protest leader, explained:

Excerpt 8

VERY SERIOUS means that it could compromise our futures. If there were to be uncivil behavior, then the school could punish us. Colleges are also aware if you have a disciplinary history, and it could compromise our acceptance status. Maybe not for just one person. (his emphasis)

In this excerpt, we see a CMAS protest leader not only enforcing guidelines for behavior during a protest, but leveraging what he understands to be the values of his classmates: getting into college, a middle-/upper-class rite of passage, which he, like Benton, seems to conflate with a figured world of an imagined, desired future (“our futures,” line 1).

Discussion

This study has implications for understanding how relatively privileged students imagined protest activity and engaged in forms of protest in ways that may have reinforced the status quo. In the cases of Oliver and Tom, we see students applying hegemonic and “schoolified” (Doherty, 2007) understandings of what is “right” and “proper” protest conduct. Oliver was quick to align with the most proximal figure of authority, and embedded in Tom’s ideas about what was “proper” in the context of a protest were “common sense” (Haney-López, 2003) judgements about what constitutes an improper protest—namely, graffiti, a form of social protest associated with political artists attempting to speak on behalf of marginalized communities. And for Benton and at least some of the Jefferson student protestors, a competitive understanding of school (i.e., school as a competitive field for getting into college) was reinforced and legitimized. These student protestors seemed to see the activity of protest as something close to an extracurricular activity, facilitating college application, while drawing on artifacts of protest. These findings are in line with those from other studies that have shown youth participating in school-sanctioned activities, such as sports, and learning to conform (Eckert, 1989). Here, this study builds understanding about how students learn to conform and offers this question for the further study of social movements: “Under what conditions does protest become mainstream?”

One hypothesis in response to this question, as suggested by this study’s findings, is that protest becomes mainstream when authority figures in a system that reinforces privilege accept and tacitly approve of forms of protest. The

Washington School District (WSD) student protestors, for the most part, did not have to defy figures of authority nor did they experience resistance in the context of their protesting. In light of other student protests and their consequences, including dismissal and clashes with the police (Agrawal, 2020; Bee, 2019), this absence of pushback is significant. Key WSD authority figures, such as the superintendent and the Jefferson High School principal, seem to have accepted, and even accommodated, the valued actions of figured worlds of protest. This acceptance may have neutered the oppositional potential of these figured worlds. Such acceptance on the part of authorities corresponds with Meyer and Tarrow's (1998) "social movement society," a thesis that brings attention to the proliferation of "less disruptive" (p. 26) approaches to protest. This theory also notes that such approaches go hand in hand with other changes in civic life, including a police force that is more strategic about minimizing disruption in the face of protest.¹⁸ As framed by the social movement society theory, the authority figures of the Colorado Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS) protest context were, likewise, perhaps engaged in a form of strategy, or damage control. By this framing, the student protestors were not only shaped by their protest context, but also shaping a protest context.

For Meyer and Tarrow (1998), the social movement society has implications for the integrity of contemporary democracies. They ask, "To what extent have these changes done away with the special role of the movement as a challenger to the polity?" (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998, p. 26). A version of this question applied to this study is "To what extent does the normalization of protest do away with the potential for the student protest to challenge a dominant and unequal education system?" Dismantling systems is not what the CMAS student protestors set out to do. And yet, this question is pertinent to the future of social movements and the evolution of U.S. society more generally. What will be the impact, if any, if privileged students continue to engage in protest activity that reconstitutes privilege? For equity and social justice, we need "radical social movements" (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 481), movements that seek to "overcome the ideological and material structures of power" (p. 482) and are "able to imagine and fight for a different reality." U.S. school leaders and administrators need to be self-vigilant they don't send a message—granted, tacitly and unintentionally—that students of White and middle-class privilege need not shoulder the burden of such work.

This study suggests that students from a largely White and affluent suburb drew on figured worlds of protest in ways that had both possibilities and limitations. They imagined protest activity and engaged in forms of protest in ways that may have effected change. They conjured figured worlds and improvised in the context of their organizing, suggesting social organizing a fertile site for identity development, one that affords youth opportunities to expand their concepts of

¹⁸ Meyer and Tarrow (1998) note other changes, too, accompanying less disruptive forms of protest, such as increasing dependence on formal and bureaucratic processes within social movements and a public more accustomed to, and tolerant of, forms of protest.

self and experience shifts in participation and perspective. The CMAS protest also seems to have served as a site for youth organizers to self-reflect and navigate complex questions, such as, in the case of Sarah, to what extent she should learn from more experienced others (versus act based on direct experience) and, in the case of Benton, to what extent he should sacrifice a desired future for a social cause. Furthermore, there is indication that the lack of push-back on the part of teachers and administrators in these school contexts conferred value on the work of activism. But this study also suggests that students from a largely White and affluent suburb may have drawn on figured worlds of protest in ways that limited too, reinforcing privilege. We need to prepare all students for the grueling work of dismantling systems. Sometimes there is good reason for—wisdom and power in—the raised fist.

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Appendix A: Table of Interview Participants

| | <i>Name (in order interviewed)</i> | <i>High School</i> | <i>Year of Graduation</i> | <i>Level of Participation</i> | <i>Form(s) of Protesting the Test</i> |
|---|--|------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Spencer | Riverside | 2015 | high | led Riverside CMAS protest; featured in local media for his opt-out activism; spoke publicly on opting out, as a member of local opt-out panel (May 2015) and at an education reform organization rally (April 2018); participated in dialogue of opt-out activists (facilitated by larger opt-out research team, Fall 2017) |
| 2 | Tara | Hamilton | 2015 | middle | participated in Hamilton CMAS protest; spoke publicly on opting out, at a rally at the state Capitol (March 2015) and as a panel member of community forum organized by larger opt-out research team (Spring 2017) |
| 3 | Brian | Fairfield | 2016 | low | As a member of a state youth council (SYC), collected data and made K-12 standardized testing policy recommendations to state legislature (which included replacing CMAS |

| | | | | | |
|---|----------|----------|------|------|--|
| | | | | | with existing data, such as the ACT); school protesting limited to informing students of option to opt out through a school-wide survey he helped develop (as SYC member). |
| 4 | Neil | Hayward | 2016 | high | led Hayward CMAS protest (handed out flyers, distributed information in school parking lot); as a member of SYC, collected data and made K-12 standardized testing policy recommendations to state legislature (which included replacing CMAS with existing data, such as the ACT) |
| 5 | Karl | Hamilton | 2016 | low | participated in Hamilton CMAS protest; as member of SYC, collected data and made K-12 standardized testing policy recommendations to state legislature (which included replacing CMAS with existing data, such as the ACT) |
| 6 | Kristina | Hamilton | 2015 | high | part of core CMAS protest organizing group at Hamilton, co-wrote open letter |
| 7 | Lisa | Hamilton | 2015 | low | signed open letter |
| 8 | Benton | Hamilton | 2015 | high | part of core CMAS protest organizing group at Hamilton, appears in Hamilton YouTube protest video |
| 9 | Becca | Hamilton | 2015 | high | part of core CMAS protest organizing group at |

| | | | | | |
|----|---------|-----------|------|------|---|
| | | | | | Hamilton, co-wrote open letter |
| 10 | Natalie | Hamilton | 2015 | low | participated in Hamilton CMAS protest |
| 11 | Sarah | Hamilton | 2015 | high | participated in Hamilton CMAS protest, featured in state education association YouTube video (November 2014), wrote letter to the editor (December 2014), member of youth opt-out panel hosted by local university (March 2015) |
| 12 | Oliver | Jefferson | 2015 | high | co-led Jefferson CMAS protest: created Facebook page, wrote letters to state legislators and media, generated student waiver form |
| 13 | Tom | Jefferson | 2015 | low | participated in Jefferson CMAS protest and signed open letter |

Appendix B: Transcript Conventions

[*italicized text*]: author's note (in some cases to protect proper names, to preserve anonymity)

(()): nonverbal communication (e.g., laughter, physical gestures, facial expressions), as relevant to the analysis at hand

(): where talk/recording is hard to hear, so transcript uncertain

—: interruption, new clause/train of thought

“ ”: quoted speech/text

... : omitted talk (in order to feature only content relevant to the analysis at hand)

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The missing social movement: colorism in black America

Robert L. Reece

Abstract

As social movements have been sparked across the United States over recent years to bring attention to and combat various forms of racial inequality, from police violence to mass incarceration to economics, one issue has been conspicuously absent as a target: colorism. Among black Americans colorism is almost ubiquitous, creating vast skin tone disparities. Recent studies reveal that darker skinned black Americans are considerably more likely to experience violence at the hands of law enforcement, receive longer criminal convictions for the same crimes, and suffer an economic penalty of thousands of dollars relative to their lighter skinned counterparts, among a wide variety of other social and economic inequities. In some cases, the gap between the social and economic outcomes of light skinned black Americans and dark-skinned black Americans are as large as the gap between white Americans and black Americans. This leaves an important outstanding question: why, then, have racial social movements in the United States consistently neglected not just to center a discussion of color but to even emphasize it as an important factor shaping the lives of black Americans? This manuscript will answer this question by using theories of durable inequality and path dependence to explore the history of color in the United States to explain how skin color stratification became cemented among black Americans and how it became so taken-for-granted that it has neglected to attract significant social movement attention. I argue that the crux of the issue builds from the United States' historical infatuation with fixed and immovable racial categories as the country sought to institute Jim Crow segregation laws in the wake of Emancipation and Reconstruction. This led black Americans to counter with calls for black collectivism that decentered the importance of color in favor of presenting a unified front to combat segregation. This "black is black" orientation remains dominant among black and white Americans leading both to ignore vast intraracial color disparities in favor of a focus on race that fails to adequately address the needs of the most vulnerable: dark skinned black Americans.

Introduction

Racial justice social movements have exploded across the United States over the past decade in a way that is perhaps more public and widespread than at any other time since the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. In 2020 alone hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protest and tens of millions of dollars in donations poured into racial justice organizations (Morava and Andrew 2021). Black Lives Matter, a slogan turned movement turned

organization turned network of organizations, has become the standard bearer for national racial justice mobilization, surpassing traditional organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League. Black Lives Matter was founded in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his admitted murderer George Zimmerman. The organization spawned a number of concurrent slogans and movements aimed at bringing targeted attention to specific segments of the black American population. For example, Black Trans Lives Matter emerged to raise awareness of violence perpetrated against black trans people, particularly trans women. And throughout 2020 anger over police violence after the murder of George Floyd became anger at a number of other forms of racial injustice, including economic injustice and healthcare injustice. However, conspicuously absent from these discussions, never receiving a march or a prominent hashtag or even a substantive mention on the websites of Black Lives Matter, the NAACP, or the National Urban League is a discussion of color and colorism, which by their very nature are intertwined with the issues at the core of these organizations.

“Color” describes the combination of racialized phenotypical characteristics that serve to stratify people of the same racial group. In particular, characteristics such as skin tone, hair color, hair texture, lip and nose size and shape are racialized in ways that make certain members of a racial group seem to appear either more stereotypically “ethnic”—and for the purposes of this manuscript, more black—or more “white.” “Colorism” describes the process by which people of color—in this case black people—with more stereotypically ethnic features, especially dark skin but also dark hair, nappy hair, dark eyes, wide noses and lips, are disadvantaged relative to their less stereotypically ethnic, whiter looking, counterparts with lighter skin and hair, straight hair, light eyes, thinner lips and noses ((Keith and Herring 1991; Monk 2014; Reece 2020).

Colorism is a powerful force shaping almost every aspect of black American life. Light skinned black Americans earn higher incomes and wages (Goldsmith et al. 2006; Goldsmith et al. 2007; Hersch 2006; Keith and Herring 1991; Kreisman and Rangel 2015; Monk 2014; Reece 2020; Sweet et al. 2007), enjoy better mental and physical health (Diette et al. 2015; Laidley et al. 2019; Louie 2019; Monk 2015; Monk 2021; Stewart et al 2018; Perreira et al. 2018; Uzogara 2019), experience fewer negative encounters with law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Blair et al. 2004; Crutchfield et al 2017; Finkeldey and Demuth 2019; King and Johnson 2016; Monk 2019; Viglione et al. 2011), are punished less and less harshly in schools (Hannon et al. 2013), and are viewed as more attractive and competent (Hannon 2015; Reece 2016). In some cases, the impact of color of black Americans’ life chances has been shown to be stronger than the effect of parents’ socio-economic status (Keith and Herring 1991), and in others the gap between light skinned black Americans and white Americans is smaller than the gap between light skinned black Americans and dark-skinned Americans (Goldsmith et al. 2006; Goldsmith et al. 2007). At least two studies show no difference between the social outcomes of light skinned black Americans and white Americans (Burch 2015; Reece 2019). Moreover, Kreisman and Rangel (2015) find evidence that color stratification among black

Americans may be increasing. And this color stratification has persisted since at least the 1800s (Reece 2018). While this extensive research demonstrates the far-reaching impacts of colorism and the growing number of scholars invested in understanding the phenomenon, scholars have not tied these strands of research together. While scholars and activists have become adept at describing the extent of colorism, where and when it manifests, the question of *how* it operates and how it has continued to shape social outcomes since the 1800s despite consistent changes in how we view race remains. Moreover, with the exception of a few articles (eg Monk 2015; Reece 2019, 2020) the theoretical and historical interaction between color and race is largely unexplored. This gap in the literature leaves anti-racists unable to adequately explain the importance of colorism to contemporary society and limits our ability to develop social policy to combat it. With this manuscript I hope to offer a historical and theoretical guide to how color and race have interacted and how race came to dominate, limiting our capacity to organize against colorism.

Despite the near-ubiquity of colorism in influencing the life chances of black Americans, a social movement that prominently and consistently targets colorism continues to elude us. Early investigations found that despite differences in life chances there was no significant difference in how black Americans of different skin tones perceived their racial identities or their political attitudes, which they dubbed the skin color paradox (Hochschild and Weaver 2007a). However, recent evidence suggests the social, political, and racial attitudes of dark and light skinned Americans are starting to diverge (Hutchings et al 2016). Light skinned black Americans have begun to exhibit more conservative attitudes in contrast to their darker counterparts. For example, light skinned black Americans are less likely to support economic redistribution policies and more likely to endorse stereotypes about black people in general. But these divergent attitudes have not led to social movement mobilization against colorism. This manuscript explores the processes that continue to dampen the potential for a colorism social movement despite material and burgeoning attitudinal differences between light and dark skinned black Americans.

My approach to the question of why black Americans have not mobilized *en masse* around colorism is threefold. First, I will use a durable inequality (Tilly 1998) framework to describe the history of colorism among black Americans in the United States and explain how color stratification has endured since the 1800s despite consistent changes in how the country conceptualizes race. Second, I will deepen my discussion of this history using a path dependence (Pierson 2004) model to explore how race rather than color has become and remained the dominant axis of identification for black Americans and how Americans' particular focus on race has impaired discussions of colorism, let alone anti-colorism social movement mobilization. Finally, I conclude the manuscript with a brief discussion of how to advance a social movement agenda that addresses colorism among black Americans and the difficult questions we are forced to grapple with in pursuing public policy that dampens the impact of the phenomenon.

Durable inequality and the start and persistence of colorism in black America

Colorism among black Americans can be traced to chattel slavery. Reece (2018a) shows that the density of local slave labor directly influenced color stratification after Emancipation. The more slaves there were in a county, the larger the economic differences between light and dark-skinned black Americans. This correlation grows from 19th century eugenic logics. Slave owners and white people exhibited a strong preference for mulatto—mixed black and white—people relative to their supposedly “pure” black counterparts. They believed that mulattos’ white blood made them smarter and more industrious (Frazier 1930; Reuter 1917; Toplin 1979). Indeed, some white people thought mulattos would ally with white people against other black people if given the chance. A legislative report examining a planned slave revolt in South Carolina in 1822 sought to assuage the concerns of Southern white people by reminding them that free mulattos were valuable allies against their slaves:

Free mulattos are a barrier between our own color and that of the black and in cases of insurrection are more likely to enlist themselves under the banners of the whites...Most of them are industrious, sober, hardworking mechanics, who have large families and considerable property; and so far as we are acquainted with their temper and dispositions of their feelings, abhor the idea of association with the blacks in any enterprise...(as cited in Jones 2000, pp. 1508-1509).

White people saw mulattos as not only different from and superior to black people but also useful for shielding them from the anger of the black masses. As a result, they heaped favor onto mulattos.

Even while enslaved, mulattos enjoyed advantages that were denied to blacks. They were often given positions as house servants, where they could avoid the rigors of field work, or as tradesmen, where they could acquire skills and education that would prove useful outside of the plantation context. They were even afforded the flexibility to move throughout and off the plantation without white supervision (Frazier 1930; Toplin 1979).

Plantation privileges also translated into mulattos being about twice as likely to be manumitted as blacks, which led to disproportionate numbers of free mulattos (Bodenhorn 2011). In 1860, only 10 percent of enslaved people were mulatto while about 41 percent of free southern African Americans were mulatto. In the Deep South only 9 percent of enslaved people were mulatto while 76 percent of free African Americans were mulatto (Berlin 1974). Free mulattos also owned more successful businesses--sometimes through leveraging favor and connections from their white parents--which allowed them to accrue appreciably more wealth than free blacks (Schweninger 1989, 1990). By 1860, mulatto wealth was about 50 percent of white wealth, while black wealth was only 20 percent of white wealth (Bodenhorn and Ruebeck 2007).

The stratification that characterized blacks and mulattos during the antebellum years eventually became the stratification that continues to characterize light and dark-skinned black Americans today. After Emancipation many of the roles that differentiated mulattos from blacks were eliminated. The boundaries between free African American vs slave and field slave vs house slave would have to be replaced with new roles. The question would be whether the new roles would disrupt or reinforce the existing color hierarchy.

Ruef's analysis of this period of Emancipation (2014) would refer to this question of roles as "uncertainty." Uncertainty describes the state in an economic transition where the actors involved are unsure about the new roles governing the economic system. In the absence of agreed-upon rules, actors are unable to predict the outcomes of their actions, which underscores the importance of quickly establishing new principles to guide the new economic system. According to Ruef "the norms, routines, and governance structures that constrain economic action...are...in flux" which tends to lead economic actors to "reassemble elements of older traditions and organizational forms in order to confront uncertainty and find a new basis for social order" (2014, p. 4).

Because building new social and economic roles and rules can be costly in terms of time and money, it is often more efficient to import previous models of social interactions into the new system. These imports are not vetted for their ability to exacerbate or diminish stratification so the new system will likely include roles and norms that reinvent the inequality of the past system. In this case, according to Reece (2018a) emulation "recreates old local knowledge and social relations, repurposes old institutions, and imbues new institutions with old norms, a combination of processes that combines to reconstruct past inequalities. These new, emulated forms of interaction appear similar but not identical to the past, but inherit similar power relations. Ultimately this would mean the interactions that governed blacks relative to mulattos may be imported into the post-Emancipation south, thus maintaining the boundaries created during the antebellum years and perpetuating the system of colorism" (p. 10).

The success of the emulation project in the immediate postbellum period is evident in the ongoing color-based social stratification. Mulattos continued to enjoy advantages relative to blacks. Mulattos benefited from greater occupational prestige (Gullickson 2010; Reece 2018a; Saperstein and Gullickson 2013), lower mortality rates (Green and Hamilton 2013), lower child mortality rates (Frazier 1933), and married more affluent partners (Reece 2018b). Moreover, while Reconstruction is often hailed as a time of emerging black political power across the country, of the two black Senators and twenty black members of Congress at the time, all but three were mulatto, signifying that black power during this period rested primarily with mulattos (Hochschild and Weaver 2007).

However, formally classifying African Americans by color—differentiating between blacks and mulattos—fell out of favor. As Reconstruction ended and Jim Crow settled across the nation the two groups were forced into a "collective

black” that both facilitated racial segregation and social movement activity but ultimately preserved color stratification while obscuring the potential for an anti-colorism social movement. While officially mulattos and blacks were characterized by their racial heritage—with mulattos mixed black and white and blacks “pure” black—Census enumerators often failed to ask detailed questions about the racial ancestry of the people they counted. Instead, they leaned on local knowledge and the prevailing belief that racial ancestry was easily discernible through appearance and social status (Gross 1998; Hochschild and Powell 2008; Toplin 1979). This meant that the difference between mulattos and blacks did not necessarily reflect differences in racial ancestry as much as they reflected differences in skin tone. Indeed, Saperstein and Gullickson (2013) show that the same light skinned African Americans were often classified differently in successive censuses. Clearly, the Census’ categorical distinction between black and mulatto was relatively arbitrary, but its existence had real consequences on stratification, and on the way it encouraged light skinned black Americans to preserve their social status.

Following the 1920 count, the Census removed “mulatto” from its list of racial classifications. However, by that time the social closure strategies of light skinned black Americans had already been cemented, including endogamous marriages and exclusive social clubs and neighborhoods (Bodenhorn 2006). Consistent with Tilly’s (1998) concept of emulation, which describes how the rules of previous economic systems can guide seemingly new systems, the deactivation of a black-mulatto distinction, and the emergence of a single black category failed to overturn the principles that guided mulatto advantage over the prior century. White people continue to privilege light skinned black Americans relative to their darker counterparts despite the lack of a formal distinction between them. The following section examines these developments as a part of a path dependent process where race came to supersede color in our classification schemas and social justice goals and how ideas about linked fate among black Americans came to limit the potential for social movements targeting colorism.

Path dependency, linked fate, and the minimizing of color in black America

The decision to prioritize race over color was driven by political priorities that emerged long before the Census removed mulatto heading into the 1930 enumeration. By that point states had already adopted many of the infamous “one drop rules”¹ that sought to define who was black (Brown 2014). During the antebellum years, slavery created a sharp social and political barrier between

¹ The term “one drop rules” refers to the variety of legislation and informal practices that dictated who was black based on their percentage of black ancestry. While legislation from state to state regarded people with anywhere from 1/8 to 1/16 black ancestry as black, informally people were generally considered black if they had any known or visible black ancestry—ie “one drop” of black blood.

black and white people, which left no ambiguity about the racial hierarchy. As I mentioned previously, mulattos were used to provide an additional buffer between black slaves and white people. However, after Emancipation, particularly as black people gained more political power during Reconstruction, white people experienced a racial crisis as they sought to maintain and secure the power they had accrued during slavery (Washington 2011). This led them to begin to emphasize race over the color differences that had become salient over the previous century.

Prior to Emancipation, many courts and legislatures rejected one-drop arguments for race out of fear of turning white people into black people through their rulings and laws. For example, in the 1830s Virginia passed the “Not-A-Negro” law to shield white people with less than ¼ black ancestry from the restrictions placed on black people at the time. Over the following decades courts across the South—e.g. in Virginia in 1853, North Carolina in 1852 and 1857, and Louisiana in 1856—would respond similarly, conceding that people who were perceived as white were often white enough to live as white (Cooper 2017). Indeed, Justice William Harper wrote in 1835 that “race was ‘not to be determined solely by the distinct and visible mixture of negro blood, but by reputation...reception into society, and...having commonly exercised the privileges of a white man’ (as cited in Sharfstein 2013, p. 528). The argument elevated color over race by allowing that even people with black ancestry could be considered white and accepted into white society if they were simply light skinned enough to do so.

Emancipation shifted the country’s collective focus from color to race. The strong mulatto class and multiracial white people posed a problem for white America after emancipation because they had historically straddled the line between black and white. But without slavery to maintain racial order, white people sought to reactivate that boundary with racial segregation. Mulattos troubled the introduction of racial segregation because they introduced racial ambiguity, meaning whether they were subject to racial segregation or not was a largely unsettled question. The answer to that question came from the well-known Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, where the Supreme Court ruled that racial classification fell to individual states (Brown 2014; Washington 2011). This case set in motion the process of formally deemphasizing color in favor of race, even as other social process worked to maintain color stratification in the absence of the formal mechanisms that set it in motion.

Plessy v. Ferguson challenged the Separate Car Act of 1890, in which the Louisiana government legislated that all railways provide separate black and white passenger cars. Golub (2005) offers an account of the case that focuses on color and racial ambiguity. He argues that the legislation threatened to unseat the privileged place of the black Creole community in New Orleans, who thrived on racial ambiguity. Formalizing black-white segregation would strip them of their status. In response, they recruited Homer Plessy, a man who was so light skinned that the court remarked that his “one-eighth African blood was not discernable in him” (163 U.S. as cited in Golub 2005, p. 564), to challenge the

legislation precisely because he was racially ambiguous. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Homer Plessy looked white, and if he had not declared that he was black he would likely have been admitted to the white passenger car with no problem. While the move to challenge the legislation on these grounds was criticized by the New Orleans black community as simply an attempt to maintain the advantages afforded to mulattos, they nonetheless proceeded.

Plessy's lawyer argued that in a country where people of many different racial groups had been procreating for multiple centuries, leading to people who are racially mixed in innumerable ways, it is nearly impossible to accurately determine someone's race at all, let alone a busy train conductor. He went on to claim that attempts to separate people by race inevitably deprived people like Plessy, who looked white despite his partial black ancestry, the rightful privileges owed to him by virtue of his skin color. The judges' response diminished the role of color in determining social worthiness, turning instead to race and the inherent and damning racialization of black ancestry. He said:

It is claimed by the plaintiff in error that in any mixed community, the reputation of belonging to the dominant race, in this instance the white race, is property, in the same sense that a right of action or of inheritance, is property. Conceding this to be so...we are unable to see how this statute deprives him of, or in any way affects his right to, such property. If he be a white man and assigned to a colored coach, he may have his action for damages against the company for being deprived of his so-called property. Upon the other hand, if he be a colored man and be so assigned, he has been deprived of no property, since he is not lawfully entitled to the reputation of being a white man (163. U.S. as cited in Golub 2005, p 572).

The judge summarily dismissed the claim that looking white entitled a person to the privileges of whiteness. This represented a turn from previous court cases that often sought to uphold the differences between blacks and mulattos and make fine grained color differences.

However, the judge did not necessarily dictate any racial biology in the case. Instead, he conceded that racial classification was fundamentally a legal procedure that should be left to state legislatures:

The power to assign a particular coach obviously implies the power to determine to which race the passenger belongs, as well as the power to determine who, under the laws of the particular states, is to be deemed a white, and who a colored person (163. U.S. as cited in Golub 2005, p. 583).

This meant that states had broad discretion to decide what percentage of black racial ancestry would make a person black for the purposes of segregation and were not bound by the inherent ambiguities of racial classification. Over the

following decades, states would take full advantage of this power and craft laws that leaned into a dichotomous view of race, from which the country has yet to return.

Pierson (2004) explores the concept of path dependency which explains how political decisions become cemented and difficult to reverse. He argues that people become invested in institutional norms and develop skills, relationships, identities, and organizations that build on those norms, continuing to cement them. He quotes Levi (1997) when he writes:

...once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice (p. 20).

He goes on to say:

“...each step in a particular direction makes it more difficult to reverse course” (p. 21).

This is exactly what happened as the United States started down the path of emphasizing racial classifications over color distinctions. After the decision in *Plessy*, states were empowered to make their own laws dictating racial classification—the aforementioned “one-drop rules.” Tennessee was the first in 1910, which established that a person was black if they had any black racial ancestry. They were followed by Mississippi in 1917, North Carolina in 1923, Virginia in 1924, Alabama and Georgia in 1927, and Oklahoma in 1931 (Brown 2014). Subsequently, the Census did not include the mulatto category on the 1930 Census or on any subsequent years. The age of color had formally come to a close and American institutions would continue to build around ideas of racial difference instead, relying on rules about clear dichotomous racial categories to guide legislation and social norms, including Jim Crow segregation and anti-miscegenation laws.

The panic white people felt over the racial ambiguity exemplified by mulattos can be summarized in a story recounted by Womack (2017). She writes:

In 1910, a man named Q.T. Simpson who attended the American Association for the Advancement of Science “declared it was only a matter of time” when black people “could be made” to look as white as any Caucasian. He claimed that since scientists discovered chromosomes and how they functioned, they could find a way to control or destroy the “color units” of black men through “baths or injections” and later, their “offspring” (pp. 27-28)

His fear exemplified the shift to a totalizing view of race, where color distinctions no longer held sway. From this perspective blackness was an inherent, permanent position determined by black ancestry regardless of physical appearance and the possibility that people with black ancestry may cheat the destiny of their black blood and appear to the world as white, either through their natural appearance or scientific alterations, drove policy through the early to mid-20th century and continues to shape racial classification today.

Although the emerging one-drop rules were not without their critics. One prominent example came from Mississippi politician Alfred Holt Stone who wrote

The mulatto is not a Negro, and neither written nor social law can make him one. By consent of all parties, including himself, he may be called a Negro. But we can no more make a Negro by such a process than we can alter the life traits and nationality of a Russian peasant by bestowing upon him an English name. The essential fallacy which underline this classification will sooner or later make the latter impossible to maintain (as cited in Hochschild and Weaver 2007b, p.164).

But Holt's views were decreasing in the minority as even the term mulatto fell out of favor, decreasing from prominent use in national media over the late 19th and early 20th centuries to scant use during the middle of the 20th century to eventually no use at all (Hochschild and Weaver 2007b).

However, prioritizing race over color had other impacts as well. Again, Pierson (2014) reiterates that people invest in institutional norms by developing skills, relationships, identities, and organizations that support those norms. In this case, even as colorism strongly persisted in the background, black Americans built their racial identities and organizations in response to legislation and norms that made formal distinctions based on race rather than color. Prominent black American leaders even explicitly downplayed the relevance of color to American racial politics and championed the need for black unity to combat racial segregation. In 1921, after Marcus Garvey criticized the NAACP for its lack of dark-skinned black people in leadership positions, WEB DuBois countered in *Crisis Magazine*

...there is no doubt what Garvey has sought to import to America and capitalize the antagonism between mulattos and blacks in the West Indies. This has been the cause of the West Indian failures to gain headway against the whites. Yet Garvey imports it into a land where it has never had any substantial footing and where today, of all days, it is absolutely repudiated by every thinking Negro; Garvey capitalizes it...and has aroused more bitter enmity inside the race than has ever before existed. The whites are delighted at the prospect of a division of our solidifying phalanx, but their hopes are vain. American Negroes recognize no color line in or out of the race and they will in the end punish the man who attempts to establish it (p. 114).

Not only did DuBois scold Garvey for attempting to bring attention to light skinned uniformity of black American leadership at the time, he argued, in sharp contrast to the evidence that was available to him and us, that colorism never held any “substantial footing” in black America.

DuBois, and other black American leaders that echoed his sentiments, were engaging in what has come to be called “strategic essentialism” (Eide 2010), which describes how social groups seek to flatten their identity differences, in this case differences in racial ancestry and skin color, in the pursuit of political goals. Fortunately, perhaps ironically, DuBois and his contemporaries were helped along by Jim Crow segregation laws and one drop rules that forced Americans with black ancestry into a collective black identity, regardless of their color, with little possibility of escape from that category save for the rare instances of passing, where someone with black ancestry was light skinned enough to identify as white and go unquestioned. Over time, this strategic essentialism would lead to a sense of “linked fate” (Dawson 1994). According to Hochschild and Weaver (2007)

...once partial or complete exit from being black was no longer possible for those with light skin or known white ancestry, imposed loyalty to the group became, over several decades, genuine loyalty...by reinforcing the line between black and white, the one-drop rule and segregation primed black group consciousness and reduced the likelihood of division by color, at least in the public arena (pp. 164).

Linked fate is the idea that tensions—class and in this case color—among black Americans were subsumed under the interests of the race because of the perception that race was the dominant factor shaping, and indeed limiting, the lives of black Americans (Dawson 1994). This means that black Americans, regardless of class and color, believed that their group interests were more important than their individual interests and the supposed niche interests of their various other social identities because it was *race* policy, not class policy, not color policy, that continued to deny them full participation in American life. In response, from the early-mid 1900s through today, they saw race-based social policy as a net gain for the entire race and rallied behind such policies.

This sense of linked fate has been demonstrated by the skin color paradox mentioned earlier, where, using data from the early 1980s and mid-1990s, Hochschild and Weaver (2007a) find no statistically significant differences in the political attitudes, perceptions of linked fate and discrimination, and racial identity between light, medium, and dark-skinned black Americans. This attachment to racial identity and the fate of all black people might serve the race well when combatting racial injustice but it stunts their ability highlight and combat colorism, which has proven to be just as pernicious as racial discrimination.

Now what? Logistical hurdles and ongoing difficulties

While ideas such as linked fate and the skin color paradox certainly serve to diminish black Americans' motivation to organize against colorism, even if they choose to do so there are significant logistical hurdles to clear. Many race-based policies rely on self-identification to decide who is eligible and who is not. While self-identification is certainly flawed, for black Americans it tends to be a relatively reliable measure of who has black ancestry and a person's racialized life experiences (Roth 2016). However, color poses a more complex question as there is no standard scale for who is considered light skinned and who is not. Indeed, when adjudicating discrimination cases where the plaintiff's case relies on color judges tend to be stumped by the same problem; they simply cannot determine who is and who is not light skinned (Data 2019). Even scholars of colorism find that the color scales they use in their research are subject to some inconsistency and black and white people tend to judge color differently (Hannon and DeFina 2020). Even though they both rate light skinned black people as more favorable, exactly *who* is light skinned and who is not varies based on the race of the observer.

Moreover, color is relative and not fixed. Some research suggests that rather than a progressive scale of color, the operative difference may be between light skinned black people and darker black people. Even if we were able to consistently demarcate the boundaries of light skin, perhaps using a tool like a spectrometer, which measures the amount of light that skin reflects and has been used in some colorism research, people's skin tone tends to change over the course of the year. Along the boundaries of whatever demarcations we draw, people at the margins may move back and forth along the line based on the season or whenever they chose to go on vacation. This would mean that their eligibility for whatever benefits are allotted for non-light-skinned people would be inconsistent in a way that is atypical of racial policy. Although the difficulty of reliably identifying skin tone may point us towards continuing to lean on race-based policy, policies designed to focus on race that rely on self-identification are likely to primarily benefit those with lighter skin. These may actually exacerbate skin tone stratification rather than minimizing it by offering lighter skinned black people more avenues for upward mobility (and to be sure, I am not advocating against race-based social policy; instead I am advocating for accompanying color-based social policy to ensure the benefits are equitably distributed).

Perhaps one solution to the problem of deciding who is light skinned and who is not is to simply ask. While this seems imperfect, perhaps simplistic, when faced with more hi-tech tools such as the aforementioned spectrometer, Monk (2015) shows that self-rated color is a strong and accurate predictor of discrimination, even more so than interviewer rated color. This breakthrough finding offers a gateway to broader color-based policy solutions. Not only does it offer a way to determine color, it provides an *easy* way to determine color. Similar to how a wider range of gender identification options have begun to appear on official documentation and how questions about race tend to have two components—

one for Hispanic heritage then another for racial identity—it may be a relatively simple matter to add another question along the lines of “do you consider yourself light skinned or dark skinned?”. This small change offers organizations considerable leverage when considering affirmative action or diversity and inclusion efforts. They would be armed with more data so that they can ensure they are offering opportunities to segments of the population—in this case dark skinned black Americans—that are uniquely disadvantaged. Similarly, including a color self-identification question on federal documentation such as the Census would provide the data necessary to guide federal policy targeting dark skinned black Americans.

A study by Notter and Logan (2021) shows that by 1920 blacks and mulattos were strongly residentially segregated, even more than they were in 1880. While we can speculate that color-based residential segregation may still manifest in American neighborhoods, we lack the data, namely Census data, to empirically investigate fine-grained neighborhood details. Collecting color data through the Census would give us the tools to leverage policy structures that have previously been used for race-based policy to enact color-based policy. For example, if we identify that dark skinned black Americans cluster in certain low-income or otherwise disadvantaged neighborhoods, we can use policies that target the neighborhood level to begin to address color-based disparities. Models for such programs already exist and are generally relatively uncontroversial. Community health centers, after-school enrichment programs, Head Start, job training programs, and neighborhood housing programs that offer local residents a path to homeownership are all ideas for race and income-based policies that can be adapted for color-based policy if the proper data is available.

Neighborhood based policies have the added benefit of not fracturing the movement by highlighting individual color differences. As exemplified by the heated debates between WEB DuBois and Marcus Garvey, colorism can be a polarizing issue in black American communities. How the impacts of colorism may sometimes supersede racism can be an understandably difficult pill to swallow as a light skinned black American, knowing that their racial group continues to rest at the bottom of the American racial hierarchy. Distributing resources individually based on color, particularly considering the variability and subjectivity of skin tone, may create tension and increase antagonism among movement actors and the broader community and risk cleaving movements that have relied heavily on racial collectivity.

However, building the momentum to change data collection standards and institute federal interventions requires a thorough awareness building phase. Colorism denial continues to run rampant and even those who acknowledge the impacts of skin tone on the life experiences of black Americans may be reticent to admit or completely unaware of the magnitude of its impact. Prioritizing race over color in regressive social policy has created ready-made targets for progressive race-based policy but leaves a gap in our understanding of how to target color specifically. For example, Jim Crow segregation provided an easy target for activists. They readily identified the inherent inequality in segregation

and sought to dismantle the systems that upheld it. There are few such targets for color. The most prominent outlet for color-based activism so far has revolved around beauty standards. Public concerns and activism about color and beauty tend to focus on skin lightening products (eg Van Hout and Wazaify 2020) and unjust treatment in the entertainment industry (eg Blay 2021). This is an exceedingly narrow focus for a phenomenon that touches almost every part of American life, including devastating injustices such as incarceration and police brutality. While conversations about beauty may offer a reasonable start to larger understandings of colorism, it is vital not to home in on beauty and attractiveness as the only or primary ways that colorism manifests in black American communities. It remains only a small part of the total impact of colorism and our awareness-raising efforts must keep that in perspective. However, the snail-like pace of awareness efforts seems inadequate when faced with such an urgent social problem, which means accelerating awareness-raising and ultimately interventions must be a top priority. Colorism cannot continue to be a lower order concern for racial justice organizations because true racial inequality cannot be achieved without addressing the stark color stratification in black American communities. This demands an “all hands on deck” approach where discussions of racial justice issues must be paired with discussions of how those issues are also shaped by color. That means when, for example, representatives from Black Lives Matter appear on CNN to discuss police brutality, they must remember to shed light on the fact that darker skinned people are at higher risk for victimization. Pairing the issues provides a ready-made way to introduce colorism into discussions that are already happening and may help quicken the process of raising awareness and building a strong movement.

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The Palestinian BDS Movement as a global antiracist campaign

Bill V. Mullen

Abstract

This paper will argue that the Boycott, Sanctions, Divestment Movement launched by Palestinian civil society in 2005 has become an important organizing tool for interethnic, antiracist, anti-imperialist struggle across the globe. Like the BDS campaign against apartheid South Africa upon which it is modelled, the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment Sanctions movement has produced wide forms of solidarity transcending national boundaries, while leveraging specific antiracist coalitional politics central to the contemporary period. In particular, BDS has provided platforms for the integration of these antiracist struggles: 1) Against Israeli settler-colonialism, and against settler-colonialism as a racist ideology; 2) Against Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism, an important counterhegemonic force against Western racist chauvinisms, especially after 9/11; 3) For Afro-Palestinian and Afro-Arab unity, a current that has exploded in the face of systematic and simultaneous state-sponsored racist violence, especially police violence, against Palestinians under Israeli Occupation, and African-Americans under U.S. racial capitalism; 4) Against both right-wing Zionism deploying Israel as a figurehead for new ethnonationalist regimes, and right-wing Antisemitism meant to use Israeli state aggression to whip up traditional forms of antisemitism; 5) For an indigenous, anti-capitalist critique of Western histories of settler-colonial violence and domination. The paper will track these currents by mapping the contours and directions of the Boycott, Divestment Sanctions Movement from 2004 to the present. It will argue that BDS's insistence on grassroots organization, self-determination struggle, and internationalism are the most important and successful social movement dimensions of the campaign.

Keywords: Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions Movement; Palestine; Israel; Apartheid; Settler-Colonialism; Internationalism; Antiracism; Occupation.

BDS: A history

The Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement was launched by 170 Palestinian civil society organizations in 2005. Its roots in global anti-racism were very specific: discussions about Palestinian adoption of the South African BDS strategy were initiated at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Intolerance at Durban, South Africa. The initiative was in tandem with discussion at the Conference about reviving the 1975 U.N. resolution 3375 that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial

discrimination.” The initial draft for the conference included that charge; it was later changed to substitute Islamophobia for racism after the U.S. and Israel withdrew from the Conference in protest.¹

Yet the conference also produced widespread support for a “second anti-apartheid movement,” and officially raised the comparison of Israel’s regime with South Africa’s. The conference also formally declared Palestinians as subject to settler-colonial rule. It nurtured an incipient internationalist response to Israel’s Occupation. From that event, Palestinian civil society and leaders gathered momentum for implementation of a second BDS campaign launched in 2005.² Like the South Africa campaign, the Palestinian BDS Movement focused on use of international law, non-violence disobedience, and grassroots organizing tethered to an analysis of Israel as a racist, apartheid state. It presented three founding demands:

- 1) Ending the Occupation, return of all stolen Arab lands, and dismantling of the Apartheid Wall.
- 2) Recognizing the rights of all Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel to full equality under the law.
- 3) Protecting the Right of Return of Palestinian refugees to their homeland in accordance with United Nations resolution 194.

The significance of the launch of the Palestinian BDS campaign for global anti-racist activists was significant and immediate. The demand for return of stolen Arab lands invoked national liberation struggles across the Arab world dating to the Western imperial annexations of the World War I period. In Egypt, the BDS movement grew to become one of the prevailing demands of the “Arab Spring” revolution seeking ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, seen as a tool of Western imperial governments, and critical of Mubarak’s tacit support for Israel’s apartheid state. The BDS Movement also resuscitated a critique of Zionism as a racist ideology meant to suppress Palestinians, and by extensions

¹ Lollo, Stephanie. “World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance: Resolution amid Controversy.” *NYLC Journal of Human Rights*. V. 18, Issue 3, Summer 2002, pp. 481-486.
https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1499&context=journal_of_human_rights

² Vally, Nathasha. “South Africa’s Second Anti-Apartheid Movement.” *BDS and the Global Anti-Apartheid Movement*. N. 38, Summer. 2008,
<https://www.badil.org/en/publication/periodicals/al-majdal/item/97-south-africa's-second-anti-apartheid-movement.html>

Arab states (like Egypt) who had lost land in the 1967 war by Israel and Jordan, Syria, and Egypt.³

Within Palestine, BDS brought unity to political aspirations for political self-determination that had been expressed but not realized by the First and Second Intifadas (it is significant that the BDS launch year was the same year as the end of the latter). Unity in this instance meant a shared set of political principles identifying Israel as a racist, apartheid-regime imposing second class-citizenship under the law for Palestinians within '48 and Gaza. BDS's articulation of "full equality under the law" implied that discrimination based on race and ethnicity in virtually all walks of Palestinian life---jobs, education, housing, health care, social provisioning, the environment---was a political norm. The language of "second-class citizenship" also resonated in countries like the U.S., where concomitant language of Jim Crow---"separate but equal"---began to translate Israeli apartheid into terms of anti-racist struggle conducive to organizing in solidarity.

More specifically, and important to this essay, the original Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions made explicit the ethnonationalist basis of Israel's apartheid state. The call stated, "Fifty seven years after the state of Israel was built mainly on land ethnically cleansed of its Palestinian owners, a majority of Palestinians are refugees, most of whom are stateless. Moreover, Israel's entrenched system of racial discrimination against its own Arab-Palestinian citizens remains intact".⁴ Using the term "ethnically cleansed" enabled the BDS movement to invite participation in protest against the state of Israel in the name of resisting the racial genocide of a Palestinian and Arab population. This idea was underscored by an ensuing sentence charging Israel with an "entrenched system of racial discrimination"---or systemic racism. In tandem, the terms made Israel apartheid legible as both an echo of earlier ethnic genocides (the German Holocaust against Jews, the Turkish against Armenians, the U.S., Australia and Canada against indigenous peoples) and as a reproduction of South Africa's white majority apartheid regime. In short, covertly, but implicitly, the BDS call named Israel as a white supremacist state.

This move had the important corollary effect of making Palestinians legible for the first time in Western history as a recognizably racialized subaltern population. It challenged and erased prior framings of the "historic" conflict in the Middle East as Israeli/Arab, Jewish/Muslim, into one of racial hierarchy. It renamed the project of the state of Israel as a settler-colonial one, and implicitly condemned Zionist ideology as----to return to Durban---racist. In this moment, Palestine became a vehicle for a global antiracist strategy, and BDS its conduit. By deploying the South African BDS strategy, the Palestinian campaign also

³ Abou-El-Fadl, Reem. "The Road to Jerusalem Through Tahrir Square: Anti-Zionism and Palestine in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution." *Journal of Palestine Studies*. V. 41, N. 2 (Winter 2012), pp. 6-26.

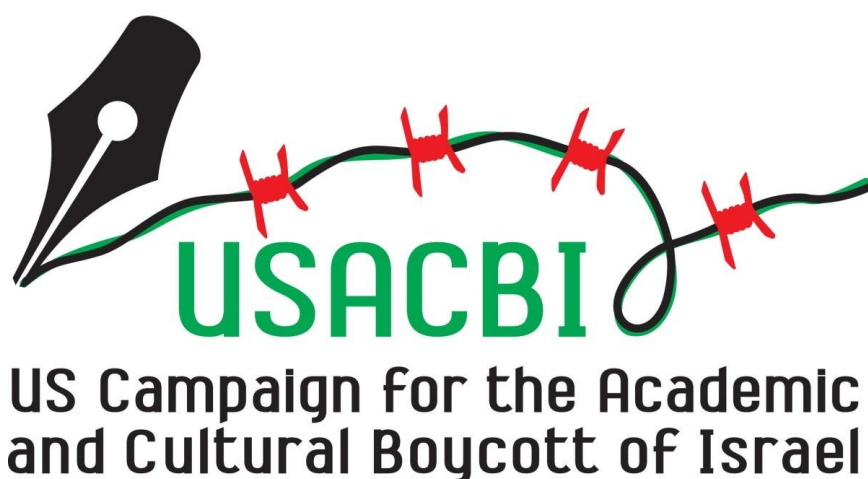
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jps.2012.xli.2.6?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

⁴ "Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS." BDS Movement.net. <https://bdsmovement.net/call>

recuperated an historical memory of what was arguably the single largest global antiracist movement of the contemporary period. A generation that was not familiar with the legacy of Nelson Mandela, the African National Congress, and the 1993 end of “official” South African apartheid would now learn that history through the prism of Palestine.

This global remembering helped trigger a proliferation of solidarity campaigns internationally. Within five years’ time, nationally-based BDS movements for Palestine were launched in Ireland, the U.K., France, and, importantly, South Africa; both the African National Congress and Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared their support for BDS,⁵ the latter after a visit to Israel describing its apartheid system as “humiliating” as the one that dominated Black South Africans. Tutu’s encouragement of the Episcopal Church to divest from Israel⁶ gave special valence to the BDS strategy. The Ireland BDS campaign meanwhile resonated strongly with that country’s anticolonial history. In the U.K., where BDS against South Africa launched in the early 1960s, the campaign has also invoked a spirit of internal anticolonial struggle against the British Empire.

In 2009, scholars and activists in the United States launched a national solidarity movement modelled on the Palestinian BDS call named USACBI (The United States Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel). The USACBI call for boycott centred on the role of Israeli universities in maintaining Israel’s apartheid state.⁷



Courtesy of usacbi.org

⁵ “AMP Calls for An End to Israeli Apartheid and US Aid to Israel.” American Muslims for Palestine. Sept. 30, 2013. <https://www.ampalastine.org/media/media-room/news/amp-calls-end-israeli-apartheid-and-us-aid-israel>

⁶ Tutu, Desmond, Cannon Bonnie Anderson and Patti Browning. “A Letter to General Convention Regarding Justice in the Holy Land.” BDSMovement.net July 3, 2018. <https://bdsmovement.net/news/letter-general-convention-regarding-justice-holy-land>

⁷ “Endorse Our Call to Boycott.” USACBI.org <https://usacbi.org/about>

The formation of USACBI was a tipping point in the United States for antiracist discourse around the historical dispossession of Palestinians. Because it emanated from the imperialist centre of the Western world, and from the country historically Israel's strongest financial and military backer (the U.S. provides 3.8 billion per year to Israel, more than any other country) the call for BDS resonated as a significant challenge to the Middle East geopolitical order racial and otherwise. Indeed, USACBI's call to boycott quickly gained traction among U.S. antiracist activists for whom Israel's racist, Zionist regime became legible as a sequel to South Africa, and as an outpost of the United States' own settler colonial history.

This was the meaning of specific U.S.-based boycott campaigns undertaken by American academic associations with a strong commitment to antiracism. Indeed, the first U.S. academic association to vote to boycott Israeli Universities was the Association of Asian American Studies. In its call to boycott, AAAS underscored the ethnoracial dimensions of the Occupation as a galvanizing force of for antiracist interethnic solidarity. The call noted that "Arab (West Asian) and Muslim American communities, students, and scholars have been subjected to profiling, surveillance, and civil rights violations that have circumscribed their freedom of political expression, particularly in relation to the issue of human rights in Palestine-Israel" and that the "seeks to foster scholarship that engages conditions of migration, displacement, colonialism, and racism, and the lives of people in zones of war and occupation" while opposing "racist practices by the Israeli state."⁸

The Association of Asian American studies vote to boycott was quickly followed by other academic organizations with a stated commitment to antiracist politics. These included the American Studies Association; the Critical Ethnic Studies Association; the National Association of Chicano and Chicana Studies, and the African Literature Association. A statement by the American Studies Association declaring its support for the Boycott was typical in its renunciation of Israel apartheid as part of a global commitment to antiracism:

The ASA is an organization that supports the protected rights of students, scholars, and peoples everywhere to freedoms of expression, thought, and movement. The ASA has long played an important role in critiquing racial, sexual, and gender inequality in the United States. It condemned apartheid in South Africa and urged divestment from U.S. corporations with operations there. It has condemned anti-immigrant discrimination in Arizona and in other states. It has spoken out in support of the Occupy movement, and of the human dignity and rights of the economically disenfranchised.

In addition, the United States is the world's strongest supporter of Israel, providing the majority of Israel's military and foreign aid, and providing political

⁸ Association of Asian American Studies. "Resolution to Support the Boycott of Israeli Universities." https://aaastudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/aaas-4_20_13-conference-resolution-to-support-the-boycott-of-israeli-academic-institutions-revised.pdf

support for settlement expansion. As a U.S.-based organization, the ASA condemns the United States' significant role in aiding and abetting Israel's violations of human rights against Palestinians and its occupation of Palestinian lands through its use of the veto in the UN Security Council.⁹

The wave of academic boycotts was also conjoined to historical events: in 2014, Michael Brown, a young African-American man, was shot to death by police on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. The shooting came in the middle of Israel's seven-week bombing campaign on Gaza, Operation Protective Edge, which resulted in the killing of more than 2,000 Palestinians, 500 of them children. Protesters in both Gaza and the U.S. immediately made connections between racist police violence, U.S. state violence against oppressed minority populations, and the need for interethnic antiracist solidarity. For example, journalists were quick to report that the St. Louis County Police Department, which killed Michael Brown and was deployed to repress protest in Ferguson, had been trained in Israel.¹⁰ From Gaza, Palestinians seeing police violence against African-Americans tweeted messages of solidarity.¹¹ Building from Ferguson, in 2015, more than 1,100 African-Americans, including prominent intellectuals and activists, signed "Black for Palestine," a solidarity statement that was the first and largest of its kind in U.S. history.¹² Afro-Palestinian solidarity perhaps culminated in the formal endorsement of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaign against Israel by the Movement for Black Lives.¹³

The conjuncture of Black-Palestinian solidarity has also resonated in indigenous communities across the globe. Palestine has afforded activists a settler-colonial lens on global capitalism useful to analysis of ongoing neocolonial regimes around the world. In North America for the Red Nation, a radical pan-tribal indigenous movement, solidarity with Palestine and BDS has become a central tenant of organizing:

Settler colonialism presents itself as a shield, as a protector. What they don't tell you is that it shields occupation and protects occupiers. Palestinians have resisted

⁹ American Studies Association. "What Does the Boycott Mean?" <https://www.theasa.net/what-does-boycott-mean>

¹⁰ "The Ferguson/Palestine Connection." *Ebony*. August 19, 2014.

¹¹ Donaghy, Rory. "Palestinians Send Messages of Solidarity to #Ferguson Protesters." *Middle East Eye*. August 18th, 2015. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/palestinians-send-messages-solidarity-ferguson-protestors>

¹² Black for Palestine. <http://www.blackforpalestine.com>

¹³ Green, Emma. "Why Do Black Lives Matter Activists Care About Palestine?" *The Atlantic*. August 18, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/why-did-black-american-activists-start-caring-about-palestine/496088>

Israeli settler colonialism since 1948 and European colonialism since 1917. Israel's violent occupation of historic Palestine is typically framed as a "conflict." This is a distortion of history that erases the actual truth: Israel's very existence depends upon the elimination of Palestinians. This is called settler colonialism. Israel is a violent settler nation that should be condemned for its crimes against humanity.

And like its patron, the United States, white historians in the United States have long framed the history of settler colonialism in this nation as a "conflict" between two equal sides: cowboys and Indians; settlers and savages...Like Palestinians, Native people continue to resist systematic colonialism by the U.S.

We refuse to be uprooted. Refusal is the basis of all forms of anti-colonial resistance, and we, as the original peoples and nations of these lands, extend unwavering solidarity and support to our Palestinian relatives who struggle for liberation from the same violence that threatens to erase *our* histories and *our* futures.¹⁴

Perhaps the most significant contribution of BDS to the contemporary real and discursive battle against racial capitalism is the Palestinian challenge to right-wing normative Islamophobia and ethnonationalism. Western imperial hegemony in the Middle East since at least World War I has been predicated on a racist, Orientalist discourse. U.S. wars against Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan; the so-called "War on Terror" before and after 9/11; Western drone bombing campaigns against Islamic movements in Africa; and demonization of Arab liberation struggles, especially in Palestine, as "terrorist" have combined to make Islamophobia a common currency about far-right ethnonationalist, neo-fascist and white supremacist regimes globally. Indeed Israel's own ethnonationalist state model, consecrated by the so-called "nation state law" of 2019 making Judaism and Hebrew "official" elements of Israeli citizenship¹⁵ have been building blocks for the rise of a global far right: from Orban's Hungary, to the revived National Front in France, to Bolsonaro's Brazil, to Trump's America, rabid support for Israel combined with nativist resentment against Arab and Muslim immigrants and 'others' have become bedrock strategies for whipping up nationalist and authoritarian rule.

This development should be understood as the return of classical Zionism as a right-wing global political force. As numerous scholars have shown, classical Zionism as articulated by movement founders Theodor Herzl prized the development of ethnonationalist states over and against racial (and socialist alternatives). Critics of Zionism in the early twentieth century included Socialist

¹⁴ "The Liberation of Palestine is an Alternative Path for Native Nations." The Red Nation. <https://therednation.org/the-liberation-of-palestine-represents-an-alternative-path-for-native-nations>

¹⁵ Berger, Miriam. "Israel's hugely controversial 'nation-state' Law, explained." Vox. July 31, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/7/31/17623978/israel-jewish-nation-state-law-bill-explained-apartheid-netanyahu-democracy>

Jews and the Bolsheviks, for whom Zionism constituted a threat to international working-class solidarity and a secular Socialist movement.¹⁶ In the current political conjuncture, Zionism plays a similarly reactionary role: support for Israel by far-right states has been used as a cudgel to attack anticapitalist and antiracist movements, including movements like Black Lives Matter. Conversely, support for Palestinian liberation struggle has become a de facto element of all major antiracist movements globally. This dialectic has made Palestine and its defense of national Arab liberation struggle a provocative wedge into the neoliberal alliances across the Middle East between Israel and Arab capitalist states like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. Palestine, in other words, has become a keyword in protesting what Adam Hanieh calls neoliberalism's reactionary upending of a 20th century Arab nationalisms and liberation struggles.¹⁷

Thus, it is not surprising that BDS has led to the most recent political resistance in Palestine, named by some the "Third Intifada." Examined carefully, the coordinates of this uprising bear the fingerprints of BDS's global antiracist strategy come home to roost in the form of a resuscitated global unity movement. Israel's most recent bombing campaign against Gaza was itself a reaction to the success of BDS: since 2005, the Knesset has spent millions of dollars combating BDS; passed laws making BDS support within Israel subject to civil lawsuit; used support for BDS to prevent intellectuals and writers from traveling to or from Israel. These repressive acts are marks of BDS's success as a tactic. Indeed, polls within the U.S. show radically decreasing support for Israel especially among those under 30; even Israel's most recent bombing of Gaza failed to elicit a support from the majority of Americans.¹⁸

As to the resistance itself, unique to its formation is a return of a Pan-Arab solidarity predicated on Palestinian liberation struggle. Israel's most recent bombing campaign was met by Palestinians with a display of unity and solidarity that has literally crossed boundaries and borders. Salwa Ibrahim has characterized this as follows:

What is happening in Jerusalem has consequences for Gaza; the uprising of Palestine '48 is joined with those of the West Bank; most importantly, the refugees at the borders are involved.

¹⁶ See Sumaya Awad and Annie Levin. "Roots of the Nakba: Zionist Settler Colonialism" in Sumaya Awad and Brian Bean, *Palestine: A Socialist Introduction*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020, pp. 11-36.

¹⁷ See Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013.

¹⁸ Abunimah, Ali. "Poll: Israel Failed to Win Support of U.S. Voters During Gaza Massacre." *Electronic Intifada*. May 23, 2021. https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/poll-israel-failed-win-support-us-voters-during-gaza-massacre?fbclid=IwAR19pA7PL3X5Z9fPdZ3NwLhMgdvSBcRXz6M32-Fn-ZGtpcH31XrtCX8I_DQ

As these lines are being written, hundreds of Palestinians and Arabs in Jordan and Lebanon are attempting to cross – for the first time in three generations – the occupied border with Palestine, tearing aside the painful, colonial discontinuities of *Bilad al-Sham*. For some, an eternal dream, a near-fantasy, is coming to be realized – to walk on the land of Palestine, to return.¹⁹

The flood of refugees seeking return also instantiated the third principle of the BDS movement. At the same time, Israel's most recent bombing has galvanized the largest international support for Palestinians since 2014. Solidarity marches as large as 200,000 took place in London.²⁰

What is also significant about these marches, to return to our main theme, is the centering of Zionism as a racist ideology. In the U.S. for example the largest Jewish civil rights group in the country, Jewish Voices for Peace, has hitched its own support for the BDS movement to a radical break with Zionism. JVP's own unequivocal critique of Zionism as racism as been fundamental to its growth as a coalition partner in antiracist U.S. struggles:

While it had many strains historically, the Zionism that took hold and stands today is a settler-colonial movement, establishing an apartheid state where Jews have more rights than others. Our own history teaches us how dangerous this can be.

Palestinian dispossession and occupation are by design. Zionism has meant profound trauma for generations, systematically separating Palestinians from their homes, land, and each other. Zionism, in practice, has resulted in massacres of Palestinian people, ancient villages and olive groves destroyed, families who live just a mile away from each other separated by checkpoints and walls, and children holding onto the keys of the homes from which their grandparents were forcibly exiled.²¹

The significance of Jewish Anti-Zionism as a constituent element of support for Palestinian liberation underscores the centrality of antiracism to the BDS movement. AntiZionism as an historical current had made manifest the relationships between white supremacy and ethnonationalism in the Zionist movement. BDS has helped make manifest this relationship by underscoring the white Christian Zionism has itself been both supportive of the Israeli state

¹⁹ Ibrahim, Salwa. "Reflections on the Third Intifada." *Spectre*. May 21, 2021.
https://spectrejournal.com/reflections-on-the-third-intifada/?fbclid=IwAR3woDz6I5jivMgX2rCwWP7Ps_VepJhWatPcpLhtLeSyqaX9WdMcgoCHAHY

²⁰ "Palestinian Solidarity Protests Held Around the World." Aljazeera. May 22, 2021.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/22/palestinian-solidarity-protests-marked-around-the-world>

²¹ "Our Approach to Zionism." Jewish Voice for Peace. <https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/zionism>

project while remaining both white supremacist and antisemitic. To take one example, when Donald Trump moved the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem he invited two prominent right-wing evangelical pastors to the ceremony to indicate the move's appeal to fundamentalists who see Jerusalem as the eventual site of Christian rapture and the conversion of the Jews to Christianity.²² Christian Zionism has been a critical building block in both far right and white supremacist politics Trump's own administration recognized as strategically important. Rejecting Zionism then, especially among liberal Jews, has become a critical means of advancing BDS's valence as a global antiracist movement.

The future of the movement

On 17 May 2017 the centrist American news magazine Newsweek reported that the state of Israel was having "its own black lives matter moment"²³ the article used the coinage to describe what it called the "intercommunal" conflict on the streets of Israel between Arabs and right-wing Jews over Israel's bombing of Gaza, in particular Palestinians as a "minority facing systemic racism and discriminatory acts." As this essay has noted, the Black Lives Matter movement itself has viewed the Palestinian liberation struggle through an antiracist solidarity lens. The adoption of that lens by a mainstream American news outlet to describe *Israeli* apartheid represents a signature moment in the success of the Palestinian liberation struggle as an antiracist movement. Indeed, the refraction of Palestinian antiracist street protests into the discursive arena signals a massive eruption of the status quo as it relates to Western comprehension of historical Palestinian oppression.

It is worth recalling in closing that the roots of today's global antiracist Palestine struggle lie in the global internationalism of an earlier era. The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions Movement against South Africa emerged in a decade (the 1960s) when international support for Palestine reached what might be called its first zenith among antiracist activists across the globe. In 1967, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the U.S. and the Black Panther Party simultaneously declared their support for Palestinian liberation, their critical rejection of Zionism as an imperial ideology, and their recognition of Palestinian and African-American subjugation as part of a global system of imperial domination.²⁴ Antiracist solidarity for SNCC and the BPP was grounded in analysis of Palestinians and Black Americans as oppressed national minorities

²² Korade, Matt, Kevin Bohn and Daniel Burke. "Controversial U.S. Pastors Take Part in Jerusalem Embassy Opening" CNN May 14, 2018
<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/13/politics/hagee-jeffress-us-embassy-jerusalem/index.html>

²³ "Israel Faces Its Own Black Lives Matter Moment." U.S. News and World Report. May 17, 2021. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2021-05-17/israel-is-having-its-own-black-lives-matter-moment>

²⁴ Thomas, Greg. "The Black Panther Party on Palestine." Hampton. May 19, 2021.
<https://www.hamptonthink.org/read/the-black-panther-party-on-palestine>

“internally colonized” by the states of Israel and the U.S. respectively. Out of those solidarity declarations came the beginnings of the long historical arc that has led to this moment of “Black Lives Matter” as its own global trope for Palestinian liberation.

That originary moment now finds itself repeated in our time: the Palestinian BDS movement has helped to foster and regenerate a new global antiracism still seeking its final expression in the defeat of Israeli settler-colonialism, Occupation, and Apartheid. Whatever and whenever the endpoint, it is clear for antiracist movement activists there is no turning back.

About the author

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Chile's social uprising and constituent process: toward a more-than-human understanding

Rogelio Luque-Lora

Abstract

Since October 2019, Chile has experienced the highest levels of social mobilisation and political reform in decades. The core demands made by these movements, as well as most academic and journalistic analyses thereof, appear to be centred on humans while paying little attention to other animals, plants and their environments. By drawing on forty-one interviews as well as seven months of participant observation and a range of online materials, this paper expands the analytical gaze of the aforementioned social movements and political reforms by arguing that there are two main ways in which the more-than-human world is part of them. First, because other-than-human beings and processes are relevant to the human-centred demands (inequality, education, healthcare, pensions) at hand. Second, because various human collectives have used the recent opening of political spaces to defend the interests of other-than-human beings. The most visible of these latter processes is the ongoing campaign to include the so-called rights of nature in the new Constitution; I question the conceptual coherence and intercultural justice of this proposal, and suggest an alternative based on the collective right of humans to defend the more-than-human. Throughout the paper, I consider how differences in the values of the various social and political actors involved tend to follow the contours of their geographies, identities and ethnicities.

Keywords: Chile; nature; environmentalism; neoliberalism; Mapuche; geography; values; rights; constitution; plurinationalism.

Introduction

On October 18th, 2019, thousands of people gathered outside metro stations in Santiago de Chile to protest against a government-issued increase in metro fares of 30 pesos (around 0.04 USD). Within a week, the gatherings had escalated into the largest and most widespread protests since at least the end of the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), spanning the entire length of the country and reaching over one million demonstrators in the capital (Alarcón 2020). It was soon clear that the rise in metro fares had had a detonating effect on a much broader and longer-standing set of issues, namely the deep and widespread discontent with the failure of three decades of democratic governments to leave behind the legacies of the dictatorship (what Julio Pinto and colleagues (2019) called 'the long shadows of the dictatorship') and deliver the aspirations of the bulk of the Chilean population (Folchi 2019a; Garcés 2019). Hence one of the most visible slogans of the protests: 'it's not 30 pesos;

it's 30 years'. Or, as a young man from Santiago said to me: 'the increase in metro fares was another humiliation in a long history of humiliations'. The protests that started on 18th October (henceforth 18/O) have variously been called *el levantamiento social* (the social uprising), *Chile Despertó* (Chile woke up), *el estallido social* (the social explosion), *el movimiento social* (the social movement) and *la crisis social* (the social crisis). In this article I favour the term 'uprising' because in the English language the word is semantically closer the social realities at play than the alternatives. At the time of writing, the social and political processes set in motion by the uprising are very much ongoing.

The mobilisations have principally called for fairer pension schemes, higher and fairer wages, and better public healthcare, education and transport services. Underlying these specific demands, there has been frustration and discontent with the structural inequalities created and maintained by the country's neoliberal model, which was enforced by the Pinochet regime (1973-1990), enshrined in the Pinochet-era Constitution, and perpetuated by subsequent democratic governments. During the dictatorship, Chile became the first country in the world to fundamentally restructure its economy according to neoliberal principles of strong private property rights, free markets, and minimal state intervention beyond creating and protecting such property and markets (Harvey 2005, 2-9). Since the reinstalment of democracy, the social critique of neoliberalism has been part of the widespread disenchantment of Chilean social movements with institutional politics, which have been considered elitist and inaccessible to the majority of the Chilean population, as well as largely unable or unwilling to deliver the demands made by Mapuche, environmental, labour and student social movements (Donoso & von Bülow 2017; Donoso 2017). All these demands have coalesced in the ongoing process, directly triggered by the uprising, of replacing the 1980 Constitution with a text drafted and approved through democratic procedures (hereafter referred to as the constituent process).

The issues at the heart of the uprising, then, appear to be exclusively focused on human affairs. Other-than-human animals, plants and their environments have been broadly excluded from the central discourses of the uprising as well as from many academic and journalistic analyses of it. This exclusion reflects widely shared values and priorities amongst the Chilean population. In a nationwide survey conducted in October 2019, which asked 'what are Chile's three main problems at present', 'the environment' accounted for just 5.6% of responses (falling from 9.4% pre-18/O to 3.4% post-18/O), with pensions, healthcare and inequality being the top-3 responses and all substantially increasing post-18/O (Activa Research 2019). Another illustrative example is Mario Garcés' (2020) book *Estallido social y una Nueva Constitución para Chile* (Social explosion and a New Constitution for Chile), in which the more-than-human figures only as a last thought in an isolated comment about this

being a good time for Chileans to rethink their relationship with their environment.

The fact that the core demands of the uprising, as well as the majority of analyses of it (see also Akram 2019; Garcés 2019; Folchi 2019a; Salazar 2019; Alarcón 2020), are narrowly focused on humans is unsurprising when seen in the broader cultural and ideological context of the country. According to the central text of the most popular religion in Chile, the Christian Bible (*Encuesta bicentenario* 2019), God created humans in His own image and the rest of the Earth to serve human interests (Genesis 1:26-29; White 1967). The upshot of this worldview is that humans are distinct from the rest of Creation, and that only their lives are ultimately valuable. (It is worth noting that less human-centred readings of the Bible have existed throughout the history of Christian thought (e.g. Simkins 2014); but for the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to acknowledge that, at least in the Western forms of Christianity that were exported to the Americas, anthropocentric views have dominated.) Notable secular ideologies are hardly less human-centred. Marxism, which inspired the socialist government of the Unidad Popular (1970-1973), has on the whole tended to value the more-than-human only as an instrument with which to serve human ends (Gray 1993). Neoliberalism, which under Pinochet replaced socialism as the national economic model, is based upon exchange value between humans in an ideal free market; therefore, it only accords value to the more-than-human world in the measure that humans value it, and then only when such values can be captured by market mechanisms (Harvey 2005).

But there are good reasons to be dissatisfied with analyses of the uprising (and of any social movement, for that matter) which focus too narrowly on human beings. Even if one were committed to a clear-cut distinction between humans and 'nature' and believed that the latter is only valuable as a means to serve the interests of the former, excluding this 'nature' from accounts of social movements risks neglecting the ways in which it matters to human beings, ranging from the material value of water and clean air to the spiritual value of cherished places. One way in which these values are relevant to the uprising is their unequal distribution in Chile. Indeed, historian Mauricio Folchi (2019b), writing in the weeks following 18/O, argued that – perhaps contrary to what is suggested by the statistics and analyses presented above – environmental injustice had been a significant component of the discontent that triggered the protests. More broadly, political ecologists have long claimed that the steep unevenness in the country's economic development stems from unequal access to natural resources (e.g. Bustos, Prieto and Barton 2014). For instance, Manuel Prieto (2014) shows how historically and politically established property rights of water resources have shaped, if not determined, who is able to profit from their economic exploitation.

At a more fundamental level, stark distinctions between humans and 'nature' are thrown into question by diverse cultures and knowledges. In fact, anthropocentrism is largely absent from cultures that are not historically steeped in Western monotheism and Enlightenment philosophy. These include

Mapuche, Aymara and other cultures indigenous to the land that is now called Chile and the Americas (e.g. Descola 2013). Outside Judeo-Christian theology, it is remarkably difficult to defend the view that humans are separate from the rest of the Earth and that only human lives are inherently valuable (Moore 1906; Gray 2002). Charles Darwin (1859), for instance, laid the groundwork for the received scientific understanding of humans as originating from the same evolutionary processes as all other lifeforms. In the last two decades, posthuman and more-than-human geographers have deconstructed the European Enlightenment notion of humans as autonomous agents separate from the rest of 'nature', who bear a special if not the only relevant form of agency (e.g. Panelli 2010; Sundberg 2014). On these post- and more-than-human views, it is mistaken to overlook the agency of other-than-human beings and processes in shaping and co-constituting societies and politics; it is also immoral to neglect the impacts of human activities on the more-than-human world.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which the more-than-human world is relevant to the Chilean uprising and constitutive process. By drawing on ethnographic data, online materials and theoretical analysis, I will first expand our analytical gaze by considering the importance of other-than-human beings and processes to human-centred affairs; that is, I will consider the importance of these beings and processes owing to the value they have *for* humans. The rest of the paper will expand our focus further by considering not just the *relevance* of these beings for human concerns, but also their own *interests* and how they have been incorporated into the social and political processes that began or intensified on 18/O. I will give special attention to the most notable of campaigns that seek to defend the interests of the more-than-human world: ongoing demands to include the putative rights of 'nature' in the new Constitution. But, in sympathetic opposition to supporters of rights of 'nature', the present paper will expose the conceptual shortcomings of this approach, as well as its potential to do violence – epistemic and material – to the very non-Western cultures it claims to speak for. I will end by suggesting an alternative framework, based on the right of human collectives to conserve their lands and waters.

The belief systems and ideologies that I have identified as responsible for an excessively narrow focus on humans operate at much broader temporal and spatial scales than recent Chilean movements and politics. Over four billion people worldwide adhere to either Christianity or Islam, two religions that are highly liable to anthropocentric understandings of Creation and of humans' place in it (Pew Research Center 2015). Moreover, capitalist and Marxist ideologies, with their comparable emphasis on human concerns, have dominated political discourse and action in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries across the globe. Therefore, it is probable that many of the analyses and conclusions of this paper can be brought to bear on social movements elsewhere. The theories and frameworks deployed here are broad enough in scope to be of use, I hope, both to researchers seeking to understand how other

movements relate to the more-than-human and to activists who wish to advocate such considerations within their movements.

A note on terminology

As will become clear, 'nature' means rather different things to different people (Castree 2005). All of the meanings discussed here include forms of life that are not human or not entirely human, as well as the abiotic environments on which they and humans depend. The testimonies presented in this paper will show that variations in what 'nature' means and how it is valued tend to follow the contours of geography, identity and ethnicity. To the extent of my abilities, my discussions will be alert to such variations. Due to the notorious ambiguity of the term 'nature', as well as the fact that in Spanish (Chile's official and most widely spoken language), as in most other European languages, the meaning of the word rests on a questionable dualism between humans and 'nature' (Ducarme, Flipo and Couvet 2020), I will only use this word when quoting other people or when discussing their ideas if they were framed in such terms, and I will place it between inverted commas. Similar things could be said about 'the environment', a term of an unmistakable anthropocentric flavour, granted to it by its vision of the more-than-human world as merely the context or backdrop for human affairs (James 2015, 1-7).

Otherwise, I will use more specific terms. I have favoured the term 'other-than-human' over 'nonhuman' because the latter implicitly perpetuates the dualistic notion that things are either human or nonhuman; by contrast, 'other-than-human' allows for the fact that although entities like rivers or trees possess qualities that humans do not, there may still be important continuities between them and humans. When referring to collectives that include both human and other-than-human beings, I will use the term 'more-than-human'. A forestry plantation is an example of a more-than-human entity because it is co-constituted by the presence and actions of humans, trees and other beings and processes. It is true that the more-than-human world encompasses everything, and this may lead one to doubt its usefulness as an ontological category (if one thinks about it, it is ontologically equivalent with more-than-shrimp or more-than-condor). But given the insistence of Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment epistemologies on the divide between humans and 'nature', and the profound ways in which these have shaped Chilean societies and landscapes, the term 'more-than-human' has the epistemological virtue of signifying the expansion of analysis to incorporate other-than-human beings, and perhaps even of questioning presupposed divisions.

Methodology and research ethics

It is a well recited aspect of the uprising that many relevant groups – most notably, Chilean politicians and the international community – failed to see it coming. I certainly did not anticipate it, but I had already planned to spend one year in Chile as part of my research on values, and the uprising provided a

unique context in which to do so. This article draws on seven months of participatory ethnography (November 2019 – June 2020), 41 semi-structured interviews and a range of online materials. I employed a targeted sampling approach, whereby informants and materials were selected on the basis of my subjective assessment of their relevance to the research themes of this study.

A significant proportion of the empirical work was carried out in Santiago, as the capital was the origin of the protests as well as the principal hub of nationwide debates about the uprising and its implications. For most of the duration of fieldwork, though, I was based in the Arauco and Cautín Provinces, in the Centre-South of the country. Two main motives drew me there. First, the wish to include rural voices, which so far have not received as wide a coverage as those of urban areas. The uprising, at least as presented by the media, has mostly been an urban phenomenon: protests quickly spread from Santiago to other large cities, including Valparaíso and Concepción (Garcés 2019), but rural areas have not seen comparable degrees of mobilisation. As a friend from a mixed rural and urban background put it to me: 'the explosion has happened in cities. As a consequence, the loggers and the fishermen who are also affected by these issues do not appear on TV'. Moreover, rural populations, by location, lie in more direct contact with other-than-human beings and processes, and as a consequence are able to provide alternative perspectives to those found in cities.

The second motive is that the Arauco and Cautín Provinces lie at the heart of Mapuche ancestral territories (the Wallmapu) prior to their colonisation by the Chilean state. There are many ways in which considering Mapuche perspectives on the uprising and constituent process is both interesting and important. Some of the core themes of the uprising had in fact already been central to pre-18/O Mapuche mobilisations, particularly the rejection of neoliberal politics and values, and the frustration with the unwillingness and/or inability of institutional politics to represent and deliver their aspirations (Pinto Rodríguez 2014; Bidegain 2017). In the words of Mapuche historian Fernando Pairican (2020, 13, my translation), 'the political presence of the Mapuche movement within the social explosion [...] diversifies the wider political process; at the same time, the explosion has enabled the recognition of Mapuche resistance in recent decades'. Pairican's words can just as well be applied to the present study. The voices of Mapuche informants included here expand the range of perspectives beyond the ken of monotheistic religions and Enlightenment philosophies. Nonetheless, given the histories of difficult and complex relations between the Mapuche and Chile, any account which too straightforwardly subsumes Mapuche demands within the remit of the uprising would be harmful and mistaken – so I will watch my step.

Ethnographic data include graffiti and other manifestations of street protest, informal discussions with a range of participants and one public debate held in Santiago in early December 2019. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, except one interview, which was held simultaneously with two interviewees. Before the start of the covid-19 epidemic, all interviews were conducted in person; thereafter, phone and videocall interviews became

frequent. Interviewees included women and men who identified as Chilean and/or Mapuche, the youngest of them being 22 years of age and the oldest 85. Everyone I interviewed held some level of personal and/or professional relationship with the more-than-human, typically as students of ecotourism, park rangers, staff of forestry corporations, smallholder farmers, and activists. Interviews were recorded, with the exception of three participants who requested that I take notes by hand instead, and manually transcribed, verbatim. All interviews were conducted in Spanish; direct quotes were translated by the author. All data were analysed by the author, qualitatively and by hand (using pen and paper).

Participants appear anonymously, except those who asked to be named (pseudonyms can be distinguished from true names by their consisting of a first name only). I have tried, and continue to try, to make this research as participatory and reciprocal as possible, by listening to informants' views and struggles as impartially as I am able to, by offering to help with their own projects and commitments and, ultimately, by sharing the findings of this research with them as they are published. This project was approved by the University of Cambridge's Department of Geography Ethics Review Group on 19/09/2019.

Human-centred concerns

Owing to its central role in Pewenche culture, its peculiar evolutionary history, and its unusual morphology, the pewen tree, *Araucaria araucana*, is iconic of the mountains and forests of Central-South Chile. For an interviewee who is a non-Indigenous employee of one of the major forestry corporations in the country, the value of this species – the resources, heritage and wildlife associated with it – exists 'as a function of man, of the community, of people, as the ultimate end'. This interviewee recognised the importance of the more-than-human world for human matters, but remained anthropocentric on questions of value.

Drawing on testimonies like this interviewee's, the present section will explore the ways in which other-than-human beings are relevant to the uprising because they matter to human beings. In order to do justice to the testimonies presented here, it is useful to distinguish between two types of expressions of anthropocentrism. The informant above did not merely manifest views or behaviours suggesting that he relates to particular other-than-human beings in an anthropocentric manner; here as elsewhere in the interview, he also made the broader claim that harmonious natural states are never ends in themselves, but rather means that contribute to the good of humans. I will refer to this kind of informant, who holds the belief that the more-than-human world is only ever valuable in the measure that it serves human interests, as philosophically anthropocentric. By contrast, other respondents and discourses described the value of *particular* other-than-human beings and processes in unmistakably anthropocentric ways; but they did not express the broader view that the more-

than-human world does not have value of its own, independently of its contribution to human interests. These latter people may even have thought that the other-than-human beings in question also have value beyond their contribution to human beings, and simply omitted this value in our conversations, perhaps because it was considered irrelevant to the uprising. It is important to note, therefore, that unless I cite evidence for philosophical anthropocentrism, my describing a *particular* comment or relation as anthropocentric does not imply that those holding it will always think in human-centred ways.

A widely held view amongst informants was that, in the same way that the state and its governments had failed to meet demands for better healthcare, education, transport and pensions, these institutions had also failed to guarantee the social right to a healthy environment. As an interviewee in his thirties put it:

There is also [an environmental component in the uprising] because there is a lot of talk about social rights, and one of them, which has been one of the most prominent in the uprising as well as the movements that preceded it, is the issue of access to water. As a human right, it is not at all respected here.

Virtually all interviewees mentioned the social injustices generated by Chile's water regime. The Chilean Water Code of 1981, written and imposed by the Pinochet administration, effectively privatised water access in the country. This radical reversal from the public, state-driven management of water resources supported by the 1967 Water Code constitutes the most recent swing of Chile's 'pendulum' of water regulation, which has been alternating between private and public management since the days of the Spanish colony (Bauer 1998). The 1981 Code created a framework of rights to the exploitation of water resources, which were transferred to private entities perpetually and free of charge. Water was thereby turned into a commodity, with responsibility for its allocation resting with market processes (Álvarez Marín 2017). Cledia Flores, an interviewee whose livelihood is based on gathering forest plants in the Arauco Province, saw in the constituent process an opportunity to swing the pendulum back again:

It would be great if there were a new Constitution because I would like rivers to no longer belong to one person [...] for waters to belong to this territory [...] for the government to appropriate and participate in this.

One example of water rights in social movements that predate 18/O is the collective MODATIMA (modatima.cl), whose mission so far has been to 'recover water sovereignty for territories and communities' by denouncing the water shortages caused by the for-profit buying and selling of water. By turning water into a tradeable commodity, the 1981 Water Code has facilitated the monopoly

over the resource by those who can pay the most for it (often, agricultural and mining corporations), at times leaving individuals and smallholder farmers under water scarcity conditions. This view of shortages as resulting from political decisions rather than natural conditions resonates with one of the defining principles of the field of political ecology: ecology is always already political. It is a view captured by posters and graffiti left in the wake of uprising protests (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Posters reading ‘It’s not drought; it’s pillage’ (seen in Santiago in March 2020). Bottom right: ‘give the rivers back’ (seen in Santiago in December 2020). The poster on the left features a half-living, half-dead fish, but it is impossible to tell whether the artist intended to present this animal as a resource for human use, as a life valuable in its own right, and/or as a synecdoche for the destruction of the broader ecosystem in which it lived. Source: author’s own.

Public comments on an investigative journalistic article explaining how the current water regime came into being (Arellano 2013) also reveal that water inequalities contributed to the discontent that eventually triggered the uprising. One such comment, made in 2015, reads: ‘Well, this is one more abuse, like the Isapres [health service], the AFP [pension scheme], the Constitution and the whole economic model that the Dictator left behind with the help of the right’. Premonitorily, a comment made in 2014 asks: ‘What can we do when facing situations like these? [...] Will we be able to create a movement that is strong enough to challenge our politicians?’ Popular disillusion with the inability of

institutional politics to bring about real change, so characteristic of the uprising, was captured by another comment, also made in 2014: 'Is there a Chilean politician who will be capable of carrying the flag of this battle and give our water back to all Chileans? I doubt it'.

In most cases – though not all of them – demands for change in water governance were motivated by the instrumental use of the resource by humans, rather than by the protection of water bodies for some other-than-human sake (for instance, intrinsic concern for the lives of the animals and plants who also depend on that water). As an interviewee who works for a wildlife conservation initiative put it: 'it has to do with the fees that people pay for water, not with conservation itself'. Note how, in each of the quotes presented in this section, the negative repercussions of the water regime were framed in terms of its impacts on human lives. Water was treated as a *human* right and the current legal frameworks responsible for its distribution were considered *socially* unjust. But note, also, that none of the testimonies I have reproduced here made any philosophical claims in favour of anthropocentrism: while each of these persons and collectives chose to emphasise the impact of the water regime on human beings, there is nothing in their words to suggest that they believed other-than-human beings can never be valuable for their own sakes, beyond their contributions to human interests. In fact, elsewhere in the interviews and conversations I held with them, the informants who provided the first and last water-related quotes in this section expressed non-anthropocentric views in relation to issues other than water.

Neoliberalism, anthropocentrism and the limits to growth

As revealed by movements for more equitable water governance, the 1981 Water Code and its implementation are inseparable from the broader neoliberal model that was written into the 1980 Constitution. Consequently, neoliberal politics have been a significant target of environmental protests since long before 18/O. The 2011 protests against the mega-dam project HydroAysén, then the largest mobilisations since the 1980s protests against the dictatorship, were significantly motivated by the social and environmental challenge to the privatised electricity sector, the 1981 Water Code and the fact that neoliberal doctrine had been baked into the Constitution (Schaeffer 2017). More broadly, many Chilean environmental NGOs have historically challenged the dominant neoliberal model and proposed alternatives that seek to balance development with social justice and environmental protection (Ulianova and Entessoro 2012).

The fact that many Chilean movements for water justice have chiefly concerned themselves with the interests of human beings and have in the same breath positioned themselves against neoliberal resource governance casts doubt on earlier work equating anthropocentrism with pro-business, neoliberal and even racist and patriarchal values (Gudynas 2014, 27-31). As I outlined in the Introduction, neoliberal logics are anthropocentric in that they only grant value

to the more-than-human world in the measure that humans value it in market exchanges; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that someone whose views align with neoliberalism would also tend to think in anthropocentric ways. But the reverse is not true – one can predominantly be concerned with the interests of human beings while critiquing neoliberal political economies, perhaps precisely because one thinks these systems are unjust or harmful to many humans. As earlier testimonies demonstrate, concerns about water governance were often motivated by ideals of social justice which in fact resisted business interests, extractivism and the inequalities generated by the neoliberal economy. Movements motivated by both anthropocentrism and social justice have a precedent in the years of the Unidad Popular (1970-1973); for instance, in the appropriation of large forestry estates by workers, who sought to sustainably exploit them to deliver long-term benefits to their communities and families (Bize Vivanco 2017).

Subsequent sections will consider the views of collectives whose efforts against neoliberalism and anthropocentrism have in fact gone hand-in-hand. Before moving on to these, it is worth making two further points about the perceived relations between the neoliberal political economy and the more-than-human world. First, a large sum of participants thought that unless there are fundamental changes in the dominant economic model and the institutions that sustain it, there will be no real and long-lasting improvement in the state of the more-than-human world. Specifically, the endless pursuit of economic growth, coupled with the priority given to the for-profit exploitation of natural resources over the wellbeing of the communities – human or otherwise – who depend on those resources for their livelihoods and wellbeing, was seen as the main barrier to real change. This was a view held by anthropocentrists and non-anthropocentrists alike. In a public discussion on the political ecology of the uprising, held in Santiago, an academic argued that

In Chile the economy has always been based on the extraction of natural resources [...] State policy exists to allow economic activity to trump other considerations. Often, communities cannot say no [...] The Awakening is an opportunity to change this.

Another academic, who in the same discussion had made the philosophically anthropocentric claim that the ultimate aim of rethinking human relationships with 'nature' is to improve human wellbeing, commented: 'we can either change the economic system now, or it will change *de facto* when we hit the limits of natural systems.'

Second, it is worth highlighting that many of the testimonies presented so far implicitly conceptualise humans and 'nature' or 'the environment' as distinct but causally related entities. This conceptualisation is perhaps best illustrated

by the following quote, taken from an interview with a non-Indigenous man who runs a small, independent conservation NGO in the Arauco Province:

The problems that likely triggered this situation [the uprising] have more to do with social issues, but the environment is directly related to society... they don't function separately. Society significantly influences the environment and the environment limits or makes possible societal development. Hence implicitly they go together.

Although there was widespread recognition of the causal connections linking the human and natural realms, these were often framed in terms of the humans having an impact on 'nature' (for instance, industry affecting water availability) and the natural realm in turn impacting the human realm (for example, water availability affecting the economy). But this was not the only way in which the interrelations of the human and more-than-human worlds were conceptualised. Some informants saw the human and more-than-human as *constitutive* of each other, rather than as distinct entities joined by cause-and-effect relations. To understand these views more fully, we must take a closer look at the Mapuche's relationships with the uprising.

The Mapuche uprising

They asked us about this social movement that began on 18th October. And I said: for us, the social movement started much earlier than that. Our people have been killed since long before, for trying to defend this place, for thinking that we somehow belong to it. And if we don't defend it, who will?

This has been a long time coming. In my area, at least 15, 20 years ago, Mapuche communities began to mobilise against the big corporations and big businesspeople [...] and we still don't see a concrete solution from businesses or the state; they don't recognise our ethnicity. [With the uprising] many people understood our communities' issues [...] since the social movement started here in Chile, I heard people saying 'actually Mapuche communities have been fighting these battles for a long time, and we've only now realised it'.

These quotes, taken from interviews with Mapuche individuals in the Arauco Province, instil caution against any simplistic inclusion of Mapuche voices in analyses of the uprising. As these and other participants explained, Mapuche mobilisations long preceded the uprising, and their people have defended their land and culture against the Spanish Crown, and later the Chilean state, for centuries. But these testimonies also illustrate important points of convergence and cooperation between the Mapuche's long history of mobilisation and the uprising. As the second quote suggests, Mapuche mobilisations and the uprising have been of a piece in their denouncing the inequalities generated by Chile's

neoliberal model (see also, for example, Pairicán & Álvarez 2011; Pinto Rodríguez 2014). Uprising mobilisations have often included significant Mapuche contingents: materially, with Mapuche people attending the protests; discursively, with demands for Indigenous rights and a plurinational state (Figure 2); and symbolically, with the *Wenufoye* (the Mapuche flag) becoming the chief emblem of the protests (116 academics 2019). The purpose of this section is to investigate some of the ways in which Mapuche perspectives can extend the scope of the uprising beyond the confines of the human. Specifically, it will examine how Mapuche informants conceptualised the more-than-human world, and how they ascribed value to its various elements.



Figure 2. Photograph of a street mural in a southern town. Writing on the right-hand side reads 'Chile woke up', 'new Constitution', 'autonomy for the Mapuche people' and 'decent healthcare'. The third person from the left is playing a kultrun (a Mapuche percussion instrument) and appears to be wearing traditional Mapuche jewellery. Top-left messages include 'quality education' and 'decent pensions'. Along the middle of the mural can be read 'free rivers' and 'more native forest'. It is noteworthy that all six demonstrators (human and otherwise) are marching in one cluster and in the same direction, suggesting that the artist(s) believe(s) these different actors are at one in their endorsement of the various messages of the mural. The other-than-human animal standing on his hind legs is a well-known dog, negro matapacos (black cop-killer), who became famous through his involvement in the 2011 student protest cycles, and who later became a symbol of the uprising (two years after his death in 2017). The widespread symbolic inclusion of negro matapacos in the uprising surely reflects the belief that the sentiments of the protests are shared beyond human animals. Other messages on the mural include 'no more repression' and 'no more abuses'. Source: author's own.

The accounts given by Mapuche informants did not just acknowledge the causal connections between the human and more-than-human realms; rather, they conceptualised human and other-than-human beings as integral and mutually

constitutive elements of a broader whole. Speaking about the lands and forests surrounding us, primary school teacher Juan Ñahuelén seamlessly drifted in and out of talk about education, health, culture and memory. He described a good education as involving the direct experience of other-than-human life, such as planting native trees and looking after them. He also recounted how the lack of school funding foreclosed any possibilities of taking children to areas where native species thrive, an issue that was compounded by the fact that, all around the town in which he teaches, forestry monocultures dominate. He said the Chilean 'education system is geared towards turning us into workforce; it does not aim to make us happy, living our lives in our territory'.

For the Mapuche, at least according to those who participated in this study, this holistic approach was grounded in the land. A Mapuche interviewee in her fifties explained that

The land is everything, everything. It's who gave birth to you, who looked after you and raised you. It feeds you and gives you energy. It gives you your relationship with your past, your present, your future. So I always wonder why you [meant plurally] compartmentalise everything into separate things, the same with health, you see, for us health is an integral thing.

This view of the land and its other-than-human inhabitants as constitutive of, rather than merely having an impact on, education, health and the economy has important implications for many of the core demands of the uprising. From this point of view, access to the more-than-human world is not simply another human right to be placed alongside the right to a good education or good health. Rather, the more-than-human is a *precondition* for a good education or health. This latter interviewee also claimed that

[Nature] should be the first article of the Constitution, and the main one, because without nature, what are we? What are we? Tell me. There would be no identity, no space, no ceremonies, no religion – there would be nothing.

Although they did not phrase it in the same terms, several informants who did not identify as Mapuche shared the view that the more-than-human world fundamentally underlies social issues. A young woman who had recently finished a degree in ecotourism claimed that

[Nature] ought to be the foundations of the new Constitution, because we are part of nature, we live in nature, therefore it has to be the foundation of this, and then we can start adding on social articles.

In turn, her colleague said about the uprising that 'if we lose the environmental battle we lose all other battles – they become irrelevant'. Unfortunately, the targeted nature of my sample, which deliberately sought out informants with direct personal and professional relationships with the more-than-human, does not enable us to gauge how widespread these views are among the wider Chilean population. Results from the survey cited in the Introduction suggest that this is a minority view (Activa Research 2019).

Viewing humans as embedded in the land rather than as distinct from 'nature' or 'the environment' was not the only way in which Mapuche participants rejected anthropocentrism. The testimonies provided by interviewees and the published literature on Mapuche philosophy show that, for many of them, humans are not the only beings whose lives are ultimately of value. M^a Soledad Antinao Curiqueo, whose job involves teaching Mapuche culture to the younger generations, explained to me that

all beings that exist in this space – we're all equals. Therefore, nature ought to exist without being harmed in any major way. We have to live alongside one another in a sustainable way.

The rest of this paper will explore expressions of non-anthropocentrism in more detail: the differences between them, the ways in which they have found space within the uprising and constituent process, and in the case of proposals to include the rights of 'nature' in the new Constitution, their merits and shortcomings.

Non-anthropocentric ethics in the opening of political spaces

M^a Soledad was not alone in her belief that the lives of other-than-human beings matter in their own right, beyond the extent to which they contribute to or detract from human wellbeing. Similarly non-anthropocentric views came up time and again in protests, debates about the new constitution, and the interviews that inform this article. One of the most visible manifestations of non-anthropocentric ethics, particularly in urban areas, had to do with the mistreatment of other-than-human animals, especially domesticated ones. Urban graffiti produced during the uprising left no shortage of calls for veganism (Figure 3), and a campaign (which began in 2015 but which has been boosted by the constituent process) for the recognition of other-than-human

animals as sentient beings in the Constitution has gathered over 200,000 signatures (Generación M 2020).



Figure 3. Pro-vegan graffiti in Santiago. On the left, 'fewer cops, more plants' and on the right, 'less meat, more tofu'. Source: author's own.

Whereas the human-centred values of the more-than-human world were directly connected to the economic, historical and institutional processes targeted by the uprising, the same was not true of the welfare of domesticated animals. To be sure, social science research has established connections between the exploitation of human and other-than-human animals in factory farms, with particular emphasis on how capitalism's necessity for ever-increasing efficiency and profit-maximisation has led to the objectification of human and other-than-human labour (e.g. Vettese and Blanchette 2020). But these connections were never encountered over the course of my research. This may have been because the perceived impact of intensive farming practices on total human wellbeing was too insignificant for these relations to be visible in the principal discourses of the uprising. More generally, it is likely that the supreme aims of ending inequality and reforming healthcare, education, pensions and transport services can be achieved without any major concern for the wellbeing of farmed animals – while the same cannot be said of the degradation of the environments upon which humans depend.

But the lack of clear connections between education, healthcare and the economy, on the one hand, and the welfare of domesticated animals, on the other, does not mean that these issues are ethically unrelated. If one were motivated to protest by feelings of empathy and duty and one did not limit moral standing to the human species (*contra* Carruthers 2011), then it is reasonable to extend activism beyond the human animal. We may thereby see concern for the wellbeing of other-than-human animals as an *extension* of some of the motivations of the uprising: an extension beyond humankind of care and responsibility for the welfare of others. Graffiti in Santiago articulated this understanding of shared duty toward human and other-than-human animals, as

well as the contradiction of campaigning for the sake of the former while neglecting the latter: 'it is quite hypocritical to demand justice while oppressing with your taste buds'.

Intrinsic concern for the interests of other-than-human beings, as articulated and defended by animal rights activists and – as we shall see – those who advocate the rights of 'nature', has become part of the uprising and constituent process as a result of the political spaces that have opened up following 18/O. The protests that began in October 2019 soon triggered broader processes of national and political renewal, which have materialised in the democratic decision to discard the Pinochet-era Constitution and create a new *carta magna* for the country. In its extreme form, this process of renewal has been framed as a death and rebirth (for instance, in Figure 1, immediately above '*Devuelvan los ríos*', can be read 'the end of Chile'). Less radically, there was widespread agreement that the country had undergone a deep awakening, as captured by the recurring phrase *Chile Despertó*. When I asked an interviewee in the Cautín Province whether she thought there is an environmental component in the uprising, she responded: 'I think it is part of a broader whole, because we are waking up and we are no longer blindfolded by the system'. In other words: even though the protests in the weeks following 18/O converged around a fairly well-demarcated set of demands, these mobilisations opened up spaces for the whole of Chilean politics, economy and culture to be questioned, and for alternatives to be proposed.

Seeing the Chilean model in crisis and faced with the prospect of democratically deciding the terms of the new 'social pact' embodied in the Constitution, people who felt strongly about human relations with the more-than-human have used these political openings to make more-than-human ethics part of the uprising. As one interviewee from the South put it:

Yes, I do think [there is an environmental component in the uprising]. At least when I went on marches and demonstrations, I campaigned for everything, everything [...] In the uprising, you take your own list of issues and you prioritise which ones you think are important. You see, I think that is how people operated.

This opening up of political space as a consequence of social movements resisting dominant political and economic power has precedents in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constituent processes of the first decade of this century. As David Humphreys (2017) argues, the challenges to hegemonic power in these countries were underlain by broader and deeper resistance to neoliberal values of individualism, competition and private profit-maximisation. Via the influence of social movements on political campaigns, elections and constitution-drafting, political space was created for alternative values of solidarity and collectivism, toward both humans and other-than-humans. In Ecuador and Bolivia, these openings were used by environmentalist groups to

campaign, successfully, for the legal recognition of the rights of 'nature' (Akchurin 2015; Humphreys 2017).

The following section will explore equivalent campaigns in Chile. Although including the rights of 'nature' in the new Constitution is only one of several clusters of proposals relating to the more-than-human put forward by members of the constituent convention (the organ in charge of debating a drafting the new Constitution) (Rubio 2021), it warrants special consideration because it constitutes the most radical departure from anthropocentric perspectives. If the rights of 'nature' were included in the new Constitution, they could have profound consequences for the country and for the international legal landscape. The constitutional recognition of the rights of 'nature' would extend the conflicts, conundrums and trade-offs between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethics from the moral to the legal realm.

Reconsidering the rights of 'nature'

In 2008, Ecuador became the first state in the world to include the rights of 'nature' in its Constitution (Akchurin 2015). The preposition 'of' is crucial here. Many constitutions recognise the human right *to* the natural environment, including the Chilean 1980 Constitution (Article 19, 8). In the case of the Ecuadorian Constitution, 'nature' is not only an object of rights (the human right *to* 'nature'), but also a subject of them: the more-than-human world itself is understood to have rights of its own. Article 71 of the Constitution of Ecuador (2008) reads: 'Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and realised, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes' (see also Articles 72 & 73). The inclusion of the rights of 'nature' (henceforward rights-of-nature) in the Constitution of Ecuador has been celebrated within many environmentalist circles as a rightful move away from anthropocentrism. Other states, including Bolivia and New Zealand, have since passed laws that recognise the rights of some other-than-human beings (Humphreys 2017; Kauffman & Martin 2018).

There is a significant contradiction in the fact that although the philosophies behind rights-of-nature tend not to see humans as standing apart from 'nature', rights-of-nature legislation has tended to codify 'nature' as a distinct legal subject with rights that are very different in content from humans' rights (Akchurin 2015). In the Constitution of Ecuador, 'Nature or Pacha Mama' does not enjoy the same rights as humans, nor are the rights of humans based on their evolutionary processes and ecological structures like those of 'Nature or Pacha Mama'. But despite their legal codification of 'nature' as distinct from humans, rights-of-nature frameworks are at one with the philosophies that underlie them in their belief that humans are not (or should not be) the only bearers of rights. They are uncompromisingly non-anthropocentric.

In spite of this, interviewees at times justified the inclusion of rights-of-nature in the new Chilean Constitution using claims with distinctly anthropocentric

flavours. Instances of this phenomenon included phrases such as ‘we owe it to future generations’, slipping into talk of the human right to a healthy environment, and sliding into discussions of the instrumental value of natural resources for humans. Informants did this without apparent awareness of the tensions between the different values motivating rights-of-nature and anthropocentrism. Indeed, a significant proportion of interviewees did not pick up on the distinction between rights-of-nature and the human right *to* the more-than-human world. On several occasions, when I asked interviewees whether they thought that rights-of-nature ought to be established in the new Constitution, their arguments in favour of doing so were based on generic calls for more and better protection of the more-than-human, alongside the assumption that rights-of-nature will be more effective at delivering this protection than current approaches, rather than specifically on the belief that ‘nature’ is a distinct entity whose specific rights ought to be protected by law.

Despite their contradictory character, these anthropocentric and pragmatic justifications have recurred throughout the history of campaigns for rights-of-nature. In other Latin American countries, proposals for rights-of-nature have been partly motivated by the hope that they will be more effective at conserving the more-than-human world than previous jurisprudence, as well as by the urge to validate the collective rights of Indigenous humans. In Bolivia, the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth establishes that ‘The State and any individual or collective person must respect, protect and guarantee the rights of Mother Earth *for the wellbeing of current and future generations*’ (my emphasis), thereby infusing rights-of-nature with anthropocentric motivations (Bolivia Law of Rights of Mother Earth 2010: Article 2). The foundational essay articulating and defending rights-of-nature written by Godofredo Stutzin (who was a well-known Chilean lawyer and environmentalist) opens with the claim that these legal reforms are a matter of ‘practical necessity’ (Stutzin 1984). In a broadcasted debate about the possible inclusion of rights-of-nature in the Chilean Constitution, Ezio Costa, CEO of environmental law NGO FIMA, argued that the human right *to* the more-than-human world has failed to bring about sufficient environmental protection, and that rights-of-nature could be an effective way to correct this (Diaz Levi 2020).

There are good reasons for doubting the pragmatic worth of including rights-of-nature in the new Constitution. For one thing, many of the worst cases of ecological degradation in Chile already violate the constitutional right of human beings to a healthy environment. Therefore, the root problem, legally speaking, lies with the lack of enforcement of existing laws rather than the absence of non-anthropocentric legislation. As a number of interviewees told me, writing in the new Constitution that ‘nature’ has rights will not achieve anything if powerful actors with an interest in degrading the more-than-human world continue to be able to dismiss the law.

The Ecuadorian and Bolivian precedents do not bode well in this respect. Despite the legal recognition of rights-of-nature, these rights have usually been overridden when they have conflicted with the states’ extractivist agendas

(Merino 2018; Romero-Muñoz et al 2019). As a Chilean academic argued in a public debate in Santiago, echoing the claims made by other participants that changing the economic model is a *sine qua non* for sustainability, 'unless there is a change in the material economy, any change to the Constitution will merely be – as in Ecuador – a declaration of good intentions.' In this same debate, an Ecuadorian academic went further and argued that rights-of-nature had in fact introduced an additional hurdle to the legal protection of the more-than-human world by opening a Pandora's box of philosophical conundrums – what is 'nature'? What rights does 'nature' have? Who should speak on its behalf? – that slow down legal procedures. It is telling that none of the informants who were in favour of including rights-of-nature in the new Constitution gave any reasons for believing that doing so would result in the better protection of the more-than-human world – they simply assumed that this would be the case. This argumentative vacuum is likely accounted for by the fact that evidence for the effectiveness of rights-of-nature is, at best, contradictory and, at worst, disheartening. Yet faith in the ability of rights-of-nature to deliver a quantum leap in environmental protection prevails.

Supporting rights-of-nature on anthropocentric grounds, including the hope that it will be an effective strategy to protect the more-than-human world for the sake of human beings, risks undermining those human-centred goals. Anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric value systems hold different things to be ends in themselves. As a result, each value system will inevitably pull in different directions, at least some of the time. This tension did not escape Indigenous representatives in the constituent process of Ecuador, who, despite the resonance between rights-of-nature and Indigenous cosmologies, worried that rights-of-nature would restrict their access to natural resources in the name of conservation (Akchurin 2015). For those who would like to see the more-than-human world conserved for human-centred reasons, probably a more effective – and certainly a more coherent – strategy would be to develop and promote an enlightened form of anthropocentrism, which recognises that humans, present and future, rely on the more-than-human world for a host of often-irreplaceable material and spiritual values (e.g. Lenart 2020). This strategy would seek to understand and protect all these values for the sake of present and future human beings, rather than aiming to deliver these goals through value systems inherently at odds with anthropocentrism.

Value plurality and collective rights

The conception of 'nature' as a subject of rights has frequently been associated with non-Western cosmologies. Indeed, in many of the countries where rights-of-nature laws have been passed, Indigenous peoples have played important roles in these reforms (Akchurin 2015; Humphreys 2017). The proposal to recognise rights-of-nature in the new Constitution of Chile was seen favourably by several Mapuche interviewees. A young Mapuche man from the Arauco Province argued that:

The first article of the Constitution should say that Nature, Mother Nature, is a living being, a being with a system [...] and that as a living being, Nature has rights, rights like you, like me.

Despite the affinity between rights-of-nature and Indigenous cosmologies (which stems from their mutual rejection of anthropocentrism), the campaigns for rights-of-nature that have emerged or been spurred on in the wake of the uprising have often been led by journalists, lawyers and activists who appear not to identify as Indigenous and who do not frame their discourses in Indigenous terms, concepts and narratives (e.g. Diaz Levi 2020). This was also the case in Ecuador, where the process of including rights-of-nature in the 2008 Constitution was mostly driven by internationally connected environmental lawyers and activists rather than by Indigenous movements, even as the idea of rights-of-nature gathered support from various Indigenous groups (Akchurin 2015). This is somewhat unsurprising given that much of the intellectual work that conceptualises and seeks to operationalise rights-of-nature has been undertaken by non-Indigenous scholars working within the structures and notions of Western Law (e.g. Stone 1972; Stutzin 1984; Nash 1989). These works have been motivated by ecocentric values, which – in the Western environmental philosophy where the term ‘ecocentrism’ has its origin – posit that ecological wholes such as species and ecosystems are intrinsically valuable, irrespective of their contributions to human interests (James 2015, 43-63).

Crucially, believing in rights-of-nature for ecocentric reasons is not the same as doing so based on Indigenous worldviews, because the two value systems belong in different epistemic traditions and make different metaphysical and ontological claims about the more-than-human world. The notions of species and ecosystems are derived from Western – mostly English-speaking – science (e.g. Tansley 1935), and they are not equivalent with *mapu* or Pacha Mama. These differences are of fundamental importance – they mean that disagreement exists not just at the level of what rights ‘nature’ should have, but also, more profoundly, in how the more-than-human is conceptualised, understood and experienced. One manifestation of these differences is the problem, widely debated amongst proponents of rights-of-nature, of giving legal rights to entities, such as ecosystems, which do not have legal voices and which cannot themselves advocate their purported rights (e.g. Stone 1972; O'Donnell and Talbot-Jones 2018). By contrast, in the Mapuche worldview, the land (*mapu*) does have a voice (Millalén Paillal 2006, 20). In fact, the name of language of the Mapuche, Mapuzungun, translates as ‘the speak of the land’; in Mapuche cosmology the land also speaks, through its various elements, such as its birds (*ibid*).

Largely overlooking these fundamental differences, campaigns for rights-of-nature have tended to present themselves as convergent with Indigenous worldviews. One must look no further than Article 71 of the Constitution of Ecuador to find the rights of Pacha Mama articulated in Western scientific terms of ‘structure’, ‘function’ and ‘evolutionary processes’. This syncretism of

'nature' and Pacha Mama has been lauded by activists and scholars who have seen it as a move toward decoloniality (e.g. Gudynas 2014, 73-75). But the problems that arise from attempting to amalgamate fundamentally different ways of conceptualising the more-than-human world – or, worse still, from subsuming one within the other – have been highlighted by those who are sceptical or critical of rights-of-nature. An Ecuadorian participant in a public debate in Santiago argued that to equate 'nature' with Pacha Mama is epistemically violent (that is, a harmful and power-laden misrendering of a concept). Through the inclusion of rights-of-nature in the Constitution, argued this informant, the Ecuadorian state has problematically appropriated Kichwa language and notions of the more-than-human.

In Chile, the Mapuche demands that have emerged during the uprising and constituent process focus more on their collective right to autonomy, reclaiming sovereignty over their ancestral territories and turning Chile into a plurinational state than on the presumed rights-of-nature (Namuncura et al. 2020). Strikingly, of the 17 Indigenous representatives in the constituent assembly, not one of them included rights-of-nature in their electoral programmes – but all of them proposed reforms to the water regime, the dominant development model and issues concerning socioecological justice (Rubio 2021). Tellingly, when I asked Mapuche school teacher Juan Ñahuelén for his views on rights-of-nature, he instead told a story about his family recovering their right *to* the land:

The community was regrouped in 92-93 when their right to the land was reclaimed. Then they returned, they won this patch of land, with the right, my dad went back to how things were in his childhood, went back to coexisting with animals, plants, agriculture, the vegetable patch, the seeds, working to have feed for the chickens, the chickens give us protein, with eggs, with meat [...] and then we let the land rest, we sowed elsewhere and let the land rest, so it is not overexploited, and that is how the land is looked after.

Later on, he added:

All that we are asking for is the will of a people who want to live better in sustainability with ecology, with a beautiful surrounding, with good health [...] this is a good cycle to recover everything to do with environmental rights and the right to live better.

Juan's response suggests that in some cases, better relationships with the land can be established not necessarily by declaring in the Constitution that 'nature' has rights, but rather by transferring land sovereignty and ownership to Indigenous communities.

Many of the problems associated with the fundamental differences in how Indigenous and ecocentric approaches conceptualise and value the more-than-

human world could be mitigated if, instead of attempting to establish the universal rights of 'nature' at the level of the Constitution, the Constitution recognised the collective rights of Indigenous nations to legal autonomy and self-determination. In this approach, rather than pursuing the chimera of state-level agreement on what 'nature' is and what rights it should have, communities with a shared culture would have the right to legally codify the more-than-human world on their own terms (e.g. *mapu* in Mapuche culture) and to legislate accordingly. As the testimonies presented throughout this article have shown, even within a targeted sample of those with direct professional and personal relationships with the land, the more-than-human was conceived and valued in radically different ways.

Legal pluralism has already been adopted in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the context of the guardianship and legal personhood of the Whanganui River (Charpleix 2018). In this case, the fundamental differences in Maori and British ontologies of the more-than-human and in their legal models have been accommodated not by amalgamating them into a universal declaration of rights-of-nature, but rather by recognising Maori ownership of the river and allowing Maori law to coexist with state law – a coexistence that rests on a set of mutually acceptable terms for mediating the relationships between place-based Maori law and the dominant legal system. As in Aotearoa/New Zealand, but unlike the epistemically violent move of equating 'nature' with Indigenous conceptions of the land, a pluralistic approach to the law in Wallmapu/Chile would constitute true progress in decolonising Indigenous territories as well as the jurisdictional system. It is well-suited to be part of broader calls for recognising plurinationalism in the new Constitution (e.g. Namuncura et al. 2020).

Importantly, renouncing the Constitutional recognition of rights-of-nature need not equate with anthropocentrism. Recognising the collective right of nations to legislate in relation to the more-than-human world on their own terms would allow less anthropocentric laws to be passed in Indigenous jurisdictions. As for non-Indigenous populations at sub-national scales, the Constitution could safeguard *the right of human collectives to protect the more-than-human world motivated by any combination of values*, anthropocentric or otherwise. By disentangling questions of value from the notions and practices of rights, it would be possible to recognise and literally do justice to the plurality of human values relating to the more-than-human without the need to construct the legal fiction of a universal, rights-bearing 'nature'. Moreover, while it appears unlikely that consensus on what 'nature' is and what rights it should have can be reached at the level of the state, agreement on *the human right to protect the more-than-human world* could plausibly be achieved. Because ultimately humans, rather than 'nature', would be the bearers of rights, this approach would not require a fundamental shift in Western understandings of the law.

Conclusion

Through the voices of tens of women and men who hold direct personal and professional relationships with the more-than-human, this paper has presented a less human-centred view of the uprising and constituent process which began in Chile on October 18th, 2019. I have identified two main ways in which the scope of the protests and ensuing political processes has been extended beyond the human. The first way has to do with the *relevance* of the more-than-human world to the economy, healthcare, education and other human-centred concerns. The second has to do with the political openings that have followed the uprising, which have been used by humans who care about the *interests* of other-than-humans to advocate and defend those interests. Throughout this article, I have highlighted how different actors, with their distinct geographies, ethnicities and identities, have tended to emphasise and mobilise different values relating to the more-than-human.

I hope to have shown that values are a useful lens through which to analyse the various ways in which the more-than-human matters to social movements, beyond the temporal and geographic limits of the Chilean uprising. The choice to distinguish between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric values was motivated by the strong influence of Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment worldviews in Chile, as well as by the wish to lay bare the differences between Indigenous and European-descended cosmologies. I encourage other activists and researchers partaking in or studying social movements to consider how ideological and cultural histories have shaped the ways in which people value the more-than-human, in general and with specific focus on the demands made by the mobilisations.

Given the socioecological injustices exerted by the Pinochet dictatorship and its aftermath, one can only view and participate in the ongoing reformation with hope for a fairer and more sustainable Chile. But some degree of sobriety regarding the potential for deep reform is warranted. History, a Chilean friend once told me in a confidential tone, shows that the powerful tend to appropriate social processes in order to maintain their privileges. The decision to exclude active lawmakers from the constituent convention has been a bold step to mitigate this risk, but the politically and economically empowered can still hope to render the process ineffectual through a variety of strategies, including the dilution of its practical significance. Any constitutional declaration of plurinationalism, of the rights-of-nature or – as I have proposed – of the human right to conserve the more-than-human is likely to conflict with extractivist agendas, as has been the case in Bolivia and Ecuador.

For this reason, I believe that those who claim that changing the country's economic model is a prerequisite for building more sustainable futures are fundamentally right. And yet, history also teaches that some of the most devastating instances of ecological wreckage and vandalism have occurred in regimes that were not neoliberal or even capitalist (Gray 1993). Dismantling the neoliberal logics in Chile's institutions is a tall enough order – but reformers

also face the more challenging task of replacing them with something that is more likely to deliver their aspirations.

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For reasons to do with anonymity and publishing convention, I am listed as the sole author on this paper. In reality, the text contains the views of tens of women and men, which are at least as central to the paper's arguments as my own. Without the help of a number of Chilean academics, most notably Claudio Soto from Universidad Andrés Bello and Nicolás Gálvez from Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, as well as the hospitality and generosity of all those who welcomed me into their homes, this research would have been of a vastly lower standard and much less enjoyable to undertake. I could not have persevered with this project after the arrival of the COVID-19 virus without the unfaltering help and care offered to me by Mauricio Pedraza and C. Rixon. I am also grateful to the Cambridge Trust and Fundación Rafael del Pino for funding this research, and to Chris Sandbrook, Beatriz Bustos, Jaime Luque Lora, two anonymous reviewers and the Editors at *Interface* for their comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

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The impact of masculinist counter-framing on the work of meaning-making of violence against women

Mélissa Blais¹

Abstract

During the 2000s, masculinist anti-feminism wheeled out a huge tactical repertoire which forced the Quebec feminist movement to modify its practices, including its discourse around violence against women. Drawing on a dataset of more than 80 semi-directed interviews with feminists active against violence against women, this article mobilizes framing theory to better grasp the consequences of masculinism on the work of meaning-making of the feminists interviewed. More specifically, it examines the masculinist counter-frames of symmetry of violence and women's violence, and their effects on how the problem of violence is identified, the solutions envisaged, and the deradicalization of feminist discourse. Finally, the article proposes a novel line of research on the disengagement effects of masculinist counter-frames. In doing so, this study contributes to the still small number of efforts to analyze the impact of counter-frames on social movement framing.

Keywords: Feminism, antifeminism, counter-movement, framing, counter-framing, disengagement

During the 2000s, anti-feminist masculinism made itself known through a few high-profile actions – for example, an activist scaled the superstructure of a bridge between Montreal and its suburbs in 2005; an *SVP papa* activist perched on top of a crane in Nantes in 2013. Often associated with men's rights activists/movement or fathers' rights activists/movement, the term 'masculinism' is used more often in French. It refers both to activist organizations such as Fathers 4 Justice (fathers' rights movement) and organizations helping men in difficulty (men's rights movement) who share a common cause, such as fighting against feminism, which is supposed to have brought about a "crisis in masculinity." This form of anti-feminism relies on the more discreet involvement of a diverse range of actors, including researchers and social workers, growing out of support networks for separated fathers (Fillod-Chabaud, 2014). Masculinism has also been transformed into a justification for killing women. This is true of the Montreal massacre killer at the École polytechnique in December 1989² (Blais, 2014, 2015) and the so-called

¹ The author would like to thank Francis Dupuis-Déri, Marcos Ancelovici and Marco Giugni for reviewing this article.

² Marc Lépine openly expressed his hatred of feminists during the shoot-out as well as in his suicide letter.

‘involuntary celibate’ (*incel*) killer in Toronto in spring 2018³ (Yang and Gillis, 2018). Thus organized as a counter-movement (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2011; Avanza, 2018; Roggeband, 2018), masculinism distinguishes itself in part from other trends which compose antifeminism by its insistence on the claim that men suffer because of women and feminists⁴. In other words, this form of antifeminism does not directly divine authority, in contrast to conservative and religious antifeminism which seeks to restrict abortion and counter sexual minority rights (Lamoureux 2006).

Masculinism also claims that men are victimized by campaigns against conjugal violence, they are even victims of women who spread false allegations and that women are just as violent as men. Consequently, mobilizations by the masculinist fringe of the anti-feminist counter-movement affect the work of meaning-making about violence against women. Grounded in part on framing theory (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow and Byrd, 2007; Snow, Benford, McCammon, Hewitt and Fitzgerald, 2014), this article will examine this type of impact on the feminist movement in more detail. It will explain how masculinist counter-frames about the symmetry of violence and women’s violence influence some aspects of feminist discourse on violence against women as well as activist engagement. After looking at masculinist influences on the identification of the problem of violence and the solutions envisaged, I will turn to an analysis of its deradicalizing effects on feminist discourse. Finally, I will propose that the disengagement effects of these counter-frames be examined to contribute to research on antifeminism, framing analysis and counter-movements.

Counter-movements, counter-framing and their impact

Studies on the anti-feminist counter-movement or anti-feminism as a reactionary force or as backlash focus on analysing anti-feminist discourse (Langevin, 2009; Jobin, 2015) and, to a lesser extent, anti-feminist attacks on feminists (Saint-Pierre, 2015), without systematically examining the impact of anti-feminist or specifically masculinist discourses on feminists from the perspective of those affected (Goulet, 2010). Masculinist discourses attacking feminist analyses of violence against women, including conjugal violence, are among those which have been studied. For example, Jocelyn Elise Crowley (2009) examines the discursive strategies used by American fathers’ rights activists to counter feminist discourses on violence against women by claiming

³ Armed with a van, Alex Minassian drove into a crowd, killing 8 women and two men and wounding around fifteen others. After his arrest, media highlighted a Facebook reference he had made to InCels (Involuntary Celibates) – who are openly anti-feminist in their discourse - before carrying out the attack. Also paying tribute to misogynist killer Elliot Rodger, he complained that no woman had ever agreed to have sex with him.

⁴ The term “masculinist” has been polysemic since the end of the 19th century, both in English and French. It sometimes refers to sexism in English and most often to a form of anti-feminism in French. I am adopting the commonly accepted use in French since the 1990s. For more details, see Dupuis-Déri 2009.

that men are just as often or more often victims of violence as women are (see also DeKeseredy, 1999; Brodeur, 2003; Damant and Guay, 2005; Johnson, 2011; Brossard, 2015).

Moreover, the effects of counter-frames on social movements is given somewhat more attention by researchers specializing in framing analysis. Framing analysis already has a well-established reputation (Snow, Benford, McCammon, Hewitt and Fitzgerald 2014). Popularized with the culturalist turn in the American sociology of social movements at the beginning of the 1990s, framing analysis drew attention because it highlighted the importance of non-structural variables, such as agentivity and strategies, in analyzing the process of the emergence and development of protest (Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Staggenborg 2012). Interested in the significance that mobilized actors give to collective action, Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow (2000) explain that framing work consists of producing and defining ideas intended to mobilize or counter-mobilize (counter-frame). This process of cognitive and discursive construction of reality is thus one of both agentivity and conflict (Snow and Byrd 2007). More than 15 years later, Holly McCammon (2014: 31-35) examines the different applications of Benford and Snow's theory published in six top sociology journals between 2000 and 2011. In addition to the number of articles, which is significant, McCammon highlights that: 1) most studies mobilize a qualitative method; 2) the majority of datasets studied consist of material produced by members of social movements and newspapers (see e.g., Girgen 2008; Plaut 2012; Ketelaars, 2016); and 3) a fair number of researchers show the influence of political, cultural and economic factors on the process of framing.

On the latter point, studies looking at “frame alignment” examine the transformations of social movement discourse by emphasizing the influence of political, cultural and economic factors on the process of framing (McCammon, 2014: 31-35). My study additionally highlights the importance of taking into account the context in which the conflict between feminism and anti-feminism takes place, if only because this context can facilitate the impact of counter-frames on the feminist work of meaning-making. For example, Carine Mardorossian (2014) showed how the 11 September 2001 attack on the United States brought about a (re)signification of “good” victims (passive and emasculated after the attack). She went on to examine the “frame alignment” of support organizations for victims of sexual violence which abandoned the frame of “victim” in favour of “survivor” to emphasize their strength and courage (also see McCaffrey and Keys 2000 and Coe 2011 for an analysis of political factors and McCammon, 2012 for an analysis of cultural factors).

Some researchers also analyze conflictual interactions by placing greater emphasis on the construction and emergence of counter-frames (see e.g., Gallo-Cruz, 2012; Trumpy, 2015; Ayoub and Chetaille, 2017; Everett and Chaudhri, 2019). For example, Edward Carberry, Shahzad Ansari and Joyce Mantel (2010) show how the environmental movement, including Greenpeace, helped reframe the identity of two oil companies (BP and Shell) as “greener” while other researchers explore the tactical responses developed by movements to more

successfully oppose counter-frames. For their part, Mary C. Burke and Mary Bernstein (2014) show how queer discourse, marginalized in the LGBT movement in Vermont, was coopted by opponents of same-sex marriage, who appropriated queer critiques of the heterosexist nature of marriage for their cause.

Other studies more precisely question the impact of counter-movements on the framing of the movements they oppose. For this line of inquiry, researchers have developed a more interactionist approach to carefully analyze the effects of counter-framing on a movement and vice versa. We can observe this in Tina Fetner's (2008) study of the LGBT movement and religious conservatives in the United States. Fetner highlights the role of emotions and specifically anger in the framing of the LGBT movement, especially in reaction to charges of "pedophilia" from the conservative right, in the context of the American government's failure to take sufficient action against the AIDS epidemic. For her part, Anne Esacove (2004: 72) develops a "dialogical model of framing" to study how "frames and counter-frames evolve in relationship to each other and cannot be disentangled from each other. Rather the framing/counter-framing process is one in which the frame/counter-frame are jointly created and recreated by social movement actors through an iterative, dialogic process." (Also see Steinberg, 1998, 1999; Ayoub and Chetaille, 2017.) To summarize, each of these studies highlights, in its own way, the heuristic significance of perspectives which take into account the interactions between framing and counter-framing in the analysis of the development of collective protest.

Nevertheless, it is important to note (following Dennis Chong, James Druckman (2012), Mary Burke and Mary Bernstein (2014)) that there are still too few studies looking at "framing struggle" (Gamson, 1990). More specifically, the question of the impact of counter-frames on feminist movements merits more substantial investment. In other words, while some studies examine the interactions between movements and counter-movements (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; McCaffrey and Keys, 2000; Rohlinger, 2002; Esacove, 2004; Fetner, 2008; Smith, 2008; Trumpy, 2015), these works largely fail to analyze the effects of counter-frames from the perspective of those who have to cope with them, in this case feminist activists and workers (Lavine, Cobb and Roussin 2017). As we shall see, my research reveals that anti-feminism is not only a factor in transforming the feminist movement, its counter-framing also contributes to a partial disengagement of activists.

In this way, one of the contributions of this article is its analysis of the discursive (words feminists no longer use), political (the capacity of the movement to convince people that women are the main victims of violence), and biographical (disengagement or moderation) effects of masculinist counter-frames. Moreover, the conclusions are not drawn from material produced by members of social movements or newspapers, but from semi-directed interviews which, as we shall see, allow the biographical effects to be more clearly identified.

Method and data

This discussion is part of a larger qualitative research project on the effects of masculinist strategies and tactics on Quebec feminists fighting male violence against women⁵. In the context of this project, I created a dataset of 87 semi-directed interviews with feminists volunteering or working in the women's movement, carried out between 2006 and 2015 across Quebec.

Data

The great majority of participants in the study were employees working to defend rights, offer support, listening and referrals to women in difficulty. A minority were involved in political or academic circles and were also specialists in violence against women. While they are not many, the latter bring a privileged perspective on the impact of masculinism on decision-makers, sometimes confirming the perceptions of frontline workers in feminist movement organizations. To maintain anonymity, I chose to use the terms “respondent”, “participant” (in the study), “informant” and “feminist” interchangeably. At times, when I found it useful to my argument, I specify their positions - though without breaching the confidentiality agreement⁶.

In sum, the majority of groups offer reception services, listening and referrals by phone, as well as individual and group meetings (Bilodeau, 1990). Many organizations, particularly shelters for abused women and the CALACS (centres for support and fighting against sexual assault) offer accompaniment to family, criminal and civil courts. The first shelters to open in the 1970s were inspired by “awareness groups”; it was a time when “women recognized that the violence they suffered from their partners constituted the norm rather than the exception, that it was not an individual problem but a social problem, and that, this being the case, it was important to act to end this brutal reality” (Côté,

⁵ Entitled *Masculinisme et violences contre les femmes : une analyse des effets du contremouvement antiféministe sur le mouvement féministe québécois* (*Masculinism and violence against women: an analysis of the effects of the anti-feminist counter-movement on the Quebec feminist movement*). A study supported by the *Fonds de recherche du Québec Société et culture* (FRQSC), the *Réseau québécois en études féministes* (RéQEF), the *Syndicat des chargées de cours de l'UQAM* and the *Département de sociologie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal* (UQAM).

⁶ Each participant was identified by an alphanumeric code. Three series of codes were created, each referring to a distinct dataset: ARR for respondents from ARIR (the Feminist Discourse and Intervention, an Inventory of Place study) followed by a digit (from 1 to 58); ATR for feminists from the Anti-feminist Attacks dataset, also followed by a digit (from 1 to 15); and RT for participants in my study, with a digit from 1 to 14. To complete the reference, each code is preceded by the number of the question (e.g. Q1 for question 1), which facilitates identification in the transcript and the questionnaire. Each dataset compiles interviews carried out with a flexible outline, open to the questions which arose during the meetings. I made some slight changes during the writing process out of a “desire for an aesthetic text” but primarily to “protect” the image of the person interviewed (Combessie 2007), without eliminating contemporary expressions, Quebecisms, or swear words because the latter reveal emotions felt during interviews.

2016: 7). Currently, the province of Quebec, with just over 8 million inhabitants, has more than 100 shelters spread over its entire territory, though with a greater proportion in Montreal and Montérégie (Rinfret-Raynor, Brodeur and Lesieux, 2010). Many of these have banded together into two networks: the *Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale* (coalition of shelters for women victims of conjugal violence, founded in 1979) and the *Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes* (federation of women's shelters, founded in 1987). The mandate of these two organizations is to promote and defend the rights of women victims of conjugal violence. These shelters provide emergency housing for abused women, and most take in their children as well. The shelters also contribute to prevention and awareness-raising, including developing activities for schools and participating in local and regional coordinating bodies of partners (police, youth protection, etc.) with stakes in violence prevention.

Like shelters, support for victims of sexual violence emerged from a new consciousness that violence against women was really a social and political problem rather than an individual experience (Robitaille and Tessier, 2010). Forty centres to support and to fight against sexual assault (Centres d'aide et de lutte contre les agressions à caractère sexuel, CALACS) are active in Quebec. Twenty-seven of these are members of the *Regroupement québécois des CALACS* (Quebec coalition of CALACS, RQCALACS) with a mandate to prevent and raise awareness about sexual assault (Bergeron, Girard, and the Regroupement québécois des CALACS, 2014).

While there are diverse and multiple divergences among workers at the shelters and in the CALACS, not to mention among feminists more generally, feminist knowledge about violence, both theoretical and practical, is largely rooted in radical feminism⁷ (Jaspard, 2006). This finding is shared by Pauline Delage (2017) in France and in the United States (also see Dobash and Dobash, 1992), and is confirmed both by my observations and Quebec-based studies (Côté, 2016). From this perspective, violence against women is seen as a means of control of women by men in a patriarchal society and conjugal violence as serving to maintain male privilege. This analysis refers to the collective position of women in social relations; individually, women may show agentivity, even carry out acts of legitimate defence – what Maryse Jaspard (2005: 100) calls “reactive violence” – but use no (or little) violence as a “means of control” (Hanmer, 1977). In short, respondents from the three datasets shared the analytical posture of understanding violence as control or power over. The discussion does not concern the debates over the inclusion of gender minorities in the analysis of violence against women, which, as we know, is a matter of tension within the groups studied.

⁷ The word ‘radical’ refers to an analysis that goes to the “root of the problem”, contrary to so called ‘reformist’ feminism.

The first series of interviews was compiled in the context *Discours et intervention féministes, un inventaire des lieux* (Feminist Discourse and Intervention, an Inventory of Place), a study directed by Francine Descarries and Christine Corbeil under the *Alliance de recherche IREF/Relais-femmes sur le mouvement des femmes québécois* (ARIR). The great majority of semi-directed interviews were conducted with heads of umbrella organizations (federations and coalitions). They thus represent organizations working against violence and poverty and for women's health. They offer support services and trainings to organizations they represent and work on political issues by organizing demonstrations or putting pressure on officials for funding. The research team privileged the criterion of non-random *exemplarity* (Ruquoy, 1995) to build its sample in order to avoid becoming "scattered" (Kaufmann, 2008) in overly-broad material. Many feminists were thus chosen for the privileged position they hold in the movement as well as to represent diversity of place in the feminist movement.

The second dataset is composed of 15 semi-directed interviews carried out in 2010 in the context of *Les attaques antiféministes au Québec*⁸ (Anti-feminist Attacks in Quebec) study. Like the previous study, recruitment relied on a sample of "instituted informants" to use Jean-Claude Combessie's term (2007: 18). Participants were questioned both about their personal experiences and their perception of the feminist movement in which they had evolved, using the approach commonly known as the "biographical method," in which the interviewee acts as an expert on her own movement (Pouliot, 1986). Consistent with the research method of the *Discours et intervention féministes, un inventaire des lieux* (Feminist Discourse and Intervention, an Inventory of Place) study, interviewees told us about other members of their group, enabling us to rapidly obtain a global portrait of situations affecting the community.

The 15 interviews in the first two datasets did not achieve a satisfying level of saturation. I therefore carried out 14 additional, semi-directed interviews with respondents from networks more specifically working against violence against women to explore this specific sector of the feminist movement community in more detail. In the hope of obtaining a more complete portrait of the impact on the violence sectors, I created a sample of feminists who work in the shelter network and in networks fighting sexual violence and supporting victims. I also interviewed a health sector staff member and bureaucrat, as well as a social service worker from the "family" sector, because her work brought her into contact with victims of conjugal violence. This third dataset thus constitutes the narrowest of the three overlapping datasets. However, it provided me with a better view of the entire range of tactics adopted to injure the feminist movement.

⁸ Constituted under the direction of Francis Dupuis-Déri, in partnership with L'R des centres de femmes, under the aegis of the *Service aux collectivités de l'UQAM*. Francis Dupuis-Déri (ed. 2010). "Projet de recherche 'les attaques antiféministes au Québec'", *L'R des centres de femmes/Service aux collectivités*, UQAM: Montreal.

To collect the sample for this last dataset, I abandoned exemplarity in order to avoid over-representation by interviewing the same feminists and to promote a rotation of voices within the community. Instead, I drew on a voluntary sample from local organisations working directly with abused women throughout Quebec. The recruitment protocol consisted of emailing groups to get in touch with feminists. The “snowball” technique (Beaud, 2009) was grafted on to this protocol, as respondents referred me to others and the representative of an umbrella organization contacted member groups to make them aware of my invitation to participate in a study on the impact of anti-feminism⁹. Although racialized women participated in the study, my third dataset is definitely rather homogenous: the majority of informants are white (European origin), heterosexual and cis-gender and have an undergraduate or graduate university degree. This said, their profile corresponds to the majority of those working in the feminist movement, a fact which has led to a lot of critiques of the logics of inclusion and exclusion operating within the feminist movement (Ouali, 2015; Ricci, 2015). Overall, I have a particularly rich general dataset which allowed me to obtain a satisfying degree of saturation; that is, to arrive at that moment where “the last data collected teaches nothing or almost nothing” (Kaufmann, 2008: 31).

Qualitative analysis

To examine these three datasets, I made a temporal triangulation of the interviews carried out between 2006 and 2015 in such a way as to highlight the feminist work of meaning-making in relation to the tactical transformations of masculinism. Briefly, the interviews in the first dataset (2006) took place during the consolidation phase of masculinism (starting in 2005) corresponding to the growing visibility of activist groups using a tactic of spectacular direct action. During this period, masculinist activists succeeded in drawing media attention to the two counter-frames examined here: the symmetry of violence and female violence against men (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2011). The second dataset was compiled during the institutionalization phase (starting in 2010), marked by the professionalization of masculinist discourse, for example, with academic specialists on the “status of men” and case-workers for men. In other words, the 2005-2010 period was marked by the spread of counter-frames beyond masculinist activist organizations into the community sector and political institutions. As regards the terms collected, the impact of the counter-frames on feminist discourse is already palpable even while the feminist resistance was in full swing, notably through popular education about masculism (as discussed below). Finally, the third dataset (2013-2015) shows that the institutionalization of masculinism continued, notably because activists with revengeful attitudes began to adopt an air of respectability, even convincing feminists to work with them. This dataset thus confirms that the impacts of masculinism observed

⁹ I can’t name her, but I hope that, if she reads this note, she will know I am talking about her because I would like to sincerely thank her for her support.

during the second period is sustained, and provides an understanding of the phenomenon of partial disengagement. In general, these tactical transformations show the complexity of the interactions which clarify my understanding of the effects of antifeminism.

Borrowing from feminist epistemology a research method which *interprets*, rather than *validates*, the perceptions of study participants (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 2003; Hill Collins, 2004), I show that masculinism produces diverse orders of effects on the feminist movement; notably, political (affecting the capacity of the movement to access financial and material resources), organizational (around the transformations of the tactical repertoire), and biographical (including the effects on activist engagement). I draw on this dataset to offer an analysis of the effect of masculinist counter-framing on the work of meaning-making about violence against women.

As mentioned above, the social movement framing perspective most often adopts a qualitative method of analysis of the contents of activist or media publications. For my part, I mobilized a research method relying on semi-directive interviews. This had the advantage of isolating the work of meaning-making consciously undertaken and duly named by study participants, independently of my interpretation. As we shall see below, I analyze the work of identifying counter-frames which are problematic to feminists, as well as the impact these counter-frames have on feminist work of meaning-making about violence, using a research method which might be less common but avoids the pitfalls of approaches which disregard the subjectivity of the activists interviewed.

I thus do not seek to establish overly narrow (and “objective”) causal links between actions, or even a movement’s demands and their effects (Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak and Giugni, 2003; Staggenborg, 2012), focusing instead on the effects of anti-feminism as perceived by feminists. In other words, although it is risky to establish causal links between masculinist counter-framing and specific impacts on the feminist movement, what can be said is that the mere perception of an “anti-feminist threat” is sufficient to provoke changes in feminist discourse. Simply said, if you are convinced that an extra-terrestrial invasion is imminent and dangerous, this perception of reality in itself is enough to change your behaviour, even if there is absolutely no evidence of such a threat. However, in this case, the existence of an anti-feminist movement is well documented by research and the task we have undertaken is to assess the effects of the perception of the threat of masculinism.

Likewise, there is broad agreement that an analysis of effects should primarily be concerned with the perception of these effects in order to understand reactions, especially in terms of shifts in tactics (Kurzman, 1996; Meyer, 2004; McAdam, 2005; Kriesi, 2009; Mathieu, 2010; Staggenborg, 2012). For example, one respondent said that she did not know the source of an anonymous death threat targeting her group, but as a “first reflex, said that it was probably an attack by a masculinist, anti-feminist group in the area” (Q4-RT10a). Although she did not know the real intention behind the attack, she still decided to

increase security measures against potential anti-feminist attacks. In short, it seems appropriate to privilege the interview as a research method to understand the effects of the counter-movement; not least because these effects can be assessed by studying the subjectivity of the actors concerned (Polletta, 1998; Meyer, 2006). Moreover, the interviews offer greater insight into feminists' relationship to political engagement and related affective dimensions than media coverage and activist documents do.

More specifically, the content analysis involved reformulating the perception of informants, as well as interpreting their experience (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2008). I first separated effects arising from environments external to the feminist movement (e.g. ties with political partners in the fight against different forms of violence) from those related to the community's internal dynamics (notably the impact on their analyses of forms of violence), to take into account the contexts of the statements. This first thematic classification enabled me to identify contextual factors which interact - even interlock - with the impact of the counter-movement. Specifically, neoliberal policies and funding cuts to feminist organizations interact with funding for support groups for violent men and the vocabulary feminists use to convince officials to prioritize their fight against violence towards women. In other words, the study shows that many women had to make "compromises" in their discourses (internal effect) to obtain the state funding necessary for the survival of their organizations. This took place in a context of public funding falling victim to the re-engineering and austerity policies of the Jean Charest liberal government, while in the view of feminists, masculinist lobbying undermined feminists' credibility with decision-makers (external effect).

Next, I carried out a transversal analysis; that is, I highlighted each category "cutting across" (Combessie, 2007: 65) the "internal effects" file and then the "external effects" file. This step allowed me to categorize information according to the type of impact (political, organizational, discursive and biographical) while distinguishing effects of external environment from internal movement dynamics for each type (e.g. internal political impact and external political impact). Furthermore, the work of categorizing is the first step in thematic analysis, namely, "the transposition [of the dataset] onto a certain number of themes representing the analyzed content in relation to the orientation of the research" (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2008: 162). Still on method, I next identified relevant themes without software. I nevertheless took care to retain minority statements (such as two respondents who believed that feminists should work with men in difficulty) for the sake of nuance and to highlight the complexity of feminist milieux and their internal divisions. I proceeded with an uninterrupted classification, noting and identifying "in the course of reading" (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2008: 166), then regrouping, and sometimes merging, to arrive at the four main categories listed above: 1) political (including capacity to fight violence); 2) discursive (including words that are no longer acceptable to talk about violence); 3) organizational (including security measures to protect themselves against antifeminist violence) and 4) biographical effects (such as disengagement). As mentioned above, I will generally focus on discursive effects

inspired by the work of Benford and Snow (2000) and then look at biographical effects by discussing disengagement. The framing analysis suggested by these writers is one of the most useful tools to highlight the dynamic nature of the conflict between the feminist movement and its anti-feminist counter-movement. In addition, their theory, aimed at identifying diagnostic and prognostic framing, enables us to pinpoint exactly what is at play in the work of signification of participants in the study.

The effects of counter-frames on feminist discourses about violence against women

Before addressing the transformations of the work of meaning-making about violence against women, I will look briefly at the work of counter-framing undertaken by the counter-movement; its efforts to “rebut, undermine or neutralize” (Benford and Snow, 2000: 626) the feminist frame of violence against women. As noted above, my data enabled me to identify two counter-frames which push feminists to express themselves within terms established by the masculinist part of the anti-feminist counter-movement: **symmetry of violence**; and **women’s violence against men**.

Playing with the idea that equality between men and women has been achieved, masculinists maintain that we should be *equally* concerned about violence targeting women and men. In this way, masculinists promote the idea of “equality of violence” or symmetry of conjugal violence, reducing control (domination) of one over the other to a conflict (negotiation) between two partners (Prud’homme and Bilodeau 2005). For example, the work of psychologist and sexologist Yvon Dallaire (2002: 22, 28), well known in Quebec, Belgium, francophone Switzerland, and France, argues that there are naturally “two co-creators” and that “the two sexes equally initiate conjugal violence,” and even that men are more heavily affected by violence than women (symmetry of violence as the first counter-frame). In the same breath, Dallaire addresses the issue of women’s violence, which constitutes the second counter-frame identified by respondents. In brief, according to masculinists, female violence against men is under-estimated; in large part, this is because men do not dare denounce it. They say that it is also because the violence is more psychological than physical and thus more difficult to perceive. Finally, the issue of women’s violence against men has become a taboo nurtured by feminists who fight male violence.

These two counter-frames are thought by study participants to be the most likely to resonate with established ideas, beliefs, and ideologies that are commonly held and broadly shared by the population (Chong and Druckman 2012; Trumpy 2015). In this light, a feminist offers a glimpse into the work of identifying counter-frames which force feminists to,

“construct a discourse, how to say it, coherent but fact-based [...] the best way to do it is to publicly deconstruct those discourses which are not marginal [...] To

give an example, say, “Look, women are going to ask for money from Status of Women Canada because they are going to steal \$400,000 and then they say that there are violent men, it’s their way of getting money” you don’t respond to that. On the other hand, if publicly, systematically, you hear: “women are also violent. We know that women are also violent. Look at the statistics.” At some point, you have to respond to that discourse. So, when I say that the anti-feminist discourse is organized in a coherent way, a coherent counter-discourse has to be constructed. Not just by saying “Ah! anti-feminists, they’re a bunch of maniacs.” (Q7-ATR-7).

The identification of the counter-frame of “women’s violence,” as in the example given by this informant, influences the work of constructing the interpretative schema of violence against women.

I chose to first examine the transformations of this interpretive schema using two of the three steps of Benford and Snow’s (2000) process of framing because it seemed best-suited to render both the discursive conflict between masculinism and feminism and its effects on the feminist analysis of violence against women, as elucidated by study participants. That being said, I then take a step back from framing analysis to get a better understanding of the impact of masculinism on the radicalism of feminist discourse. Finally, I complete the analysis on the impact of counter-framing to document the consequences of the framing struggle on the engagement of feminists in an original way.

The victimization of women and the identification of men as perpetrators of violence

Faced with a struggle aimed at dismantling their frame, feminists adjust their diagnostic framing; that is, their identification of the problem (violence against women) or their adversaries (violent men¹⁰). An informant attests to the influence of the symmetry of violence counter-frame on how the problem is identified in the following terms:

[there] is a distortion in the discourse and particularly about violence against women [...] Yes, there are men who are victims of violence and, among these, [in] a few rare cases, the perpetrator is a woman, but does this problem necessitate a kind of shelter of the same kind as women who are victims of murder [...] and these women, if we don’t put them in a safe environment, they will die. I have seldom heard of the death of a man killed by his female partner (Q3-RT11).

Recalling that deadly partner violence primarily affects female partners or former female partners is thus part of a diagnostic reframing in response to

¹⁰ That said, “consensus regarding the source of the problem does not follow automatically from agreement regarding the nature of the problem.” (Benford and Snow 2010: 616). For this reason, the nature of the problem of male violence will not be discussed.

masculinist challenges to statistics about the victimization of women in contexts of conjugal violence. Informants reach this point having gained new perspectives through “developing background knowledge about risk assessment, we have also begun to introduce, in the discourse on conjugal violence [...] risk of assault [for women], risk of homicide, risk for women and for children. I think that this was a way of showing that not all was equal and that while it was all very well to have an anti-feminist discourse, women continued to pay for it with their lives” (Q10-RT5).

To convince people that women are the main victims of conjugal violence, feminists also chose to rely on statistics seen as more credible, sidelining research based on probability sampling: “perhaps around 30% of criminal acts are reported, but we are forced to fall back on [...] police statistics, even though we know very well that violence is under-reported, they are the only statistics showing us that women are more abused than men, because with Statistics Canada’s methodology, things are even-steven” (Q10-RT5).

Feminists thus feel they are “forced to fall back on” on “public safety data” (Q5-ATR2); which is more difficult to challenge but underestimates the problem because many abused women never make a complaint, and numerous complaints are rejected by the police. According to the informants, the symmetry of violence counter-frame undermines the credibility of feminists because it benefits from the reputation of the institutions and researchers helping to promote it. In response, respondents resort to figures and definitions produced by recognized institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) (also see Ayoub and Chetaille 2017 for LGBTQI in the Polish context). Consequently, they engage in a conflict over statistics, started by the masculinists, both to prove the victimization of women and maintain their credibility with decision-makers and the public. Following this logic, a feminist explains, “we really based our statements on research, which maybe we didn’t do before. [...] Because we may have thought that there was a certain level of information about the problem, but there isn’t” (Q6-RT5). This approach is thus perceived as “a change in our ways of doing things, the fact that we have to show, all the time [...] what the reality is for women” (Q6-RT5), because, as Robert Benford and David Snow (2000: 619) remind us, the framing is more credible if the evidence put forward is plentiful and culturally acceptable.

For some, maintaining credibility not only involves the use of research data but also taking a distance from one’s emotions¹¹, echoing Nancy Whittier (2001), who emphasizes that the movement against child abuse in the United States modulates its emotional norms according to the context. In the case of the feminists interviewed, a process of rationalization is at work, with feminists believing they are “less emotional in our arguments. Give less emotional responses. [...] Be more prepared [...] because we are women ... And that has often been our Achilles’ heel” (Q10-ARR2800). In short, responding in a “more theoretical way” to anti-feminist attacks is part of the work of meaning-making

¹¹ See Groves and Whittiers in *Passionate Politics*.

to show “[that] we are capable of being articulate, we are capable of being strategic, we are capable of being strong” (Q7-ATR17).

Faced with the counter-frame of the symmetry of violence, the definition of the opponent - that is, violent men - in the diagnostic framing of male violence against women has also undergone transformation (for the case of anti-choice, pro-choice, see Trumpy 2015). Not only is the work of framing influenced by media discourse psychologizing violent men and their “distress” (Q10-RT10b), it is equally influenced by “the masculinist argument (and its position in Quebec) [which] has the potential of convincing part of the public that men are considered the enemies of the women’s movement and that they suffer negative consequences from the transformations it has brought about” (Goulet 2010: 94). Following Émilie Goulet, I adopt the concepts of “enemy boundary creep” and “boundary-push back” developed by Jocelyn Elise Crowley (2009) to grasp this phenomenon. The latter enrich the counter-framing analysis by providing a good understanding of the interactive nature of the process of framing and counter-framing, as suggested in particular by the works of Esacove (2004), Mary Burke and Mary Bernstein (2014) examined above. That is, by arguing that feminists unjustly accuse all men of being violent (enemy boundary creep), anti-feminists aim to challenge the analysis of asymmetric violence, and even the identification of men as perpetrators of violence (boundary-push back). The “boundaries” of the definition of the opponent have shifted and feminists testify that they must be careful not to give the impression that they lack empathy for “suffering men” (Q11-ARR10; Q9-ATRb).

From my dataset of interviews, it seems feminists are unable or no longer able to ignore the reduction of feminism to an “anti-men” movement. To counter anti-feminist enemy border creep, an informant tells how she has to explain, in workshops she facilitates, that feminism “is good for both women and men” (Q13-RT7). In general, they say, “you have to walk on eggshells” (Q5-RT4) and constantly repeat that men are not excluded from feminist struggles (Q10-ARR8), that “men also” or “yes men” are victims of conjugal and sexual violence (Q11-ARR9; Q5-RT7). Boundary-push back thus affects the porousness of the boundary between “us feminists” and an ill-defined opponent¹². Enemy boundary creep influences the diagnostic framing of feminists who often hasten to clarify that men in general are not opponents of feminism and that they can also belong to the category of “victim” (Q5-RT3), which was not the case “15 years ago” (Q7-RT10b).

Because men are now victims alongside women, the feminists interviewed testified that they had to modify the vocabulary used to speak about the problem of violence against women. As one respondent remarked, “before, when we spoke about ‘violence against women’, you didn’t have someone automatically saying ‘yes but men too’. Now, whether it is a training or media interview, I

¹²That said, anti-feminism contributes to this confusion but is not its sole cause. For years, observers have discussed the difficulty feminists have in naming one or more opponent. (Atkinson 1975)

know that if I say ‘women victims’ too often, I will be told, ‘yeah, but there are male victims’. So, I tend, for example, to use the term ‘victim’, rather than ‘woman victim’” (Q5-RT4).

The feminist frame of violence against women is thus transformed so that the term “women” disappears from the discourse, giving way to “victims” without further precision or, in French, to a term equivalent to “individual” victims of sexual violence (Q5-RT8). It is noteworthy that no respondent specified that she had adopted the neutral term “victim” for the purpose of including the victimization of trans people; a fact which deserves to be analyzed in its own right. Another person who worked in the field also engaged in the work of (re-) making meaning, but in her case by deciding to:

... speak about male conjugal violence, to qualify this violence, in order to make up in some way for precisely the impact of symmetry, because well [...] the counter-discourse says that just as many, or even more, women are violent, we said, it’s a way of naming the thing and then categorizing it. Between men and women, which suffer from or use violence? This was our objective, but it became a matter of changing what we called things, in all our communications (Q10-RT10b).

That said, this group’s choice was more marginal in contrast to the attempt to silence the male specificity of violence against women. Thus, not only the definition of the opponent has transformed under the impact of the counter-frames of the symmetry of violence and women’s violence, but also the identification of the problem (that is, male violence against women) in the diagnostic framing.

The counter-frame of the violence of women sometimes fuels debates over subjects viewed as taboo, namely women’s violence. A minority of feminists interviewed believed that women’s violence remained a contentious topic amongst feminists. But, to avoid abandoning the field to masculinist analyses of women’s violence, some participants wanted to enter this field of research, long deemed untouchable, while still finding it difficult to do so because of: 1) the wariness of some feminists about broaching this issue; 2) the lack of feminist analysis on the topic; 3) the effects such analyses might have on privileged vocabulary; and 4) the fear that it would be used to lend credence to masculinist assumptions about the symmetry of violence in conjugal contexts.

What they fear from this type of undertaking can be illustrated by looking at brochures for “specific clientele,” including male victims and gender minorities, produced by the Quebec government’s *Secrétariat de la Condition féminine* (Status of Women Secretariat) and distributed by the *Table de concertation en violence conjugale de Montréal* (coordinating body on conjugal violence of Montreal)¹³. In these brochures (see image below), both the masculine and feminine are used for people who are violent against gender minorities, while

¹³ Found at: <http://www.tcvcm.ca/files/vous/HV-SCF-FR.pdf>

only the feminine is used to designate the partner-perpetrator against men. The brochure on violence against men thus implies that men are only abused by women and not by other men.



(Screenshot, Jun 2th 2021)

In sum, the innovation produced in the diagnostic framing by the masculinist counter-frame of women's violence mainly consists of an opening on the part of feminists - embryonic and not a matter of consensus – to reflect on women's violence. This innovation does not, however, question the prognostic framing about the need to provide services to women.

Solutions to problems of violence against women

The conflictual dialogue also affects the prognostic framing of solutions to the problem of violence against women. However, the latter does not appear to be undergoing a major re-working of meaning. That is, feminists interviewed did not, in any way, question their services or the accompaniment of victims as priority, though partial, solutions to the problem of violence against women. The prognostic framing nevertheless appears to have been influenced by the introduction of men's victimization into the diagnostic framing of violence against women. Following this logic, feminists believe they must justify investing in and promoting women-only services as a solution to violence against women, which triggers adjustments in the prognostic framing. It is worth noting that study respondents did not refer to challenges to women-only resources for abused women in relation to the inclusion of non-binary people. The conflict was entirely about including the needs of cis-gender men, abused by a cis-gender woman in the context of a heterosexual couple, in feminist services.

In this way, a respondent complained of being forced to respond to criticisms about the exclusion of men from their services. When asked why her group does not take care of battered men, she reacts by saying,

“Do you buy your pills [at a grocery store]?” So, they understand somehow that this isn't the right place and I'm not the one who's going to figure out their problems. If there are battered men, I'm not saying there aren't, but it doesn't belong here. At some point, we are forced to defend it this way and even, a little more often, a little more aggressively sometimes (Q&-RT2).

While justifying the relevance of services for women, feminists are called upon to position themselves on the relevance of “resources for men” (which aim at rehabilitating violent men), such as this activist, who notes, “in my discourse, you know, I say, ‘yes, it's okay to have resources for men.’ I am still softening things a little” (Q10-ATR18). During the 1990s and 2000s, some of these groups, for example, replaced the expression “oppressive men” with “men in difficulty” (Q12-RT14). Twenty years later, some of these groups are described by respondents as anti-feminist or masculinist. In the context of budget cuts, the inclusion of resources for violent men in the prognostic framing certainly does not allow feminists to modulate the importance officials give to organizations for violent men as a priority solution to violence, to the detriment of their own resources nor, explains a former bureaucrat (Q3-RT11), the resulting funding.

In short, feminists now take male victims or perpetrators into account in their analysis of solutions to problems of sexual and conjugal violence, whether intentionally or not (Q6-ARR1100). While upholding their mandate, the feminists interviewed responded to the prognostic counter-frame of the symmetry of violence (support male victims too) by insisting on the specificity

of their mandate or by evoking “resources for men” or “groups for violent partners”; generic terms which include masculinist organizations.

The deradicalization of feminist discourse

Moreover, feminist vocabulary sometimes seems to be prohibited from the work of meaning-making in general. To convince the greatest number possible, some feminists avoid using the word “feminist” to identify themselves, their approach, or perspective. My data also shows that some sense a deradicalization of feminist discourse. I will thus look at the perceptions of deradicalization of the discourse in general as a discursive (relating to the difficulty of naming the root of the problem; namely, patriarchy) and political (relating to the kind of social transformation implied by a radical analysis of the problem) effects of anti-feminism.

In fact, in contexts in which feminists fear the presence of anti-feminists, many speak about “diluting” (Q7-RT13) feminist discourse, “because if we do not dilute it, we are no longer listened to” one of them believes (Q5-RT7). For example, she no longer uses “the word *patriarchy* or *oppression*” (Q5-RT7) in her workshops. It appears that the perception feminists have of the public’s position on feminist demands partly explains the deradicalization of their discourse. Alexa Trumpy (2015) observes a similar phenomenon among pro-choice activists in the United States who reject feminism altogether, because they believe that the public considers this label too radical and outmoded. In other words, perception of public beliefs, which masculinists help shape, influences the construction of the feminist identity and its boundaries. Consequently, the reasons for engaging in collective action seem to have “softened,” to adopt the words of one respondent (Q5-ATR3). Another explains she is “fed up having the focus on me. So, for me, this kind of smothers the assertion of our organization’s feminism, of me as a woman.” (Q12-RT10a). The same is true for a feminist activist on the periphery of the big urban centres who believes that by adopting a “mainstreaming” approach, she can be more convincing about the relevance of her analysis (Q1-ATR14). Another informant believes that in remote areas, they “smooth out the discourse [...] to please funders” (Q5-RT2). That said, some believe that muzzling one’s feminism constitutes a “retreat of historic proportions” (Q5-ATR6b) whether or not it is done to protect oneself or to be heard.

The causes of deradicalization are, however, multiple and not limited to anti-feminism. Factors include the professionalization of feminist interventions, seen as the source of a “tendency to privilege a psychological and clinical approach to the issue of abused women, to the detriment of a social vision.” (Prud’homme, 2010: 138). The “fear” of not being “able to respond” to their detractors is another explanatory factor of “deradicalization and even [of the] difficulty of calling oneself feminist as a shelter worker,” believes a social service worker (Q7-RT8).

That said, according to informants, anti-feminism does contribute to the deradicalization of feminist discourse. One of them notes that radicalism is sometimes openly prohibited: “when I was invited to give a training, the woman on the phone told me, ‘Don’t be too radical’ [...] Feminism is watered down or we are non-feminist; for me, that’s a result of anti-feminism.” (Q5-RT13). This informant agrees with the analysis of Canadian criminologist Molly Dragiewicz (2008: 137) when she argues that anti-feminist rhetoric, “not only fails to challenge feminist research and theorizing on violence, but also points to the centrality of the relationship between patriarchy and men’s violence against women.” In the same vein, Susan Marshall (1997) shows that the explicit rejection of radicalism was an effect of the counter-movement on women’s suffrage in the United States. In the contemporary Quebec feminist movement, the removal of “part of the radical analysis” (Q10-ATR5) also seems to be a result of “pressure,” sometimes coming from their own circles, particularly from colleagues. A social service worker nevertheless notes that,

my discourse, I haven’t yet decided to change it, though my colleagues want me to. But, over my dead body! [...] You know, that’s their solution, to smooth out the discourse and muzzle it a bit. That’s what they’ve decided to do. We don’t always agree, we don’t always give the same service, but anyway [...], I think that they kind of avoid the source of the problem. That they avoid naming it, how do we do that and why and what it is called to do that. That is, how can there be anti-feminists, how can this be (Q10-RT2).

This study participant also highlights that her colleagues do not all have the same awareness of the impact of anti-feminism on their circles, which makes them less vigilant. She also draws links between a loss of radicalism in discourse and the type of actions now prioritized in the struggle against sexual violence: “I noticed in my first 10 years, you know, we went to the wall, and our actions were more radical if you like, the day of action, it’s well it’s always the same small action, it’s cute, it’s nice, it’s soft [...] that’s the effect this has. I always have the impression that I have to keep my foot on the brakes” (Q5-RT2).

In sum, feminist discourse seems to be losing its radicalism; this impact is both discursive, in the way in which violence against women is discussed, and political, watering down the causes of violence against women.

Anti-feminism as grounds for feminist engagement

My dataset nevertheless shows that masculinism has an impact which could be described as running counter to strategies to undermine the feminist movement. This is a reawakening impact on what respondents generally refer to as “popular education”, and what I have recategorized as “educational tactics”. In brief, educational tactics essentially aim to inform women about their history and their rights. A respondent also included educational content “on our socialization, our victimization, to understand this whole system,” because, in

her view, “if all women understood it, there would be no holding back.” (Q13-RT1).

Among the diverse study and training initiatives or popular education workshops, some attempt to improve understanding of the phenomenon of anti-feminism and equip feminists to better counter anti-feminists. For example, the “quick response” guide *Paroles féministes, controns le ressac!* (Feminist Talk, Let’s Counter the Backlash) produced in 2005 by the *Table de concertation de Laval en condition féminine* disseminate feminist discourse and educate women against masculinist discourse. For its part, the *Conseil du statut de la femme* (Quebec government’s Council on the Status of Women) organized study and training days on masculinism, one informant recalls (Q6-ATR3). An informant (Q7-ARR2800) also gives the example of the 2006 publication of *Cassez la vague* (Break the Wave), a guide providing “a response to the so-called arguments about the symmetry of conjugal violence.” Another recalls a training (Q12-ARR1300) outlining the masculinist backlash against shelters for women victims of conjugal violence.

These different examples of trainings highlight the fact that anti-feminism is now one of the bases for feminist engagement against violence against women. Since 2005, anti-feminism has been identified as an opponent; an opponent which is a motivation for feminist engagement and, more precisely, for collective action against violence against women. In other words, according to the observations of David Meyer, Suzanne Staggenborg (1996), Bert Useem, Mayer Zald (2009) and Kelsy Kretschmer (2014), even though conflicts between a movement and its counter-movement awaken internal divisions (notably over the inclusion of cis-gender men), in the case of the feminist movement, they can nevertheless still rally feminists against a common opponent.

As a structuring opponent of the feminist tactical repertoire, the inclusion of anti-feminism as grounds for engagement echoes the us/them frame of the American gay and lesbian movement identified by Tina Fetner (2001). A respondent notes that “in the framework [of the campaign] 12 days of action for the elimination of violence against women, [...] one of the 14 ways of struggling against violence was to talk about anti-feminist discourses” (Q6-ATR19). Another feminist adds, “I was looking at everything that has been written lately. We always talk about anti-feminism. Whether it is in our memories, we always make them central to our interventions, our arguments” (Q6-ATR6b).

The effects of masculinism on feminist engagement

However, anti-feminism also leads to a more arms’ length engagement. Moreover, it “can generate disengagement. We lose feminist activists with this exhaustion,” a respondent believes (Q7-RT11). Others are “revolted” by having to “fight, having to defeat the same arguments all over again all the time,” (Q14-RT1) meaning masculinist arguments about conjugal and sexual violence. While they are still working for the feminist movement, their convictions and their engagement in feminist struggles are apt to lose their force. To use sociologist

Bert Klandermans' term (2005: 96), this form of disengagement is explained by a conviction of "insufficient gratification" following a perception of lack of "means to achieve political or social change." A feminist echoes the words of the sociologist by arguing that, "the older ones [...] I have seen many of them fold their arms and just do their job, that's it. [...] Well, that's it. [...] discouragement, disengagement: 'Look, we are not going to change the world'. I have seen many go with the flow [...] and then limit opportunities for confrontation as much as possible" (Q10-RT8).

For feminists who "go with the flow," disengagement remains limited because it is kept in check by "routine action," that is, "forms of every day action" (McAdam, 2005: 71) which keep feminists working for the movement, but without much political enthusiasm. This process of taking a distance from one's convictions is consistent with the figure of the "distanced activist" (Ricci, Blais and Descarries, 2008: 8) whose engagement shows detachment; detachment allowing one to "find a better personal balance at the same time as articulating a vision of a more rational and composed world." Everything seems to indicate that, within such a dynamic, anti-feminism can lead to a "lack of desire to take action," a lack of "desire to get involved," regardless of the age of the activists, because "conjugal violence alone is already a lot. Adding all of these movements, adds even more" (Q14-RT4). This feeling of being overloaded caused by anti-feminism helps lower "expectations" (Q13-ARR16) and undermines "hope for change" and even the feminist utopia, because "we forget to dream," one respondent believes (Q8-ATR4).

These symbolic (psychological and political distancing) and material (resignation, relocation and disengagement) displacements also refer to mobility experiences within the feminist movement itself. Representing the trajectory of the "ordinary leaver," as defined by Olivier Fillieule (2005: 20), a feminist recounts having left a feminist organization to join another, also feminist. In her words,

there is this whole rise of masculinism but there is also the fact that groups, which were radical groups, are less strong about defending the discourse. [...] this change, for me it had already begun to happen in the shelters. So, I found that more and more difficult. I remember what I said was, "My god, it's already super difficult to fight with the outside. I can't deal with also doing, having this fight on the inside, so I think I no longer belong." (Q5-RT8).

Highlighting deradicalization as the first process caused by anti-feminism, this respondent offers a glimpse of the effects of anti-feminism on the "activist career" or on the "continuation of objective changes in positions and the associated series of subjective realignments" (Fillieule, 2009: 87). It can be added that those who "move" (Klandermans, 2005: 107) sometimes have difficulty finding work outside the feminist movement because of prejudices against feminism, to which the counter-movement contributes. In short, anti-feminism even affects the trajectory of feminists outside the feminist

community. In the words of one study participant, “when they saw me arrive with my CV [with the name of the feminist organization], I can tell you that you don’t pass just anywhere, just that, and I found myself in a workplace where lots of jokes were made” about her feminism (Q1-ATR6b). Even though anti-feminism is not the only cause of mockery, it nevertheless undermines the credibility of feminists in workplaces outside the movement, which seems to have made the search for a new job more difficult for this feminist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an analysis of the interactions between framing and counter-framing sheds light on the dynamics between engagement and disengagement. As we have just seen, masculinist counter-framing is one of their tactics which leads to a form of disengagement, a “more distanced engagement”. However, this study also shows the mixed impact of masculinism; highlighting in an original way that a counter-movement, in the same period of time, can also stimulate a social movement. That said, it would be interesting to look at whether anti-feminism is more specifically at issue in cases where people are off-work because of depression.

On these contrasting effects of masculinism on feminist engagement, I would add that feminists are less likely to see how masculinism stimulates their engagement. At least that is what an investigation of anti-feminism in private life reveals (Blais and Chrétien, 2018). Beyond the examples of educational tactics discussed in this article (e.g., anti-feminist training), feminists deploy a multitude of resistance tactics against anti-feminist attacks, even in their intimate lives. In this regard, the self-defence guide, *Votre antiféminisme, nos réponses* (Your Antifeminism, Our Responses) presents 7 types of verbal responses and individual and collective maneuvers. We find not only reasoning and humour, as when a feminist wants to escape an unpleasant conversation by saying, “I’m going to go burn my bra, I’ll get back to you in a moment” (quoted in Blais and Chrétien, 2018: 21), but also breaking away from family members and developing a chosen family, or defiance of gender norms, particularly by cutting one’s hair, since masculinists come down hard on women with short hair. Finally, some feminists have come to physically retaliate against anti-feminists and also try to mobilize the women around them to better respond collectively to family members who maintain anti-feminist discourses.

Considering everything, it seems that the analysis of counter-frames merits special attention when examining the dynamics of (dis)engagement. Initiatives combining content analysis of activist production with semi-directed interviews, making it possible to place narratives within organizational practice and biographical trajectories, seem most promising. In addition to proposing new lines of research, this article has been an opportunity to highlight the value of taking framing/counter-framing conflict into account when analyzing transformations of social movements.

Finally, as an opponent of the feminist movement, masculinism must be taken seriously when trying to understand the discursive shifts in organizations working against violence. Alongside factors generally identified as the most likely to lead to changes in feminist organizations, such as professionalization (Delage, 2017; Côté, 2016), is the non-negligible factor of masculinism. Consequently, I hope that I have succeeded in drawing attention to the significance of this conflict, especially in terms of the effects of self-censorship and deradicalization, not to mention the time feminists pour into countering this structuring opponent of their tactical repertoire and work of meaning-making.

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Personal outcomes of activist interpreting: a case study

Mark Halley

Abstract

In this paper, I explore how social movement participation may impact the personal and professional lives of interpreters. To do so, I studied the American Sign Language/English interpreters who worked in the 1988 Deaf President Now protest at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. I conducted semi-structured oral history interviews with 21 interpreters who worked during the protest, and I employed narrative inquiry to identify critical events and analyze the personal outcomes interpreters experienced as a result of their participation. Specifically, the analysis reveals that interpreters' experiences in the protest contributed to their evolving views on the roles of interpreters and of deaf people, as well as to unforeseen personal and professional benefits. Taken together, the findings suggest that the experiences of signed language interpreters in contentious political settings may differ markedly from their work in other environments, contributing to personal transformation. Further, this data demonstrate how interpreters are embedded in protests in ways that parallel the experiences of other social movement actors.

Keywords: interpreting, disability rights, outcomes, case study, protest

Background

Deaf President Now: a history

Founded in 1864, Gallaudet University is the only university in the world designed for deaf¹ and hard of hearing students. Despite this, every president of the university had been hearing (non-deaf) until 1988. That same year, when the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees appointed another hearing person as

¹ In 1978, the term 'deaf' was capitalized (i.e., 'Deaf') for the first time in an academic paper to refer to a distinction between being culturally deaf, as opposed to audiotologically deaf (Markowicz & Woodward, 1978). In response to debate over the term among academics, Woodward and Horejes (2016) argue that "a rigid taxonomy of deaf/Deaf is dangerous, colonizing, and ethnocentric, and it reinforces tautological and spiral debates with no positive constructions to the understanding of what it means to be deaf/Deaf" (p. 286). Deaf cultural values and the differences between deaf/Deaf identities are not the focus of this article. Therefore, I choose to avoid the taxonomy described by Woodward and Horejes (2016) and do not to capitalize the word 'deaf' when referring to individuals who may be audiotologically deaf, culturally deaf, or both. Rather, I use 'deaf' in a broad sense of the word, to include individuals with a hearing loss who may or may not identify with American deaf culture, use American Sign Language as a primary means of communication, and consider themselves to be members of the American deaf community.

the university's seventh president, students and other members of the deaf community protested the decision. The uprising, which later came to be known as the Deaf President Now (DPN) protest, garnered media attention in the United States and across the globe. Dozens of American Sign Language/English interpreters volunteered in the protest, ensuring the communication needs of protesters, the press, and the public were met (Gannon 1989). The interpreters, who exhibited a collective identity with the protesters (Halley 2019), provided their services in a wide variety of claims-making activities (Lindekilde 2013) that took place during the demonstrations, including radio, newspaper, and television interviews, and public rallies, among other events. The protest was a historic milestone in the struggle for deaf rights, as well as in the wider disability rights movement.

If the Deaf President Now protest is regarded as an explosion that was ignited by the deaf community, its fuse was long and winding. Numerous events in American history and within the deaf community culminated in the frustration and collective action that erupted on Gallaudet's campus in 1988. It is impossible to judge any historical shift as an isolated event; rather, situating such a shift—including DPN—within a historical context is necessary to understand the social, cultural, and political influences that drove it. Gannon (2012) documented and explored these influences in his seminal book, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America*.

In framing DPN, one place to begin could be President Abraham Lincoln's 1864 signing of a charter that authorized the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind to confer college degrees to graduates. Soon thereafter, deaf people began establishing a variety of social and political organizations, including the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) in 1880 and the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (NFSF) in 1901. The NAD was founded "by deaf leaders who believed in the right of the American deaf community to use sign language, to congregate on issues important to them, and to have its interests represented at the national level," (NAD, n.d.).

These institutions and associations set the stage for greater opportunities for information sharing and organizing over the years. Deaf citizens in the United States have been involved in numerous protests and other civic engagement activities for many decades. For an in-depth account of deaf-centered advocacy efforts in the United States, see Gannon (2012).

Developments at Gallaudet in the early 1980s also stirred community discontent, igniting the fuse to the DPN explosion at the end of the decade. In 1982, Dr. Edward C. Merrill, Gallaudet's fourth president, announced his retirement. Deaf people did not actively organize or advocate for the board to appoint a deaf person to lead the university, but some deaf people had been arguing that it was time for a deaf president (Christiansen & Barnartt 1995). In one meeting with members of the board, Merrill suggested that a qualified deaf person should be selected. However, Merrill was replaced by Dr. Lloyd Johns, a hearing man, who ultimately only remained president for two years, until 1984. With Johns' resignation, the board decided not to conduct an exhaustive search

for Gallaudet's sixth president. The board instead appointed Dr. Jerry Lee, a hearing man who then served as Gallaudet's vice president of administration and business, to be the university's sixth president. Lee served as president for three years before announcing his resignation on August 24, 1987. Lee would later be replaced by Dr. Elisabeth Ann Zinser, which resulted in the protest on Gallaudet's campus. Perhaps as a harbinger of the protest to come, NAD and other organizations also opposed the selection of a hearing person as Gallaudet's provost one year prior, in 1986 (Christiansen & Barnartt 1995).

DPN can be seen as part of a wider, thematic context. Jankowski (1997) has suggested events like DPN fall under the umbrella of a broader "Deaf movement" in the United States. Whether the objective is achieving effective communication with a doctor via a qualified interpreter, accessing television programs through legally-mandated closed captioning services, or ensuring deaf children have access to their education in American Sign Language, "communication accessibility is the core of civil rights" in this movement (Barnartt & Scotch 2001: 49). However, it may not be accurate to describe DPN and the deaf movement as situated completely within the larger civil rights movement. Jankowski (1997) suggests that deaf people have generally framed their struggle around issues of culture and diversity, rather than civil rights. Regardless of how one classifies the movement, it is critical to note its three core elements of education, language, and culture (Barnartt & Scotch 2001). Each of these themes emerged as driving forces during DPN.

Although this paper focuses specifically on the work and experiences of interpreters—and therefore aligns well with the academic field of interpreting studies—disability studies and deaf studies are critical backdrops that inform an understanding of DPN and the data explored in this paper. Deaf studies—a term originally coined by Frederick Schreiber, the executive director of the National Association of the Deaf in 1971—is an academic discipline that "originally developed along the model of other minority studies" but "explored a wide spectrum of topics, many of which which [sic] fall under the more general notions of *identity*, *power*, and *language*," (Bauman 2008: 9, emphasis in original). A key concept in deaf studies is *audism*, a term coined by Tom Humphries in 1975, defined as "the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears."

Further, it is not possible to subsume audism and deaf studies within the discipline of disability studies. Rather, there is resistance from both individuals who are deaf and those who work in deaf studies toward traditional conceptualizations of disability. Rejecting the notion of a focus solely on the physical aspects of hearing loss, many deaf studies scholars suggest that their work is in fact "a branch of ethnic studies, separate and distinct from disability studies" (Baynton 2008: 296). However, deaf studies scholars generally recognize that "deaf people are disabled in the sense that they fall outside most cultures' notions of normality and are on that basis denied equal access to social and economic life" (Baynton 2008: 297).

In sum, the Deaf President Now protest did not take place within a vacuum. In the decades leading up to the 1988 rebellion, deaf people had already begun fighting for their civil rights and moved toward self-determination. And while it is not possible to point to DPN as the cause of future milestones, many view the protest as an important step toward the eventual passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 (see, for example, Bauman 2008). The ADA introduced unprecedented legal mandates for accessibility in the United States, such as the right of deaf individuals to interpreting services.

Signed language interpreting in the United States

Interpreting has been defined as a type of translation “in which a first and final rendition in another language is produced on the basis of a one-time presentation of an utterance in a source language,” (Pöchhacker 2004: 11). Interpretation can therefore be differentiated from translation in terms of its immediacy; translators have time to craft their translations and produce a lasting product, whereas the work of interpreters is more immediate and ephemeral in nature.

Like other social phenomena, interpreting is not simply carried out by objective practitioners. In the same way that social movement scholars study the work of movement actors, interpreting studies scholars investigate the work of interpreters. Like social movement studies, interpreting studies is interdisciplinary, having evolved over several decades as researchers have explored various aspects of interpretation (Pöchhacker & Shlesinger 2004). Scholars have studied interpretation and translation using a number of approaches: translation studies and linguistics (see, for example, Chesterman & Arrojo 2000; Nida 1964, 1991; Snell-Hornby 1988), cognitive science and psychology (see, for example, Barik 1972; Goldman-Eisler 1967), and sociocultural research (see, for example, Anderson 1976; Cronin 2002; Wadensjö 2004).

Despite their ostensibly *neutral* positioning, evidence suggests that interpreters are active participants in communication encounters. Historically, professional signed language interpreters have struggled to determine and explain the role they should assume when providing their services (see, for example, Cokely 1984; Frishberg 1986; Ingram 1974; Witter-Merithew 1986). Scholars and practitioners have used a number of definitions, models, and metaphors to describe the role of an interpreter, as well as the challenges interpreters face when enacting their roles. Specifically, interpreters have been conceptualized as providing services according to a number of roles: helper, conduit, communication facilitator, and bilingual, bicultural specialist (Roy 2002). A shift in recent years has moved toward a recognition of the active role interpreters play in managing communication between interlocutors (see, for example, Llewellyn-Jones & Lee 2014; Hauser, Finch, & Hauser 2008; Metzger 1999; Roy 2000; Wadensjö 2004). In what may be described as a perspective that takes into account the broader contributions of translators and

interpreters, Baker (2006b) boldly states “neutrality is an illusion, and thus uncritical fidelity to the source text or utterance also has consequences that an informed translator or interpreter may not wish to be party to” (128).

It may also be helpful to briefly contextualize the state of American Sign Language/English interpreting and interpreter education at the time of the protest. While the earliest records of interpreters can be traced back more than 5,000 years to ancient Egypt, Ball (2018) argues that American Sign Language/English interpreting in the United States likely began in the early 1800s. However, this work did not begin its trajectory toward professionalization until 1963, when a federal grant toward interpreter education was awarded, which resulted in a workshop held at Ball State Teachers College in 1964 (Ball 2013). Over the coming decades, a variety of organizations were pivotal in the professionalization and academicization of interpreting and interpreter education, including the National Association of the Deaf (NAD, founded in 1880), the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID, founded in 1964), and the Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT, founded in 1979).

Moving forward into the 1980s, a wide variety of advancements pushed the interpreting field forward as a profession. By this time, CIT had developed a national presence, hosting its seventh convention just months after DPN. During this decade, educators made great strides toward developing rigorous standards in interpreter training, such as through the development of the CIT/RID Educational Standards Endorsement (ESE) System (Ball 2013). This decade is also notable for new ventures into graduate-level education for interpreters, with the piloting of a master’s degree in interpreter education at Western Maryland College and the development of a master’s degree in interpretation at Gallaudet University. In the decades since DPN, the interpreting field has continued to build its new home in the halls of academia, with standards continuing to rise. For example, since 2012, candidates sitting for national RID certification must possess a bachelor’s degree. Further, educators have recognized that students cannot be expected to learn the intricacies of interpreting in a few short weeks or months. A 2022 search of interpreter education programs listed by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf yields 50 certificate programs, 81 associate-level programs, 55 bachelor-level programs, and six graduate-level programs, including one doctoral program.

Social movement studies: personal outcomes

Despite the far-reaching impacts of DPN, in this paper I focus on a more granular level: I address the personal experiences of the interpreters who offered their services during the protest. Specifically, I examine how the protest impacted the interpreters on both personal and professional levels. To do so, I draw from a variety of theoretical constructs and foundational concepts in social movement studies. I analyze interpreters’ narratives to identify critical events

(Woods 1993) that reveal the personal or biographical outcomes (McAdam 1989) for the interpreters as social movement actors.

Studies of the personal impacts of social movement participation have frequently focused on quantitative, demographic changes and behavior in activists (e.g., marriage and divorce rates, income, having children) and suggest “a strong and enduring impact of participation on the life course of activists” (Giugni 2004: 502). In a public conversation in 2009, famed historian Howard Zinn aptly summarized—if not in academic terms—the benefits of participation in a social movement:²

If you get involved in a movement, whether you win or lose today or tomorrow—because you never know whether you are going to win or lose—you’ve got to do it. Because if you don’t do it, you will lose—definitely. If you act, you will have a chance at winning. A chance. That’s the only way. But if you do get involved, your life will be better. You will feel better. It’s fun to be in a social movement with other people who think and feel the way you do. It makes life more interesting. It makes life more fulfilling. So whether you win or lose, in the meantime you will win.

(AUB Secular Club 2015)

In recent years, researchers have also been interested in the qualitative outcomes that individuals may experience as a result of engaging in activism and social movement participation, many of which mirror Zinn’s sentiments. For example, participation in social movements has been shown to improve self-esteem (Cherniss 1972), self-confidence (Shriver, Miller, & Cable 2003), and well-being (Boehnke & Wong 2011; Klar & Kasser 2009). Researchers have also suggested that movement participation may bring about gender-specific personal outcomes, specifically that New Left activism has stronger biographical consequences for women than for men (Van Dyke, McAdam, & Wilhelm 2000). Further, a set of three studies examining activists’ activity and personal outcomes provided evidence that engaging in activism was correlated with subjective well-being, eudaimonic well-being, and social well-being (Klar & Kasser 2009). Along these lines, a meta-analysis of 57 papers that addressed change revealed nineteen primary forms of psychological changes in activists (Vestergren, Drury, & Chiriac 2017). Evidence from longitudinal research has also demonstrated that collective action in an environmental campaign can lead to psychological change, particularly change driven by intergroup interaction (Vestergren, Drury, & Chiriac 2018). Further, Vestergren, Drury, and Chiriac (2019) also explored how participation in a movement led to eleven types of psychological change, including changes in relationships, well-being, and knowledge. Finally, it should be noted that activists who engage in failed campaigns may still reap positive personal outcomes, as Zinn suggested. In a

² Zinn’s words have been edited for clarity.

longitudinal study of activists in the 2016 US presidential election, Dwyer et al. (2019) found that Hillary Clinton voters who engaged in activism and strongly identified with Clinton's campaign were less likely to experience depression and sleep quality problems following her electoral loss to Donald Trump when compared to other, less enthusiastic and vested Clinton voters.

Despite the wealth of research on personal outcomes of social movement participation, no empirical study has yet examined the consequences experienced by interpreters engaged in movement work. To address this gap in knowledge, I examine the outcomes for interpreters who participated in DPN and explore how their narratives offer insight into the ways in which their participation in the protest impacted their lives. Specifically, I describe a) their evolving views on the roles of interpreters, b) their evolving views about deaf people, and c) the unforeseen benefits of their participation. Taken together, the findings offer insight into the personal outcomes that an individual may experience as a consequence of interpreting in protest environments and demonstrate how interpreter participation in movements leads to unique biographical consequences, clearly situating them as social movement actors.

Method

I recruited interpreters who worked during the protest to participate in semi-structured oral history interviews (Blee & Taylor 2002). I interviewed 21 individuals who provided interpreting services during DPN, fifteen of whom identified as female, and six of whom identified as male. Nineteen identified as white, one identified as Asian, and one identified as being of mixed race. Nine recalled receiving at least some form of financial compensation for their work during DPN, although 14 of the 21 identified primarily as volunteer interpreters. In addition, although eighteen of the interpreters worked with protesters, three primarily worked with the university's board of trustees during the protest (i.e., interpreting for deaf and hearing members of the board). Finally, two of the interpreters who worked with protesters also undertook coordination roles in which they oversaw the provision of interpreting services within the protest (e.g., scheduling interpreters for media interviews).³

Materials and procedure

I created a semi-structured interview protocol (Weiss 1994) to guide data collection. Upon receiving approval from the Gallaudet University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and securing funding, I began contacting and recruiting participants for interviews. Prior to data collection, each participant completed an informed consent form and a videotaping consent form. During the interviews, I encouraged participants to elaborate by asking for clarification and

³ For an organizational overview of the provision of interpreting services in DPN, as well as an analysis of coordination efforts, see Halley (in press).

posing follow-up and probing questions. At the conclusion of each interview, I verbally collected demographic information from participants and offered them compensation for their time.

Analytical approach

The data were analyzed via narrative inquiry and thematic analysis. Webster and Mertova (2007: 6) note that “there is no single narrative inquiry method, but rather a number of methods dispersed among individual disciplines.” However, they argue that narrative inquiry stands apart from other forms of analysis because narrative researchers present the entire story offered by participants, whereas other approaches typically break narratives into piecemeal bits. Through narrative inquiry, researchers may identify critical events, or life experiences that demonstrate changes in an individual’s understanding or worldview (Woods 1993). The overarching analytical aim of this study is to identify critical events associated with personal outcomes experienced by DPN interpreters.

The data was analyzed with a narrative approach, which Mona Baker used to study activist translators (2006a, 2006b, 2010a, 2010b, 2013). Finally, I also employed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to thematic analysis.

Findings

The findings in this section center on interpreters’ a) evolving views on the roles of interpreters, b) evolving views about deaf people, and c) unforeseen benefits. I present an analysis of each of these themes paired with supporting narratives shared by the participants.

Evolving views on the roles of interpreters

DPN interpreters demonstrated shifting views about interpreting and their roles as interpreters.⁴ In their narratives, the participants realized that they needed to take a step back in the protest, rather than attempt to assume control. When recounting her on-the-ground organizing work, an interpreter coordinator told a story about a time she attempted to provide interpreters with preparation materials before a rally:

I always shared as much preparation information as I had with the interpreters. It was one of the last days when Harvey Goodstein⁵ and others were on the stage in

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of not only interpreters’ perceptions of role but also the roles interpreters enacted during DPN, see Halley (2020).

⁵ Dr. Harvey Goodstein was a deaf Gallaudet faculty member and prominent leader of faculty in support of the protest. Goodstein later served on the university’s board of trustees.

the gymnasium. Maybe it was like March 11th on Friday or something like that. But I remember running around to each of the interpreters and saying, 'This, this is gonna come! This is what you can expect.' And my timing wasn't the best, and I really shoulda just let it go, but I wanted to inform everybody of what was going on, and I remember Harvey going, 'What are we waiting for? Come on, we gotta get this thing on the road!' I guess I'd asked them to hold off because I wanted everybody to know what was coming, which is my preference as an interpreter. I like being really prepared ahead of time, and I want as much information as I can get because I feel so much more confident that way. So I remember Harvey specifically saying 'What are we...?' you know, 'We gotta get this thing going!' You know, so it was kind of an error on my part I realized. I kind of held things up a little bit in the efforts of trying to prepare the interpreters... Once I was in the position of having some say in the matter, I wanted to get people as prepared as possible, but I don't know. I'm not sure how much difference it makes really in the end. I realized right at the moment when he said that like, 'What are we waiting for?' You know, 'Let's, let's do this,' and you know, I thought, 'Oh, oops.' [laugh]

In this narrative, the coordinator suggested that her commitment to other interpreters and providing them with as much information as possible in advance may have negatively impacted the protest. She stated that when she had "some say in the matter," she took control over the situation in an attempt to ensure a smooth interpreting process. Referencing her personal preference to prepare for interpreting assignments, she described eagerly supporting interpreters with contextual information before they began working. However, when she was confronted about her actions, she appeared to realize her eagerness delayed the rally, noting the potential hiccup ("Oh, oops."), possibly suggesting a shift in how she saw her role as an interpreter and interpreter coordinator. In this particular case, she crafted a narrative in which she retrospectively saw her coordinating role as potentially causing a minor disruption to the protest. On a larger level, the story speaks to a realization that an undue focus on interpreting quality and the needs of interpreters over the needs of other participants may lead to unintended consequences.

Participants shared many narratives of critical events that led them to reconsider their roles in the protest and their roles as interpreters. An interpreter who worked as a contractor at Gallaudet and provided volunteer interpreting during the protest recounted her experience in a DPN rally at the United States Capitol:⁶

At the large event at the Capitol we had positions where we were supposed to stand to interpret so that everybody could see what was going on. And there were

⁶ Video of a march on the United States Capitol is documented online (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtsYVeRuBuw>) at time code 15:46. Included in the video record is an American Sign Language speech by one of the student leaders, simultaneously interpreted into English via a microphone system.

speakers where there was like a platform podium set up. It was a sea of people. At that point I was being assigned by someone who was definitely scheduling things, so I was assigned to this one particular area, and we were set up in front of this stage. So I'm in position and it became very clear that only deaf people were going to be talking at this thing. There's no hearing people. So we were supposed to listen to the voice interpretation⁷ and then interpret it so that people like way in the back could see. I had never interpreted in front of an audience of like, you know, three thousand people in this scattered environment. So I'm like 'Whoa.' And then about two minutes later someone said, 'Like, you're in the way.' [laugh] 'We can't see. You're in the way.' So I like shrunk out of there like [1:CL-walking away].⁸ So that put me in my place. I realized, 'Really, you're not needed to do this because there's deaf people on stage.' And I was not far enough away from the stage. I was more in the front. That's why today I have the big picture of the whole scene. If you look really, really closely like right in the center, you can see me, and it must have been taken in the one second that I was standing before they told me to move. So I always look at that picture to remind me of my place.

One of the interpreter coordinators shared a similar experience:

There was a local news station that was going to be interviewing one of the four student leaders, and I think it was Greg Hlibok. By the way, his older brother Bruce was my very first person that I met at Gallaudet and was my dear, dear friend. That was my first year there. So I had connection to two out of the four student leaders, which was pretty amazing. Anyway, I'm at home, and I get a call from [another interpreter]. This was at like two o'clock in the morning, and she said, 'There's going to be an interview. We need an interpreter who will be picked up by a car to go to...' I can't even remember which station it was, one of the network stations. 'And they're going to be interviewing. We really need an interpreter there.' I said, 'Okay, I'll work on it.' I'm like, 'Okay.' Hang up. A, Who can I call at two o'clock in the morning? B, Who's a really brilliant voice interpreter? Who's somebody who's not gonna mess this up on national TV?⁹ So who do I call? So I ended up calling [a particular interpreter], who's a dear friend of mine. So I called her, and I said, 'I'm sorry I'm calling you so early in the

⁷ The participant uses the colloquial phrase "voice interpretation" to refer to interpretation from American Sign Language into spoken English. Despite the academic convention to refer the languages being used (e.g., "interpreting into Portuguese" or "interpreting from British Sign Language"), signed language interpreting practitioners frequently refer to each respective direction as "voicing" and "signing."

⁸ The interpreter codeswitched, began using American Sign Language, and produced a sign depicting someone walking away in embarrassment. The sign is produced by the one-hand (i.e., the index finger) moving away from the body while flexing the finger.

⁹ Many interviewees described the pressures of interpreting live on the air before large audiences. An excellent example of this is apparent on *Nightline*'s special on the protest, broadcast on March 9, 1988 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxLCo_qTYVw). Included in the footage are live television interviews, including a joint interview with student leader, Greg Hlibok, Academy Award-winning deaf actress Marlee Matlin, and President Elisabeth Ann Zinser.

morning. We have an assignment.’ And I think I called back, or I gave her the number to call, I can’t quite remember the details. And that happened. So in the meantime it’s now three o’clock in the morning or three thirty in the morning. I’m pacing up and down going, ‘Oh, my God...’ I’m like, ‘Okay, there’s gonna be media, I better get to Gallaudet.’ So I get to Gallaudet at four o’clock in the morning. And I go to Ole Jim.¹⁰ Locked. So I’m in my office, I’m like, ‘Okay. Just chill.’ I lie down, and I do a meditation on the floor of my office. I’m like, ‘Just calm down, just calm down, just calm down.’ Seven o’clock! Nobody’s there. But the interview was happening. I’m like, ‘Oh, my God, nobody’s here.’ I’m back in my office, and I go, ‘Okay, what’s wrong with this picture? Why am I the only person here? I’m hearing, for God’s sake!’ And you know what? It was that moment that I realized that I could calm down, step back, be a little bit more chill about it. It was still history being made. It’s not my history being made. If everybody else is asleep, why am I up? [laugh] It dawned on me that it was kind of ironic. That turned out to be a very important moment in my life because it helped me in future interactions to build a wall and go, ‘Is this mine?’ Being an advocate is not the same as, ‘This is mine.’ Different places, different mental climates. It just was kind of a life lesson that I never forgot: that when you are highly involved it’s a good time to look at your motives and say, ‘What are you doing? What’s it for? Who’s it for?’

In these narratives, both the interpreter and the interpreter coordinator experienced moments of stress that lead to personal reflection about their roles in the protest. In the first case, the interpreter found that she was not needed and was able to step aside, allowing the protest to take its course without her. In the second story, the interpreter coordinator recognized the need to secure an interpreter for a protest-related assignment, but she came to a point of overwhelming responsibility, which caused her to reflect on her role and stake in the protest. In both cases, the interpreter and interpreter coordinator’s stories point to experiences in which they needed to re-evaluate their self-perceptions and responsibilities.

In a grander view, stories of critical events also suggest shifting attitudes of hearing interpreters toward working with deaf people. Through their narratives, the participants suggested that they came to see the importance of enacting roles that did not usurp power from deaf people. One volunteer interpreter did most of her work during DPN with a hearing journalist who reported on the protest. She recounted how her work in the protest shifted her thinking about the work signed language interpreters do:¹¹

I didn’t really think about it much during the week, but what was very obvious to me that I ultimately looking back felt like it was a really, really good lesson that I could take with me for the rest of my time on this planet, was that we hearing

¹⁰ Colloquially known as “Ole Jim,” the Peikoff Alumni House is the first gymnasium built on Gallaudet’s campus, constructed in 1881.

¹¹ This passage is also analyzed through the lens of social role theory in Halley (2020).

people are facilitators and nothing more. So at that moment, we definitely were in the back seat, as interpreters, as hearing people, and I felt that had a cleanliness to it and a separation of role that was just right. In terms of empowerment of the deaf community and so on, whenever I walk into a new situation now, 30 years later, this whole rest of my life, I've been involved in so many different kinds of situations where deaf people are trying to do something, and you know there's a little bit of a negotiation going on about who's in charge. But my impulse is always, 'Now step back.' Even if you disagree or you think that you could do something in a different way, let the deaf person handle it. When it's over you might advise or provide a comment, but when the moment comes for decisions to be made, you step back.

The interpreter described her work with the hearing journalist throughout the protest as a critical event that led to a lifelong shift in her understanding of how interpreters could best work with deaf people. The experience of witnessing deaf people take control of their destinies in a way that had not previously happened forced her to reconsider how interpreters could best ensure effective communication without taking on a role in which they acted in a paternalistic way. This shift in understanding, which led to decades-long changes in behavior throughout her career, is at its heart a transformation of both interpreter role and views of deaf people. In the next section, I explicate how DPN provided interpreters with experiences that challenged them to view and work with deaf people in new ways.

Evolving views about deaf people

In addition to evolving views on the roles of interpreters, the participants also described how particular experiences during DPN brought them to a deeper understanding of the protest and provided them with a more informed view of deaf people. Interpreters detailed several ways in which DPN impacted their worldviews or their beliefs about deaf people. They frequently suggested that although DPN did not alter their perceptions of the deaf community, their views were validated by the protest. As one interpreter said, "DPN confirmed my view of deaf people." Despite these comments, interpreters also shared stories from the protest that seem to suggest shifts in how they viewed people who are deaf. Interpreters often described feeling an increased sense of pride and respect for the deaf community. One DPN interpreter explained how the unfolding protest gave her a greater respect for deaf people:

I think DPN gave me more respect for the deaf community. 'Cause you know, when you're saying you're part of the community, I mean it's hard to pinpoint it, but you just gain a respect like, 'Okay, you're really going up and fighting for what you want, and this is how you do it, and you're doing it peacefully.' I think I did gain a lot of respect because I saw many friends, faculty, and students behaving in a way that I hadn't seen before, and I respected that. Like when Harvey Goodstein

interrupted [chair of the board, Jane Bassett] Spilman and said, ‘Let’s walk out.’¹² You know, it’s like he was taking the microphone, and I was like, ‘Oh, my gosh! I can’t believe he’s doing that!’ So it was just a newfound respect.

In this narrative, the interpreter shared a critical event—Gallaudet faculty member Dr. Harvey Goodstein taking the stage from board chair Jane Bassett Spilman—that seems to have shifted her understanding of not only the protest, but her beliefs about the deaf community. By seeing a deaf person take such drastic and courageous action, she suggested she gained a new sense of respect for deaf people. Other interpreters shared similar stories of witnessing deaf individuals taking radical action to claim their own destiny and how witnessing these events deepened their understanding of the deaf community. For example, one Gallaudet employee who volunteered to interpret during the protest described her shock and amazement at seeing a prominent deaf member of Gallaudet’s administration addressing a crowd of protesters while standing on top of a vehicle. Interpreters shared many similar perspectives of their DPN experiences. As one volunteer interpreter suggested, “DPN gave me another opportunity to see deaf people as fully human.” Statements like this reflect interpreters developing a new layer of understanding about deaf people.

One interpreter who worked for the interpreting agency that was contracted with the board to provide interpreting services during the protest (Sign Language Associates, or SLA) recalled her experience in the deaf community prior to DPN. She recounted deaf friends and acquaintances who used English-based signing systems¹³ instead of American Sign Language, and she described how they worked strategically within a system dominated by hearing people. Further, she noted that prior to the protest she had limited experience in working with deaf American Sign Language users and deaf “rebels.” Facing this side of the deaf community that was previously unknown to her, she recalled interpreting during a contentious showdown between protesters and members of the board of trustees on the first night of the protest:

¹² Video evidence of the March 7, 1988 event is available online (https://media.gallaudet.edu/media/DPN+1988+vol.+13+-+Field+House+Protest+1+of+3+March+7%2C+1988/1_hxxovz94/158896001). Goodstein usurps Spilman’s role after she takes the stage at time code 4:40 in the video record. It is of interest to note that Goodstein’s interjection, in which he stated that the board had refused to meet protesters’ demands and that the crowd should therefore leave, was apparently not interpreted into English, perhaps because no interpreters had access to a microphone at the time of the interruption.

¹³ Just as hearing people from different areas and backgrounds meet and experience language contact (Thomason 2001) between spoken language (e.g. English borrowing *taco* from Spanish), signed languages are also influenced by contact with users of other languages. For example, American Sign Language has been influenced by spoken and written English in both natural settings and in contrived communication systems devised by educators. As a result, signers sometimes communicate in ways that are influenced by English syntax and lexicon. For an extensive review of signed language contact in the United States, see an overview by Lucas and Valli (1992).

I had spent a number of years freelancing before SLA, and I had been involved in the northern Virginia deaf community and working on campus. And one of the things I realized was while standing on Connecticut Avenue, the very first night at the Mayflower [Hotel]. I was standing at the Mayflower, and I saw this entire street full of people watching me. And so I'm looking out, and I'm looking at people, at deaf people who I consider very judicious, very accepting, very adept at working in their world. And I see them angry about the choice of the president. So what I'm thinking is, 'Wow, this is a lot deeper than I thought.' Because normally the deaf people I talk to are very judicious. They're very, 'Okay, we're gonna figure out how to work within the system, this is not what we want, but this is our goal, and this is how we're gonna do this.' And they're not necessarily as... well, there are some deaf people who I work with who are more rebels, more, 'I want this to happen, I want it now, I want it.' And so that is harder for me to work with because they are more confrontational. But in this crowd, these are people who I think of as being more working within the system, and I'm seeing them with really angry expressions, and they're acting out. That was my first time thinking, 'Wow, it's a much deeper issue than I'm thinking it is.'

In her narrative, the interpreter juxtaposed her prior understanding of deaf people, informed by her experiences with cautious and diplomatic deaf friends, with the fiery anger and animated expressions she sees in the crowd. She suggests that this critical moment of witnessing the rage of deaf people may have shifted her understanding of the gravity of the protest and deaf community members' sentiments about its significance. She later recounted another story of a meeting with a deaf friend after the protest:

A deaf friend of mine who I knew through the community before DPN always Sim-Commed.¹⁴ She always talked to me when we interacted, when we went out for lunch, when we were together. And then after DPN she stopped using her voice, and she only signed to me. I had to admit to her, 'I don't understand you when you don't use your voice' because I had gotten so used to hearing her voice. And when she signed her signing style was very close to her, not a lot of space, there would be a lot of fingerspelling, and there were not full extensions. So if you're using your voice, I don't care that I can't read your fingerspelling. But if you're not using your voice, I'm watching you very intently! That was one of the changes I saw. I remember during that period of time there was a lot of discussion in the interpreting community about what truly bilingual deaf people want from an interpreter. I can do English-like signing, so would you rather have a clean English rendition, or would you rather have sloppy ASL? [laugh]

¹⁴ Sim-Com, or Simultaneous Communication refers to the linguistic activity of attempting to use both a spoken and signed language at the same time (e.g., speaking in English while also producing American Sign Language signs). For more on Simultaneous Communication, see work by Coryell and Holcomb (1997).

Although this occurred after the protest, the interpreter related it to her DPN experience as she described seeing a change in language use by the deaf community, specifically in how a deaf friend uses language. The story illustrated the interpreter's perspective on how her friend—and deaf people in general—use language, as she notes shifts in the autonomy of deaf people who chose to no longer use their voice when communicating. Despite the interpreters in DPN generally describing strong relationships with deaf people prior to the protest, events on the ground offered the opportunity for refinement of their worldviews. Witnessing deaf people engaged in unprecedented and brave action led interpreters to confront their own beliefs and biases about deaf people, ultimately leading to introspection about audism. Specifically, the interpreters suggested making strides in work toward addressing dysconscious audism, “a form of audism that tacitly accepts dominant hearing norms and privileges,” (Gertz 2008: 219). In this particular case, the interpreter had become accustomed to deaf people shifting their language use and production in a way that met her needs as a hearing person.¹⁵ Further, it underscores a shift in her beliefs about interpreting, as she pondered the linguistic needs and preferences of deaf people when interpreting into American Sign Language.

Unforeseen benefits for interpreters

In the interviews, participants suggested that working during DPN may have brought about benefits for interpreters. These positive outcomes for interpreters were unexpected, as no participant I interviewed recalled expecting any benefit as a result of their participation in the protest.

The participants frequently referenced an unintended “status boost” for DPN interpreters. They argued this raised prestige may have been beneficial to both interpreters who volunteered their time and to those who worked under contract, such as those who interpreted for the board of trustees. They reasoned that the new and intense spotlight on deaf people brought with it a new public eye on interpreters and their work. Interpreters commented on having few opportunities prior to DPN to interpret in which deaf people were the center of attention at large events. But with deaf leaders at the helm during DPN, interpreters began interpreting for journalists, television cameras, and large crowds of eager onlookers. With this in mind, participants suggested that DPN may have brought interpreting issues to the public discourse in an unprecedented way. This was borne out in practice, demonstrated most clearly with the publication of an illustration by cartoonist Bill Garner in *The Washington Times* on March 9, 1988. In the cartoon, Gallaudet's newly-appointed hearing president is shown at a platform next to a male interpreter; each caricature is labelled with a name placard. Below the interpreter and the president are numerous arms with their hands raised, offering thumbs down gestures. The interpreter appears to be attempting to provide an interpretation,

¹⁵ For a linguistic overview of codes-switching, code-mixing, and code-blending in signed and spoken languages, see Emmorey et al. (2008).

but the president, face sunken, says “NEVER MIND!...” The mention of interpreters is notable given that interpreters are frequently forgotten in the historical record, particularly in times of conflict (Baker 2010a; Pöchhacker 2016).

Further, participants referenced advances for the deaf community following DPN, such as the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, which created new career opportunities for interpreters. One Gallaudet contract interpreter reflected upon the ADA and how its passage may have benefited the interpreting field as a whole:

Big picture, I’m not so sure about the ADA getting passed without DPN. It might have because obviously the deaf population wasn’t the only group involved with that. But I think probably all of the publicity had something to do with helping make it more acceptable to the mainstream. I don’t know, but I think it did have a big effect... Of course that opened up a whole lot more interesting possibilities for interpreters.

It is outside the scope of this paper to speculate on the trajectory of the disability rights movement and the passage of the ADA without DPN; however, numerous participants credited DPN as a significant driving factor in the push for the ADA, indicating a widespread perspective about the import of the protest. Further, interpreters and protesters alike commented on ways in which the ADA impacted the interpreting field in the United States. By creating a legal mandate for access, interpreters found themselves employed and providing their services in a variety of new settings with greater frequency.

In addition to the broad floodlight cast upon deaf people and to some extent interpreters during DPN, a spotlight was also pointed directly on the deaf leaders of the protest and those who interpreted for them. For example, interpreters who worked with student leaders on live national television broadcasts were easily recognized by viewers. Participants suggested that interpreters who were either recognized or self-identified as DPN interpreters after the protest may have been viewed by deaf people in a different light. As one Gallaudet employee who volunteered to interpret in DPN commented:

When people hear that I was there and I was part of it, I think it gives me credibility that I’m somebody who volunteered my time, who volunteered to be a body, to fill up a space on the side of the protesters. And I think that my friends and colleagues in the deaf community are struck by my commitment to the deaf community, and I think it gives me credibility.

Coupled with general respect that may be given to DPN interpreters, participants also commented on the individual professional benefits they reaped as a result of their work in DPN. Participants never reported considering

potential personal benefits at the time of the protest. Despite this, they reported a variety of personal and professional benefits after the fact. Numerous interpreters, particularly those who worked in high-profile DPN settings, attributed noteworthy future career opportunities to their time in DPN. One volunteer recalled a unique professional interpreting opportunity that arose after the protest:

After DPN I became one of President Jordan's preferred interpreters. I remember when [a foreign dignitary] came to Gallaudet on a tour, and there were several of us assigned to interpret that assignment. I drove in that day, and I remember thinking, 'I don't know who's gonna do what here' because we were all gonna be assigned to different people, and I thought I'm just gonna say, 'Wherever is fine with me,' because it really was fine with me. I didn't have a real preference of being in any particular position. And when I got there, as soon as I saw President Jordan he said, 'You're gonna be with us.' And so it was like, 'Whoa.' You know, I was really surprised that he wanted me to interpret. Because I don't see myself as a real top interpreter, one of the best. I don't know what it was, but he felt comfortable with me. And it was a very successful visit, and it worked really well, and it was such an honor to be selected for that. But when I looked at the other interpreters I thought, 'Oh, no. There's other people here who have better skills than I do. They're more articulate, they're gonna have better word choices' or whatever. But for whatever reason, he preferred me in that particular role. And I also interpreted for the board of trustees after that, so I just feel like I did benefit from DPN, but it wasn't intentional.

Other participants also referenced specific post-DPN work opportunities that may not have been offered to them were it not for their involvement in DPN. Several participants commented on future interpreting opportunities in high-profile settings at Gallaudet, such as working with the board of trustees or President Jordan.

Participants frequently described how DPN impacted their beliefs about their ability to make change in the world, sometimes leading to new realizations about social change and progress. The participants suggested that these new realizations offered them an intangible benefit: a sense of excitement about their ability to enact change. One participant who was employed by an interpreting agency and also volunteered to interpret in the protest described how his participation in DPN changed his worldview and ultimately his career trajectory:

Interpreting in DPN made me realize that's what I wanted to do as a career. That I could have an impact on people's lives. I had seen other movements externally.

But to be in it was something very different, very unique. Even the second DPN¹⁶ was nothing like the first one. So just that sense of history looking back, it's like, 'Wow, what a watershed moment in history.'

Here, the participant described his participation in DPN as a critical event in his career path. By seeing that interpreting had real-world consequences and that he could, in his words, "have an impact on people's lives," he suggested finding new significance in his work. He contrasted interpreting in DPN with seeing movements from the outside, exploring how his involvement in the protest carried a deeper and more significant meaning. An interpreter who worked as an employee at Gallaudet shared a similar story, detailing her personal transformation during the week. She indicated that in the early days of the protest, she was not in strong support of the protesters' demands. Although she described cherishing her relationships in the deaf community, she also described early feelings of indifference toward the protest:

I didn't even know what I was doing at the beginning when people were asking me what was my opinion about who should be the president, and I was a little confused at first. Like I was all about, 'No, it should be the most qualified person.' I really thought they should just hire the most qualified person, and it doesn't matter if that person is deaf or hearing. But as we went through the week of DPN and I listened to more and more deaf people speaking and explaining how they felt, and it wasn't just about, 'We need a deaf president because we're a deaf university,' but 'we need a role model for the students, we need to send a message: a presidency of a university is something you can aspire to. We have to stop the oppression.' And during basically the five days of the protest from Monday to Friday my opinion turned around, and I changed... I personally am not a very strong activist. That's not my default. It's not my nature. But I think that week I really became one. And seriously when I jumped in my car on that Monday morning I think that I was there out of FOMO [Fear of Missing Out], but as the week went on I really began to believe in the cause, and I think I became an activist in that situation.

In this narrative, the interpreter describes her progression from being indifferent toward the protest to supporting the selection of a deaf person as Gallaudet's next president. Beyond this, she suggested that although she is typically not "a very strong activist," she became one that week after learning more deeply about oppression from members of the deaf community. In this

¹⁶ The 2006 "Unity for Gallaudet" protest (often referred to as "DPN 2" or "the second DPN") has not yet been explored in detail in by scholars, but according to *The Washington Post*, students objected to the selection of Jane Fernandes as the university's ninth president because a) she did not cultivate a positive relationship with the campus community, and b) she was not a native user of American Sign Language (Kinzie 2006). For insight into the Unity for Gallaudet protest, see these stories from Amy Goodman's *Democracy Now!*:

https://www.democracynow.org/2006/11/1/behind_the_struggle_at_gallaudet_u and https://www.democracynow.org/2006/11/1/students_at_premier_school_for_the.

way, she was suggesting a personal transformation, including her perspective on the protest, her understanding of oppression, and her assuming the identity of an activist.

Discussion

It is worth noting that, by and large, the participants described their experiences in DPN—and the impacts on their lives—in a positive light. They recounted the numerous ways in which the apparent turmoil brought about welcome changes to their perspectives and lives after the protest. However, the experiences of interpreters in DPN may not be generalizable to interpreters who work in other protests. The outcomes of DPN have been described as “unusually successful” (Christiansen & Barnartt 1995: 168) compared to other student-led movements, and to this day, many in the American deaf community view DPN as a watershed moment. Future research might examine the outcomes for interpreters who work in contentious political settings that do not have clear-cut positive consequences (e.g., a failed protest campaign), or those in which interpreters face significant hardships as a result of their participation (e.g., violence or personal attacks).

DPN also stands apart from other protests due to it being planned and led by deaf people. In the 21st century, deaf people continue to engage in contentious politics and participate in contemporary protests. However, DPN remains the largest protest in history led by deaf people. The protest situations in which interpreters work today, whether they be protests organized by deaf people (e.g., a local community protesting against budget cuts in a deaf education program) or the general public (e.g., demonstrations against the Trump administration), we must not assume that the experiences of interpreters will parallel those in DPN. However, this study has offered a glimpse into some of the personal outcomes interpreters may experience and has thus opened the door to further inquiry. Finally, note that this analysis has focused on the experiences of interpreters and the personal outcomes they report in one particular protest. Future research could more explicitly identify the types of psychological change reported (Vestergren et al. 2017) across interpreters who work in a variety of movements.

As Greenwald (2014) has noted, in the years following DPN, deaf people across the globe continue to engage in contentious political action. In contemporary movements, many parallels can be drawn to DPN. Deaf-led protests today frequently center on similar issues, including rights to education, language, and accessibility. Although it is not possible to draw a historical line from the 1988 protest to modern struggles, DPN may perhaps be best understood as a precursor for decades of activism that would follow. DPN remains to date the largest deaf-led protest in history, but activists today continue to fight for causes that share strong connections to Gallaudet’s revolution. For example, movement building has taken place under the helm of Deaf Grassroots Movement (DGM), founded in 2015, whose mission is to “end the jobs/education discrimination, to

shatter the communication barrier and to provide equality for all.” Another deaf civil rights organization is HEARD, an abolitionist group that, among other activities, advocates for the communication rights of deaf prisoners. In the decade since its 2012 Deaf Prisoner Phone Justice Campaign, HEARD has been a leader in advocating for accessibility, such as through its development of a guide for community organizers working in disability and language justice, aptly titled, “The Revolution Must be Accessible!” (BEHEARDDC 2020).

Notably, deaf people continue to engage in activism that diverges from the overarching themes identified in DPN. For example, in June 2020, the National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA), released an open letter demanding the removal of Gallaudet’s current president, Roberta “Bobbi” Cordano, citing her “failure to view systematic racism as an overarching priority for the University and to accept accountability, [which] demonstrates a lack of leadership, and moral conviction required from her role” (National Black Deaf Advocates 2020). NBDA’s demands serve as just one example of activism undertaken by deaf people that extends beyond disability and hearing status.¹⁷

Taken together, while we must exercise caution in generalizing from DPN and overemphasizing its impact, the protest clearly falls within a historical context of deaf-led activism and advocacy across the United States and around the world. For this reason, an analysis of the protest and the interpreting associated with it provide valuable insight into contemporary movement activity.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the personal outcomes reported by American Sign Language/English interpreters who worked in the 1988 Deaf President Now protest at Gallaudet University. The narrative data I have analyzed in this paper point to the complex work of interpreters in protest settings and clearly demonstrate how the interpreters were situated within the context of the protest. The findings demonstrate that far from being detached onlookers, interpreters who work in contentious political settings like protests become participants like any other and take with them transformational moments and experiences.

Social movements are by their very nature ongoing struggles that transcend space and time. In the 21st century, deaf people—and others from linguistic minority groups—continue to engage in a wide variety of social movements. Whether in the struggle for autonomy in Hong Kong or in the Black Lives Matter movement, deaf people’s meaningful involvement requires the participation of interpreters of all backgrounds. The unique position of interpreters in social movements offers us a novel and dynamic look into a wide variety of historical and contemporary movements. Rather than overlooking the work and experiences of interpreters or viewing them as neutral conduits of

¹⁷ As of this writing, Cordano continues to serve as president of the university.

claims-making activities, let us strive to better understand those who seek to both create new realities and enable communication across ideological divides.

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Understanding history: following digital networks

Talia Velez

Abstract

Sometimes a research project will change drastically, and it will be up to the researcher to redefine its scope or aim. This is not unheard of in cultural analysis or ethnography. However, that is when our toolset can be most useful, allowing us to think on our feet and adapt to the ever-changing challenges of research even in a different cultural context. One of the many tools which researchers can make use of is netnography.

This paper aims to demonstrate a case study of how netnography was used to understand a collective assembly in Mexico City to bridge the gap between academia and the world outside of it. In other words, it is an examination on how netnography was used to understand a group of people in order to redefine a project and create new pathways forward.

Keywords: netnography, cyber ethnography, cultural analysis, civil struggle, Mexico

Introduction

As most researchers know, even the best laid out projects are prone to change. This can be due to cuts in funding, an inability to access the field of research, or radical institutional changes; the list of reasons for research gone awry could fill an encyclopaedia or two. Therefore, researchers need to have access to an array of tools to be ready to tackle the problems at hand and successfully complete their project – even if this means changing its initial aim.

This was the case for a project in Mexico City that was led by the National Laboratory of Diversities (LND due to its initials in Spanish) in 2019. Because of budget cuts that resulted in the closing and complete restructuring of the laboratory, the project that aimed at providing aid to the General Assembly of Peoples, Neighbourhoods, Towns, and Pedregales of Coyoacán—henceforth known as the General Assembly—had to be scrapped from LND's agenda. Yet, all academics of the Autonomous University of Mexico City (UNAM) that initially supported the initiative, chose to move forward with helping the community. They made this choice knowing that the General Assembly might be reticent to re-initiate contact after the initial project had been discarded. This reticence was understandable given the historical tensions between marginalized groups and academics in Mexico (Damián & Jaiven, 2011). Because of the lack of manpower, the loss of contact with the General Assembly, and the Mexican sociocultural dynamics between academia and disadvantaged peoples, I was brought in to help redefine the project.

This paper is about two different but interrelated topics. First, it is about the story of an assemblage (Latour 2005) of peoples who have been in an ongoing struggle for survival since the 1970s. While this paper will focus on the most recent fight against displacement, the historical nature of the General Assembly is a necessary context for the reader to understand its current struggle. Second, building on this example, this paper is about netnography and its possibilities to help academics bridge the gap between academia and subjugated groups. As such, using the General Assembly as a case study, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how researchers can use netnography to produce and access the field of research while acknowledging the need to create the possibilities for connections and solidarities between academia and those in need.

The paper focuses on the first month of research for this project. This timeframe is ample enough to contextualize, highlight, and discuss the aforementioned topics, but short enough to ensure clarity for any researchers looking to try different tools in their studies. Furthermore, introducing findings and dynamics that emerged in the later parts of my research requires more than the space available here to properly untangle.

The paper is divided in three sections. The first section is a brief look into netnography as a general practice. This allows me to underscore the pros and cons of this research method and set the initial context of my research. It also helps me discuss netnography within the context of my research – leading me to my second section. In this section, I demonstrate my netnographic findings. Here, I lay out the historical context of the General Assembly and their struggle. Lastly, the third section deals with my direct contact with the General Assembly and how this was facilitated by netnography. This section ends with a brief discussion of the conclusion of my research.

Netnography in practice

A portmanteau of the words Internet, network, and ethnography, netnography was originally developed by marketing professor Robert Kozinets in 1995 (Dalal 2019) to research online interactions between Internet users. Since then, however, its research uses have extended to the fields of humanities and social sciences. This breadth of uses stems from the globality of the Internet. It is also further substantiated by the ways in which the Internet helps us express ourselves, connect with others, and better understand our globalised world (Blank 2013).

In the case of social movements, one can find netnographic research about the cyberactivism during the Arab Spring as well as about the Occupy Movement in the US (Al-Hasan, Yim and Lucas 2019; Arafa and Armstrong 2016; Penney and Dadas 2014; Tremayne 2014). Scholars have also done netnographic research about the Black Lives Matter movement on social media (Wilkins, Livingstone and Levine 2019), and the use of Facebook in Chilean student protests (Cabalin 2014), to name a few examples. However, there have been few netnographic studies performed on the different communitarian assemblies (Mezzadra and

Gago, 2017) in Mexico, unless they form part of the Zapatista movement. Netnography has proven valuable in previous studies about human interactions. It is interesting use netnography within the hetero-temporal and social context of a popular assembly in Mexico City because of the country's status as both postcolonial and developing and the historical centrality of the nation's capital. That is, because of the cultural centrality of Mexico City, which often mirrors the landscape of Mexico as a whole (Rojas, 2009), and the prevalence of digital connections that cannot always be found in other parts of Mexico, we can discern interactions which can otherwise remain invisible to researchers. In addition, the use of netnographic research about to Mexican social movement organizations remains rare in Anglophone publications.

It is important to keep in mind two aspects of netnography when researching groups in need. First, netnography is akin to Frida Hastrup's "analogue analysis" (2014). Hastrup reminds us that the innovative nature of ethnographic work lies in it being "constituted by selective combinations of different features and experiences rather than summation" (Hastrup 2014, 49). This resonates with the character of a netnographic study because of the vast amount of information which can be found on the web. Much like Hastrup's analogue analysis, it requires an inventive approach in which the researcher, willingly or not, becomes part of the story being told.

This approach breaks away from old forms of viewing ethnography in which researchers have a god's eye view (Haraway, 1988) of their field of research and maintain an objective distance from what they observe. Instead, we see an ethnography that is akin to a conversation between different actants, features, and modes of research that the ethnographer is part of (Hastrup 2014). Thus, our choices of what voices to listen to and where to look for information will dictate the story we tell. This allows us to map a "vast array of entities swarming toward" (Latour 2005, 46) a dynamic goal. That is, it helps the researcher disentangle and understand the actions of different entities around a differed, but interconnected objective. While there are volumes written on whether researchers should attempt to remain objective or accept their subjectivity (Haraway, 1988), I believe that it is in accepting our situatedness that we can make better use of ethnographic tools. Therefore, it is through understanding if and how our research participants use the Internet *as well as* our own relation to digital spaces that we can discern whether netnography is a valuable research tool or not.

This leads me to my second point: it is important to keep in mind that while the Internet is an everyday tool in the Global North, this is not necessarily the case in the Global South. Indeed, in Mexico, only 65.8% of the population has access to Internet (Islas 2019), and those who do not are usually people with little economic resources, most often in rural areas. While it is true that the mobile internet has helped offset some of this lack of connectivity, there is still an accessibility gap between the Global North and Global South (ITU, 2020). Further, this lack of access tends to affect women disproportionately, even in urban areas. In addition, in some countries Internet use is heavily monitored,

leading people to not post their views online for fear of reprisal (Freedom House, 2021). Therefore, researchers that partially or solely rely on netnography might in some instances encounter difficulties in understanding the voices of subjugated peoples.

When I found the General Assembly's Facebook page, I realised that this was, luckily, not the case for the case study central to this article. I later learnt that not everyone in the community has Internet access. Yet, enough people in the community had a smartphone for the General Assembly to use it as a form of information dissemination. It also proved to be an efficient way to communicate among assembly members and set up plans for demonstrations and other political acts.

Still, having direct access to information about the subject of one's research comes with its own set of problems. In my case, I found that even within the General Assembly's Facebook page, there was an excess of information to sort through, an issue which I will now address.

Too much information, too little time

The rising accessibility of the Internet leads to vast amounts of information online. Thus, one can move from having almost no information about a particular topic to having an excess of it. In such cases, researchers must choose a strategy to figure out what information is valuable to their research. In this case, they must ask themselves who they will listen to, why they will listen to them, and how they will listen – whether it will through forums, social media posts, videos, articles, podcasts, or a combination thereof.

In my own research, I found little mention of the General Assembly in the records of mainstream media outlets. However, there was a fair number of alternative media sites, social media posts, Internet radio shows, web-based newspapers, and YouTube videos covering the plight of the General Assembly and their case. Additionally, the General Assembly created a lot of information about itself and its members on a regular basis.

Because of the excess of information, I decided to make use of actor-network-theory (ANT) based on the General Assembly's Facebook page to conduct an analogue analysis (Hastrup 2014). ANT is useful because of its ability to help researchers point towards the "specific ways phenomena come into place" (Vikkelsø 2007, 304). That is, as Latour has pointed out, ANT can help us understand how networks work because it aids us in defining the "tracing of new associations and ... the designing of their assemblages" (Latour 2005, 7). In other words, by way of the theoretical and methodological motions of tracing a network that includes non-human beings, we can see the breadth of a network through their actants and their interactions.

Still, I did not want to veer too far off from the actions of the human actants and the story they were trying to communicate. While actants such as the aquifer, modernity ideals, or local laws affect the General Assembly, I was focused on

trying to understand if the General Assembly was still active, in which ways, and why. Here, I am referring to actants in the Latourian sense as beings which influence or modify other actors through their actions. This view allows for a non-anthropocentric framework where humans are only a part of a network of interactions. This is central to my research given that at least one non-human actant, the aquifer, was viewed by the General Assembly as a living part of the community. In a sense, then, I was dissecting the world making of an assemblage of multiple—not necessarily human—individuals with a range of identities and social practices. Therefore, enacting an analogue analysis of my findings as I traced the networks of which the General Assembly is a part of, would allow me to capture and understand the “selective combinations of different features and experiences” (Hastrup 2014, 49) of this assemblage. This way, I would have the needed overview to answer my questions and create a research plan to move forward.

ANT meets netnography

In theory, netnography allows us to intensively conduct “fieldwork across multiple sites” (Davies 2008, 159) and, as such, would allow me to collect information on the different issues faced by the General Assembly. However, some ethnographers argue that netnography should not be the sole source of research because the “disembodied nature of internet interactions” (Davies 2008, 169). I found this to not necessarily be true for several reasons. One, while digital technologies can decentre the expected human experience due to a perceived loss of embodiment, the experiences we have in these digital spaces are as real as those we experience outside of it. Indeed, phenomenology “suggests that the status of being is not an absolute condition” (Bukatman 1993, 118). This means that the human experience is framed by a lack (Derrida, 2006) which we constantly try to overcome. In this case, the lack of in-person interaction is simply solved by technological means.

Thus, the stories told by the people from the General Assembly through their Facebook page are not less real than the ones I was later able to gain through interviews. While it is true that social media experiences are curated to elicit certain emotions, the same can be said of stories told among peers as they are the subjective and remembered experiences of a person interacting with others. This does not mean that our memories are wrong, unreal, or faulty. Instead, subjective as they may be, they are part of us, our history, and our community. In other words, the way a person’s experience is curated by their mind is not that dissimilar to the curated experiences we find in social media spaces. Both serve to create our persona and the ways in which we interact with the world. Nevertheless, claiming that digital interactions lack bodily expressions (Davies 2008) would completely ignore digital media such as online videos – which is what I ultimately decided to focus on for my research.

The choice of focusing on videos was a logical option in this case. After having read a couple of news pieces online, I had a better picture of the actants involved

– information which I outline in the second section of this article. Further, after narrowing down my research to the General Assembly's Facebook page to listen to their voice (Spivak, 2010) rather than that of others talking about the General Assembly, and as I briefly mentioned, I found that I still had an excess of data.

The General Assembly has a prolific video library on their Facebook page¹ with over 150 videos in 2019 alone. These videos not only depict the struggles of the communities involved, but also the ways in which their own struggle is interlaced with those of many other assemblies, groups, and individuals in Mexico. Thus, through these videos I found a large network of people involved in several social movements. They were active agents using their own experiences of struggle as a community in order to connect with like-minded individuals and groups who, like the General Assembly, viewed their homes and histories as a vital and living part of their communities.

To facilitate my understanding of the General Assembly, and at the same time be able to adhere to time constraints, I chose to only analyse one video or event per month – starting with the first video uploaded on June 5th, 2015.

Additionally, I focused on videos that focussed on the historic circumstances of the communities that led them to participate in popular movements. This sometimes led me to watch two or more videos posted in the same day to get a clearer picture of the information given. Yet, this choice was important for my research because I needed to understand why people were fighting; I needed to understand their struggles in their sociocultural context and why they were important to them as a community. As such, like with other research methods, the researcher needs to define their needs at any given point of the project (Davies, 2008). These needs change as the project progresses and as such, one needs to keep revisiting them throughout the research.

Trying to understand why the General Assembly existed, I found that focusing on its re-telling of struggle allowed me to gather enough information to prepare a preliminary report for the academics I was working with. This report helped me demonstrate that the General Assembly remained active. It also showed the ongoing struggle and briefly touched upon the advancements made by the real-estate developer and the communities. It was clear to me that I needed more information to better understand the historicity that the General Assembly was engaging with.

In short, I found out that the General Assembly was fighting to protect a shallow aquifer that was being threatened by real-estate developers. These developers were working on a housing complex in Aztecas Avenue #215. The aquifer had been perforated during the creation of an underground parking lot that would house 683 cars, even though the developer lacked the necessary construction permits for the complex (Gilet 2019). Further, to cover up the perforation of the aquifer, the developer had chosen to dispose of several millions of litres of water

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Asamblea-General-de-los-Pueblos-Barrios-Colonias-y-Pedregales-de-Coyoac%C3%A1n-1580258772267776/>.

(Castro 2019) by throwing them into the sewage system. Yet, the developer faced no major legal repercussions.

Despite being forced to halt construction several times, the construction of the housing complex remained underway. This seemed odd given the severity of current water crisis in Mexico City (Moreno 2019) which has led the authorities to create extensive laws that prohibit the waste of water. Breaking these laws can lead to economic sanctions or jail time when a citizen or entity is found to be wilfully wasting water (SACMEX 2010).

This initial report proved satisfactory to my team, and I was able to gain access to a database of videos to further my research. This database had been initially gathered by the LND in conjunction with some people from the General Assembly. It holds many videos which, although not taken by the people living in the Pedregales, outline their struggle in great depth, presenting a vast picture of the history of the Pedregales. As such, my analysis is an amalgamation of both sets of videos. The story told within them through the myriad of differing points of view allowed me to better understand the people from the Pedregales, their struggles, and, ultimately, opened the doors for the creation of a new project.

The General Assembly

Having established my reasons for using netnography and how I approached it, I now move on to discuss the work of the General Assembly. This section outlines the history of the Pedregales of Coyoacán as I learnt it through the videos I analysed. I begin by outlining the history of the Pedregales as I learnt it through netnography. Then, I move onto the conflict that the General Assembly was dealing with at the time of this study and the different actors involved. Lastly, I talk about the academics involved in this ongoing struggle.

Becoming through practice

The actors involved in the case of Aztecas 215 are what Latour would call composite assemblages that are constantly interacting with one-another (2005). That is to say, assemblages largely made out of human actants with the same goal. The first of these assemblages, and the one which is the focus of my research, is the General Assembly. The history and struggle of this assemblage is told throughout several videos of which I will now provide a composite analysis.

Through the video analysis I noticed that the General Assembly was composed of smaller neighbourhood groups. While all these groups had a long history in the area, some were comprised of what are called *pueblos originarios* (original peoples²). That is, Indigenous people who had lived in the area and within a

² In many Latin-American countries, Pueblos Originarios generally refers to Indigenous Peoples. However, in Mexico it specifically refers to the Indigenous peoples who have lived in and around Mexico City since the conquest.

specific hierarchical system with its own rites and customs since the time of the conquest. However, I found this group to have dwindling numbers as many of them had moved because of the growing gentrification of the area. Another, and larger, set of groups was made up of what has been historically called “the invaders” (Agencia SubVersiones 2015) by the original inhabitants. The term invader in this case is a term that was used between 1960 and 1980 when referring to groups of internal migrants moving from outside Mexico City to the Pedregales of Coyoacán. Thus, although it is now a self-given name by many of the current residents of the area, it was initially used by the locals to portray their outsider status. Regardless, these people migrated to the Pedregales in search of a better life and arrived with little to no financial resources to an area that had been largely ignored by the original settlers.

The invaders arrived to pre-existing huts largely made of volcanic rock (Interruptus Radio 2016). Then, they began to build roads and set up a sewage and electricity system for the area (ZODES No Coyoacán 2015). It is then that university students from the neighbouring UNAM helped them to plan what needed to be done. However, it was the inhabitants, locals and invaders, who “broke their backs working” (Enciso and Poblador@s y Fundador@s 2002, 19) without any help from the government, until it was time to build schools. As such, the Pedregales became more than just a place where people lived because they did not have enough opportunities back home. Instead, the territory itself became an inherent part of their history and being. While they brought their own traditions, stories, and customs with them, the Pedregales became an integral part in the performance of these – a place where they had to learn to be bricklayers, blacksmiths, plumbers, and electricians in concert with each other.



Still of a video showing the flooded construction site.

Still, it was because of the *pueblos originarios* in the area that the people migrating to it could adapt to the living conditions. While the original inhabitants had several limitations in terms of basic services, they were the reason other people learnt to live in an area categorised as inhabitable.

Moreover, they taught the newcomers where to get water and how best to carry it, which herbs to use to treat different ailments, where to buy food, and how to take care against poisonous insects and animals, among other things (Agencia SubVersiones 2015). In other words, the original people taught the people migrating to the Pedregales of Coyoacán how to live in this area. The newcomers were taught how to become someone from the Pedregales. They were taught how to interact with the new environment around them. This shows that there is no a priori on how “to be” from the area. Instead, one can become part of the Pedregales through interactions with neighbours and by being willing to give a hand in the (re)creation of community. Therefore, while people will proclaim to be either invaders or originals, they both see themselves and each other as equally

deserving a space within this community. Further, this intermingling of peoples created customs and rituals inherent to the area which include patron saint's festivals (Hernández 2012), the building of the Emiliano Zapata school (yabasta padova, 2015) that promotes art crafts and sports for the local youth, and the willingness to fight for the preservation and improvement of the community (zayabita, 2008). People from different communities outside of Mexico City brought with them specific forms of living, such as the celebration of a saint or the performance of free communal labour, commonly referred to as *tequio* in Indigenous communities (Asamblea de Migrantes Indígenas de la Ciudad de México, 2011). These practices were integrated in the creation of the Pedregales. Furthermore, as these practices did not displace the performances of the original peoples of the area, this resulted in the intermingling of local uses and customs that originated from outside the community, together constituting a new way of living in the area.

Consequently, according to the people of the General Assembly, one needs to perform in a specific manner in order to belong to the Pedregales. To be clear, one needs to be willing to become a part of the community through communal efforts (Agencia SubVersiones 2015) in which the territory is itself part of the community rather than a place where the community resides. This communal becoming is what Hastrup would call “a non-dualistic register of sustained interrelation” (Hastrup 2014, 49) that can only be broken by refusing to take part in the community. That is, the community does not adhere to classic insider/outsider boundaries but is instead in a state of constant reification through communal practices.



Picture of a neighbour lifting a hose going from the building site to the sewer.

Breaking with history

Besides the communities of Pedregales, there were other groups of actants involved in the Aztecas 215 project. Namely, the real-estate developer *Quiero Casa*, several government agencies, and a group of UNAM academics. These actants need to be addressed to give a full account of my findings so that the reader can have a better understanding of the (re)actions of the General Assembly.

The first two videos uploaded by the General Assembly to their Facebook page introduce us to *Quiero Casa* (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2016a, 2016b). Both videos portray the developer as an ecocidal and capitalist real-estate developer that has been wilfully wasting an untold amount of water by pumping it through hoses into the drain. The videos give us clear shots of these hoses, together with claims

from the community that the water has been spilling for several months – soon after *Quiero Casa* took over the property and began the construction of residential apartment buildings. In the video, it is also mentioned that there have already been demonstrations against the developer and the waste of clean water: the same water that the people in the area had used for generations to survive. The second video shows the developer's attempt at hiding the spillage of water, which proved impossible due to the amount of water spilled as well as the watchful eyes of neighbours (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2016a, 2016b). At the end, the video provides a view of the building site from the inside. It is obvious that it is flooded with water from the aquifer. The water looks mostly clean and solely spoiled by the debris from the building site itself.

Thus, the introduction to the developer pointedly and simultaneously marks *Quiero Casa* as uncaring of the harm they are causing, and deceitful as they attempt to conceal this harm. This introduction to the real-estate developer also mingles with communal ideas of an ongoing governmental presence.

In the video addressing Patricia Mercado, then secretariat of the Mexico City government, we can begin to see direct mentions of governmental officials. Mercado had claimed that the water that was being disposed of by the developer was composed of sewage spills instead of the clean water shown in the videos taken by the General Assembly. Here, assertions of co-conspiracy between government authorities and real-estate developers become manifest. Nevertheless, these allegations are understandable, given the rapid growth of some real-estate developers and the high level of corruption that has been part of the Mexican government for centuries (Rodríguez 2013). Furthermore, the claims of co-conspiracy are rooted in the belief that specific real-state companies can break the law without repercussions, while government officials will take steps to aid them. This implies that government officials are active rather than passive in their corruption – they help break the law instead of ignoring it.

As such, the General Assembly begins its introduction to the public not only by presenting the developer and government officials, but also by speaking to a certain audience. This is the audience of the Mexican people; it is an act of plural performativity addressing the plural performativity of the people. This is important not only because it provides a mutual cultural understanding, but also because, as Judith Butler posited regarding these type of pluralities, it has two main effects:

one is articulating a voice of the people from the singularity of the story and the obduracy of the body, a voice at once individual and social; another is the reproduction of community or sociality itself as bodies congregate and “live together” on the street (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 173).



Still of the videos taken during the international forum.

This means that the General Assembly identifies itself and the people as one. This does not mean that, unbeknownst to them, the Mexican people are all part of the General Assembly. Rather, it means that the General Assembly as a performative plurality in itself is also a part of the people. It identifies the struggle of the General Assembly against *Quiero Casa* as a struggle of the people. Further, it identifies the enemies of the General Assembly, whether corrupt authorities or real-state developers,

as enemies of the people.

These identifications keep recurring in several videos that the General Assembly presents. Therefore, while the General Assembly is a unit in itself, it communicates its openness to the struggles of other pluralities. For example, this unity with the people becomes evident in a video showing members of the General Assembly as guests at the memorialisation of the 43 normalistas of Ayotzinapa (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2019a). The 43 normalistas were students who were persecuted, attacked, and kidnapped in 2014 by the municipal police of Iguala Guerrero, Mexico, for allegedly taking illegal possession of a central bus terminal. However, this unity goes beyond national or regional identification. This becomes clear in their videos on the international forum “Water is Life y la Vida se Defiende.” Here, a representative of The International Indigenous Youth Council fighting against the Dakota pipeline speaks via Skype and is welcomed as one of the people by those present (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2017a, 2017b). This forum was held at the General Assembly’s *plantón*, an encampment which serves as a form of protest.

Their *plantón* was located for several months outside of *Quiero Casa*’s building site in Aztecas Avenue #215, until the demonstrators were removed by shock police. Shock police, also known as riot police or riot control agents (RCAs), are police agents trained in riot and crowd control to maintain public order. In Mexico, they are well-known as the suppression arm of political powers, and have a history of violence which includes the disappearance and murder of student protesters and supporters in Mexico City during the 1968 student protests (Carey, 2005). Thus, to employ shock police in Mexico serves either as a warning for further violence and suppression, or an open call for violence. In the case of the General Assembly, they were merely used as a warning – a fact that members of the General Assembly underlined, but which did not stop their efforts.

I also analysed the representations of the housing project given by *Quiero Casa*, and later appropriated by the General Assembly (Agencia SubVersiones 2016). The focus of the developer is on modernity and future possibilities. They present the viewers with images of new apartments and modern buildings that are completely devoid of people. As such, the people from the communities surrounding the apartment complex are erased. We can see a space that is open and waiting but that does not offer a denouement which could decentre capital. Instead, history is either erased or displaced, and the future is only alluded to. This results in the erasure of the history of the area and the people already living in nearby communities because they do not have sufficient economic power to buy the apartments created by *Quiero Casa*. Therefore, rather than having history or people at the core of the project, it is modernity and capital that are its *raison d'être*.



Still of the video released by the government of Mexico City.

This is also evident in another video found on YouTube where we can see a subversion of the governmental project of Economic and Social Development Zones (ZODES). This project, of which the development by *Quiero Casa* is a part, is shown to focus on modernity, progress, economic development, and the future (Vega 2016). Indeed, at minute 4:51 of the video, the viewer is presented with a larger claim by the government of Mexico City. This claim, spoken by a disembodied voice, is that ZODES transforms decayed zones into vocational zones that give life to the space. This time, the claims are followed by images of would-be residents in public spaces, yet they are all similar looking silhouettes only differentiated by colours. As such, a further erasure is performed in the video because the subject is vaguely presented and is given life only through its work. Furthermore, the space this subject occupies can only come to life through this economy-based modernity, which is cemented as truth through lack of embodiment. That is, because these claims cannot be attached to a person or organisation, they are presented as objective truths in favour of Mexican progress.

Yet, because the General Assembly appropriated the video, these images are juxtaposed with those of current residents. This forces the viewer to ask whose future the government is referring to. As the video goes on, we are presented with the image of Miguel Ángel Mancera, then-governor of Mexico City, speaking about the 5 to 6 thousand jobs being generated by ZODES. This makes the viewer ask whose jobs these are, as we see the same people being dispossessed of their land not having any of these opportunities to rely on. All images appear in stark contrast with the expressed desire of the communities embodied in the people asking where they would go if gentrification took place. These are the communities who established their lives in the area when no one

else wanted those lands. However, this is not solely about the past for them, as an older resident explains by minute 11:06 of the video: “I fight ... I don't worry about myself anymore, but what about our youth? If we don't do something, what will become of them?” (Vega 2016). Thus, while the communities have strong links to their past, they do not forget about their future. However, unlike the images shown by the government, this is not a faceless future. It is a future where coming generations of the people will take centre stage along with the territory they must protect.

Therefore, while we can locate the different actants of local governmental agencies, they are often shown by the General Assembly to be on the side of real-estate developers, and fighting for a future that is not for the people. Instead, they are envisioned as fighting for capital and modernity. This image is reinforced in other videos by the General Assembly that feature government functionaries such as the live video from October 24th, 2019. In this video functionaries from Water Systems of Mexico City (SACMEX) are shown while they give reasons why it still looks like *Quiero Casa* is throwing away clean water (Asamblea General de los Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias y Pedregales de Coyoacán 2019b). When pressed for more information, these functionaries seem to be either unsure of how to answer or accepting that they have not fulfilled specific requirements as per an investigation of environmental impact given by the Attorney General's Office of Environment and Territorial Order of Mexico City (PAOT). This lack of action leads the viewer to either believe in the aforementioned claims of co-conspiracy or to view the functionaries as inefficient and irresponsible.

The past is written in water and stone

Regardless, the investigation of environmental impact by PAOT has been a cornerstone of the fight between the General Assembly and *Quiero Casa*. This study was possible thanks to UNAM academics – the last group of actants to be mentioned in this paper and who at the time of the project this paper refers to, were not part of the academic efforts to help the General Assembly.

While the academics that I worked with were not able to fulfil their initial project, several others have been part of the struggle in Aztecas 215. From philosophy professors writing pieces for online publications (de la Escalera 2019), to international law professors giving talks at the *plantón* (Asamblea General de los Pueblos 2016) – there are countless academics who have actively supported the struggle. However, few have been as salient as Dr Oscar Escolero, Dr Luis Zambrano, and the student Selene Olea from the Institute of Geology and Marcelo Canteiro from the Institute of Biology. They performed an exhaustive study of the water in the area and mapped two different aquifers that went onto other parts of the city.

The results of this study countered those of a previous study done by SACMEX in that the water was drinkable. Instead of coming from runoffs of rain water mixed with sewage pillage (Roa 2016), as the SACMEX study had claimed, the

water came from a shallow aquifer which ended in the deeper aquifer that provides water for the whole city (PAOTmx 2016). This means that for reasons that remain unexplained, SACMEX's tests were erroneous. Further, affecting the aquifer in Aztecas avenue would mean not only affecting nearby residents but the whole city as the aquifer feeds water to the larger aquifer which the whole city relies on. An aquifer that specialists expect will run out of water within the next 40 years (Moreno 2019). In theory, this should make the addressal of the problem much more prescient, especially since, as Dr Escolero asserts in minute 34:50 of the video, this is water that is also used by several houses in the area and two water treatment plants. Thus, it is "in no way acceptable that the water of this shallow aquifer is taken and thrown away to the sewage" (PAOTmx 2016, 37:22). Doing so strongly affects both the environment and the inhabitants of Mexico City.

The very existence of an aquifer had been loudly proclaimed by the inhabitants of the area. They were aware of this possibility because of their knowledge of the territory's history, which is inscribed in its name: Pedregales. In short, the term *Pedregal* comes from the type of rocky soil which can be found after the explosion of a volcano. Specifically, this type of soil is found in the area because of the explosion of the *Xitle* volcano many years ago, which created a layer of volcanic rock (Interruptus Radio 2016). Additionally, the area used to be known as *Hueytilatl* which is Nahuatl for 'between springs.' This means that the network of springs in the area was covered with a layer of volcanic rock because of *Xitle*'s explosion. However, the water remains close to the surface. Thus, any digging in the zone can easily damage the urban infrastructure built around the aquifers or the ecosystem itself.



Picture of the march through Coyoacán.

The area's history was not unknown before *Quiero Casa* damaged the aquifer through digging. This is pointed out in one of the first press releases by the General Assembly, in which they refer to the 169 ILO Agreement signed by the Mexican government in favour of the protection of indigenous and original peoples (Agencia SubVersiones 2016). This agreement states that any work which directly affects the peoples in the area needs to be agreed upon by a community assembly. In their press

release, the General Assembly further states that a meeting with the communities was initially agreed upon, but later ignored, by both the developer and the government. I should also point out that the development of the apartment complex required the logging of 180 trees, some of them which were protected species such as white cedar (La Coperacha 2016). Consequently, it is easy to understand the frustration that the members of the General Assembly have felt through the years fighting against a real-estate development that has greatly affected them and their ecosystem.

Gaining an understanding of the history and current plight of the General Assembly was only part of my assignment. I still needed to find a way to contact them. Thus, it is time to move on to the third section of this paper where I lay out the steps I took to contact the General Assembly, and the result of this renewed contact between them and UNAM academics.

First and last words

Thus far in this paper, I have touched upon the use of netnography as a research tool, and the insights I gained during my research. In practice, this process led me from being an unknowing outsider to someone who had knowledge and cared about the people of the Pedregales in Coyoacán. As I learnt about the General Assembly and its history, I started to develop a connection to the people that form part of it. It is in the process of becoming through knowledge that we reach self-poiesis. Athena Athanasiou makes an excellent remark about this process: “self-poietics [the process of bringing the self into existence] ... is a possibility whereby the self is dispossessed of its sovereign position through opening a relation to alterity” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, pp. 67-68). In other words, it is because we recognise the self in the eyes of the other that we open to the other.

I make this remark for two reasons. First, because as a researcher, it is my ethical duty to mention when my objectivity, as situated and constructed as it might be, is challenged. Second, because the becoming of self-poiesis underlines the existence of the researcher’s voice in their research. The self is not a self-contained individual but one that is part of the world and its (re)creation. Therefore, research is a sort of analogue analysis where the voice of the researcher is inevitably enmeshed with their research (Hastrup, 2014). This is particularly present when, in a Levinasian sense, we must open ourselves to knowing the other. Moreover, this connection is important because in opening ourselves to the other, we create opportunities for the other to open to us as well, which was part of my goal in this project.

Having elucidated on the creation of ethical openings and emotions, I now turn to the steps I followed to contact the General Assembly, and the result thereof. Therefore, I will now talk about my initial contact with the General Assembly before moving to the conclusion of this paper. However, first, I must state that I will not give my contacts’ names and have chosen to not use pseudonyms because the members of the General Assembly repeatedly stated to me that they prefer to refer themselves as members of the General Assembly rather than use their names. This choice acts to give them some safety from punitive actions by government officials or Quiero Casa, as well as centres their plight and their community rather than them as individuals (Velez, 2020).

First contact

After I collected all the information I could pertaining the General Assembly, I proceeded to contact its members. This was facilitated by a professor who was external to the project I was a part of. While he was initially reticent to provide me with his contacts, as he was afraid of letting the people from the General Assembly down since he could not help with the project, the amount of information I provided him with eased his mind. As such, he gave me two contacts of active General Assembly members and informed them beforehand about my existence within the project.

With the help of my team, I contacted two members of the General Assembly. In my first message, I gave a brief outline of who I was and why I was contacting them. I quickly received a reply asking me for a project brief where they could read more about my background as a researcher and my reasons for wanting to talk to the General Assembly. This brief, they explained, would be voted on during their next meeting. I was also invited to a march they would have with other groups in a few days.

I wrote the brief they requested, stating some of the things I had learnt through my research into their plight and history. Additionally, because there was not a clear goal in the project at this point, I simply underlined that I wanted to learn more about them. I also decided to attend the march so that they could have the opportunity to get to know me in person and ask any additional questions they could have.

Meeting people

The march that I was invited to, began from two different areas. The plan was to have the two groups meet at a halfway point and proceed together before the march culminated in a meeting. Because I was not well-acquainted with the area, I went to the point that was easier to get to by taxi. At my arrival, I introduced myself to the people gathered and explained why I was there.

The people were welcoming even though none of them were part of the General Assembly. To them, it was good enough that I showed interest and had been personally invited by one of the General Assembly members. They gave me a small flag to carry, and after discussing the layout the group should have, we set out. I chose to stay towards the end of the march. This way I could be a part of it without being central in any way. It also gave me the chance to take a few pictures with permission from the group.

We walked for a while and met up with the group at the slated meeting point. Here, while the groups were reorganising, I took the chance to introduce myself to the person who had invited me. He welcomed me, thanked me for the brief, and



Picture of a meeting between academics and the General Assembly.

explained what would happen next. This is when I learnt that they wanted me to introduce myself during the meeting. This way, my contact explained, more members of the General Assembly would have the chance to understand why I was there. I agreed and thanked him for the opportunity.

The march moved on and this gave way to the meeting which was broadcasted via internet. Several representatives from each group spoke – from people trying to save their local Indigenous school to a professor well-acquainted with civil rights fights. At last, it was my turn. Briefly, I explained why I was there and the research I had done so far. I tried to underline the importance of listening to their stories and that I was there to learn about them.

My speech was well received, as was my brief, and I was invited to a meeting with members of the General Assembly at one of their houses. I will not delve into the details of this meeting, but it suffices to say that the members of the General Assembly were eager to talk about their experience. The success of this interaction also led to a handful of personal interviews, to a tour of the area, and to more marches. However, what is clear to me about my interaction is that it was my willingness to listen and learn from them that led to the General Assembly welcoming me. Furthermore, the knowledge I had gained through my netnographic research allowed them to pre-emptively know that I was interested in them as people rather than study subjects – something that they underlined during our first meeting. By this I mean that my knowledge allowed me to simultaneously show interest in their plight and connect with them through shared experiences of struggle.

Final words

The knowledge I gained through netnography also helped to gain the trust of my academic peers. That is because I was able to extensively provide details about the actions and the history of the General Assembly before talking with them directly, the UNAM academics that I was working with trusted my abilities. The knowledge I shared with my team also gave my colleagues the opportunity to come up with new ideas for the project. Keeping in mind the lack of resources for the legal work or artistic presentations that had been part of the original project, my team settled for the idea of co-creating a book with the General Assembly.

Thus, with the trust of both my team and the General Assembly, I was able to set up a meeting to discuss the creation of a book. This was the first time that both groups met since more than a year. Yet, the time passed was not felt because I was able to provide both groups with the information they needed about each other. For the General Assembly, this meant that they understood that the academics had not lost interest in working with them, despite changes in the project. For the academics, this meant having up to date information regarding the General Assembly. Both groups, however, needed someone to bridge this gap of knowledge for them to meet again. This bridging is where netnography was a successful tool.

Netnography might not be a replacement for human interaction (Davies, 2008). Nevertheless, the knowledge that we gain using this tool opens new avenues for moving forward. This is what makes netnography a useful tool in social movement research. That is, netnography allows researchers to gain insight in the struggles of social movements. It allows us to map out the reasons for the struggle, the forms this struggle takes and interactions with other movements and local authorities. It also opens possibilities for further research and better mutual understanding between researchers and the groups that are part of their research. This can, in turn, help social movement activists create stronger links with academics through an understanding of the context that social movements take place in. However, it is important to keep in mind that because netnography is a tool that underlines to researcher's capacity to listen and learn, it is up to the researcher to create new openings to move forward with the knowledge learnt.

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Also saying yes: overcoming the “anti” stage in social movements

Silvano De la Llata

Abstract

This paper explores the question of transcending reactivity in social movements. By analyzing the square movements, it teases out three ideas with which the movements engaged in theory and practice: (1) refusal, (2) destituent power and (3) creative resistance. These concepts did not operate as part of an explicit ideology but were rather enacted in the encampments, public assemblies and protest actions. Philosophy drew from practice. The first two concepts (refusal and destituent power) have been salient subjects of debate in the square movements and similar movements of resistance in the last twenty years. However, creative resistance is the least documented of the three, and I argue that it is the key to transcend the reactive stagnation (the “anti” stage) that social movements often face. The paper explores the question of how to escape the trap of shaping movements of resistance in function of the powers that are being contested. Going further, it analyzes the role of affirmative personal transformation and everyday life politics in social change. It draws from a two-year fieldwork and participation in the square movements (in Barcelona, New York, Paris, Montreal and Mexico City) and engages with texts and debates on the movements. It contextualizes these debates – historically and philosophically – in order to draw lessons for future social struggles. The square movements showed the importance of outrage as a triggering factor for social struggles, but also raised questions about the dangers (and ultimate futility) of dwelling in reactivity. The article proposes that striving for creativity and engaging in proactive experimentation could be crucial attitudes to go beyond the sole acknowledgement of injustice. Ten years after the coming about of the square movements and with the prevalent culture of reactivity and outrage, these questions are more important than ever in contemporary social movements.

Keywords: life-affirming politics - creative resistance - destituent power - square movements - Occupy movement

1. Introduction

In the height of the square movements in 2011 and 2012, many philosophers and intellectuals joined the protest encampments. Some read speeches and others participated in the general assemblies. Angela Davis, Judith Butler, Naomi Klein and Slavoj Žižek visited Zuccotti Park. David Harvey read a speech in Occupy London. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt spoke in events organized

in the context of the 15M movement in Madrid.¹ Others, like David Graeber and Marina Sitrin actively participated in the organization of the mobilizations while engaging in public and academic debates. Numerous books and essays were written as a response to these movements (Zizek 2012; Harvey 2012; Graeber 2013; Chomsky 2012; Purcell 2013; Badiou 2012; Hedges 2012). However, in none of these cases were these intellectuals perceived as leaders or ideologues of the movements; rather, they spoke as regular participants taking their turn in the general assemblies. While in some cases, these speeches were considered inspirational and influential for the movements' identities, they were often just diluted in the sea of participation.

The square movements developed a practical philosophy based on their commitment to practice in the encampments, general assemblies and protest actions. They were prefigurative in essence (De la Llata 2017; Sitrin 2012). That is, they did not develop a program to be attained in the future, but rather enacted it. Theory was drawn from practice and "developed through action" (Maeckelbergh 2012).² Therefore, academic debates were considered seriously by the movements only to the extent that they responded to the actual experience of the movements in the field. Thus, the line between intellectual thought and activism was blurry, as the square movements were fertile ground for what Gramsci (1992) calls 'organic intellectuals.'

Drawing from a two-year field research on the square movements (in Barcelona, New York, Paris, Montreal and Mexico City) and an analysis of texts and debates about -- and often directly produced within -- the movements, I identify three moments that were to some extent transversal across these movements: (1) the acknowledgement of injustice, (2) the desire to get rid of the unjust order and (3) the experimentation with alternatives to the perceived unjust order. These stages also reflected to three transversal debates that took place in the movements (respectively): (1) *Refusal*, (2) *Destituent power*, and (3) *Creative Resistance*. The reported outrage, indignation and weariness of the general order of things mark the acknowledgment of injustice and is therefore a point of departure for these movements. Here, it is worth mentioning that even though the struggles were so different in nature and motivations, most of them appeared to have shared a similar attitude of refusal – especially in their first stages of the movements. The notion of *destituent power* and explicit references to revolution or deposing the ruling power were also commonly discussed. While refusal and destituent power often constituted commonly held visions, the participants were split about what should come after. This was an issue that haunted the square movements across the world, as it has happened with other social movements in the past. But, even though there were differences, there was one thing the movements seemed to agree about: *how* things are done informs *what* is done. The means do not justify the ends: the means *are* then

¹ Joining the Indignados in Madrid, Negri confessed that even though the struggle really inspired him, he was beginning to feel "too old," after a life-time career as an activist.

² Sturgeon (1995) proposes the idea of "direct theory," which is the application of the concept of direct action into theory.

ends. There was never an explicit intention to seize power. Therefore, there was a strong focus on the processes rather than on the outcomes of the revolutionary process. But the question about what the movements were actually *about* -- not only *against* -- and about which processes are truly revolutionary and which are not still remains open. This is where *creative resistance* comes into play. The notion of *creative resistance* (De la Llata 2017), as I will outline further on, is the necessary mechanism to transcend the reactive “anti” stage of only articulating what one does *not* want. Creativity is essential to social movements. The square movements brought to the table the question of how to move from refusal to an affirmative position of taking “the offence [and] making positive demands” (Sparrow in Humphrys 2012). However, beyond demands, the question is, What would be the opposite of what is refused and, consequently, what are the processes that are to be destituted?. In other words, *What do we really want to achieve?* The question is as simple and practical as it is political and historical. And, it echoes Lenin’s “What is to be done?” and Martin Luther King’s “Where do we go from here?”. Furthermore, the objective of the paper is to explore questions that are often overlooked in social movements: How do we identify the role we -- actively or passively -- play in perpetuating injustice? And, what are the concrete steps (beyond only calling out injustice) that we need to take in order to experiment with and ultimately achieve radical change?

The debates in the square movements (online and offline, inside and outside of the encampments) reveal the historical anxiety towards the movement itself mirroring the powers that are being contested. The danger of this anxiety is to be trapped in reactiveness. That is, becoming paralyzed and “caught in theory” because you do not want to err. This is the result of the tendency to externalize power and to articulate a language of resistance that locates power as force that is alien and therefore imposed on the oppressed. This anxiety towards power, similar to the adolescent who fears resembling the parents, often detaches resistance movements from their own power.

In what follows, I explore the concepts of refusal, destituent power and creative resistance. Building on an *ontology of becoming* (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1983; Nietzsche 1886, 1887; Negri 1999; Hardt & Negri 2000, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2017) and the work of thinkers and activists that either participated in or inspired the movements, I propose striving for creativity and cultivating a life-affirming approach in order to transcend the reactive stages of resistance.

2. Methodological note

The field research of this paper is based on direct observation, interviews and the analysis of texts produced in the context of the Occupy Wall Street Movement and the *Indignados* Movement in Spain, and briefly in sister movements in Mexico City, Montreal and Paris (See Figures 1, 2 and 3). This paper teases out the discourse of these movements. This was expressed in texts that were often directly produced within the square occupations as well as on the theoretical debates that responded to these texts. However, this philosophy

is by no means entirely new, as it draws inspiration and adopts practices from other movements of resistance, which will be discussed further on.



Figure 1. Temporary occupation of Washington Square (New York City) in the context of the Occupy Movement. Source: The author. New York, New York. March 15, 2012.

This paper analyzes the discourse(s) of the movements in search for common threads, practices and sources of inspiration. To do so, I conducted an immersive ethnographic work in protest actions across the previously mentioned movements. I did participant observation in demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, pickets, protest encampments, student strikes, two general strikes, general and neighbourhood assemblies and occupations of public and private buildings. During the most intense period of the research (between the summers of 2011 and 2012), I attended on average one protest action a day, while I was living between Barcelona and New York City. Later, as the movements became a global phenomenon, I decided to explore other movements that explicitly manifested solidarity or inspiration with those movements. So, I did participant observation in the occupation of the esplanade of La Defense in Paris (2011), and interviews with activists from the YoSoy132 Movement in Mexico City and the Students' Movement in Montreal in 2012. The fieldwork was also complemented by a detailed analysis of online materials, such as videos, blog posts, articles, pictures, and minutes that were posted on websites and Facebook, YouTube and Twitter groups, as well as printed material that was distributed in the streets, such as flyers, newspapers, brochures, and posters. I also joined online assemblies, meetings and solidarity actions in these five movements. These materials allowed me to identify common practices and influences across the movements.

My positionality in the research was that of a participant observer as I actively joined the protests. Here, it is worth mentioning that some of the lessons that derived from this research were that most of the participants did not spouse the idea of a division between intellectuals and activists or between practitioners and theoreticians. It would be misleading to think that activists are detached from reading or producing theory themselves. Most of the participants were very well informed on the “theory” and were often directly in contact with people otherwise deemed as intellectuals. Some of the works that are cited here belonged to veteran activists (who are also “intellectuals”) who participated in social movements and were often invited to join assemblies and rallies (e.g. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, John Holloway, Marina Sitrin, David Graeber, etc.) or to deceased activists who played a similar role in their time and therefore are often directly cited in debates in conversations by activists (e.g. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Albert Camus, Herbert Marcuse, etc.). I describe how these movements built a discourse by drawing ideas and practices from the overlapping and often indistinguishable worlds of theory and practice.



Figure 2. General assembly in Plaza Catalunya (Barcelona) in the context of the first anniversary of the 15M movement. Source: The author. Barcelona, Spain. May 15, 2012.

The open-endedness that prevailed in the protest encampments and the general assemblies (De la Llata, 2016) makes difficult to identify a thematic coherence in the debates. Nevertheless, there are some debates that were somewhat recurrent – not only across the square movements, but also throughout the recent history of social movements. The following description teases out three concepts that were recurrently discussed and that manifested in three stages.



Figure 3. Occupation of the esplanade of the arch of La Defense in Paris. Source: The author. Paris, France. November 10, 2011.

Methodological approach and problem delimitation

In 2011 and 2012, the square movements spread across the world. I arrived in the field with detailed calendars and maps of protest actions that I had developed from closely following the websites of the movements. I had clearly delimited the publics and spaces that I wanted to study. I had specific questions I wanted to ask the activists, such as when, how and why they had joined the movement; what was their ideology; what were their goals and motivations or what was the significance of the sites they had chosen to occupy. This research agenda proved close to futile. The marchers often improvised their itineraries and constantly changed their venues. Participants actively avoided answering whether or not they belonged to the movement. In addition, the movements were expanding across the world and growing in numbers day by day.

The encampments were diffuse objects of study. Thousands of people occupied public spaces for long periods of time (sometimes for over two months). It was difficult to pinpoint who was part of the movement and who was a stranger, who worked in favour, who against and who was neutral. All shared the space. In the absence of apparent physical or identity boundaries, anyone who volunteered to participate in the assemblies, the organization of the encampment or the protest actions was somehow “in” the movement. Through this realization I decided to adopt a Deleuzian approach. In this approach, as Hillier (2007) points out, “[one] cannot begin from the whole as a whole is never given or giveable” [and] one cannot begin from the outside in order to find its limits but rather, one has to start from the middle” (Hillier, 2007, p. x). Adopting this approach was imperative to understanding such an elusive phenomenon, as the ideologies of these movements and the spaces they created were relentlessly shifting.

Identifying the social and identity boundaries in the ethnography was a complex process. There are two main approaches in research delimitation in social sciences: nominalist and realist (Lauman, et al., 1989). In the former, the researcher delimits the realm of study based on the research questions and framework, while the latter assumes that “the proposition of the social entity exists as a collectively shared subjective awareness of all, or at least most, of the actors who are members.” (Lauman, et al., 1989, p. 65). My research falls under the latter. These social movements showed an that separated the squares from the adjacent streets. The rejection of ready-made classifications and reductionisms were common across the social movements. Participants were elusive and even ambiguous when asked about their membership and level of involvement in the movement, as well as when defining the operational and physical boundaries of occupied spaces. I encountered this when I interviewed people who were involved in the actions of the movements. They reported either not being part of or being only close to the movement. Consequently, a realist approach (as opposed to nominalist) was adopted for the delimitation of the fieldwork and the ontology of becoming for the analysis of the results.

This ethnography seeks to understand how the movements dealt with spaces and their boundaries in respect to physical planning, management and identity. The methods include participant observation, direct observation, interviews with key actors and videophotographic analysis in the context of protest.

3. Three philosophies drawing from practice

The “square movements” (Stavrides 2014) (also referred to as the “movement of the squares” (Flesher Fominaya 2017)) began with the apparently random event of the immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia in December of 2010. The death

of Mohammed Bouazizi, the 26-year-old who could not find a job after getting a degree in computer science and was forced to become a street vendor, only to be harassed, humiliated and stripped from his wares by the police, sparked outrage across the country. It was an act of refusal, not only addressed to the police but to the larger socioeconomic structure (Hardt and Negri 2012). The reaction to this event ultimately led to the Tunisian Revolution. And subsequently the Revolution gave rise to the so-called Arab Spring and inspired other protest movements, such as the *Indignados* and Occupy Wall Street. The wave of mobilizations lasted way into 2014, and it later included the occupations of Taksim Square in Istanbul, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong as well as Students' Movements in Mexico, Chile and Quebec. These movements responded to a broad variety of causes and contexts in different countries. Therefore, they are difficult to cluster under the same banner. Some authors even claim that these kinds of movements are not movements in the traditional sense, but rather *movements of movements* (Mertes 2004), *non-movements* (Bayat 2013) or, simply *mobilizations* (Rebelaos 2012).

Even when there were some commonalities across movements -- the critique of representative democracy, the emphasis on occupying public spaces, the complaints of human rights violations, the commitment to practice and prefigurative politics, the sense of solidarity and internationalism, the wide use of social networks -- they did not share a defined ideology and would be impossible to homogenize them. However, they did share practices and engaged in similar debates in the general assemblies and online forums during the occupation of the squares. There were also explicit exchanges and gestures of solidarity between different square movements.³ There were also conferences and scholarly works developing in parallel to the assembly debates.⁴ Even though there were cases in which the debates deployed simultaneously or independently of each other, most of the time the topics were discussed in the

³ There are numerous examples of these exchanges, such as the solidarity communiqués that the occupiers of Tahrir Square sent to The Occupy Movement (Comrades of Cairo 2011), the video-communicués that the *Democracia Real Ya!* (associated with the 15M) sent to the YoSoy132 Student Movement, explicitly saying they were part of their movement, solidarity communiqués between the Quebec and Chilean and Mexican Student movements that were occupying squares at the time. As well, in all the cities that I covered in this research, there were sections of the general assemblies (often towards the end of it) dedicated to “international affairs.” In their interventions, “delegates” reported on updates from their movements and, rather than being referred to as members of other movements, they were often introduced as brothers, sisters or comrades. The facilitator would often say something along the lines of, “the sister is here to tell us about the struggle in Egypt.” Different as the those struggles might have been, there was an overall sense of internationalism.

⁴ A good example of this activist-academic parallels is the case of the attempt of reoccupation of Zuccotti Park on its half anniversary, which I witnessed in March, 2012. During the Left Forum of 2012, filmmaker, Michael Moore closed the conference with a lecture that resulted in the attendants (most of them OWS veterans) marching towards Zuccotti with the intention of reoccupying. The NYPD showed up and there were more than one hundred arrests, according to activists. These activists presented papers, coordinated panels and organized discussions in the forum in the same way that they managed OWS commissions, think tanks and general assemblies.

following order: 1. The acknowledgement of perceived injustice, 2. The desire to get rid of injustice and 3. The experimentation with alternatives to the unjust order.

Refusal: the acknowledgement of injustice

“That’s it!”, “Enough is enough!”, “We can’t take it anymore!” (Interviews at the 15-O Global Protest). These were the recurrent opening statements in a series of interviews I conducted during the 15-O global demonstration (15th of October, 2011) in Barcelona. (See to Figure 4). The 15-O were a series of protests around the world (one of the largest simultaneous mobilizations in History) and was a decisive moment in the development of the politics of refusal in contemporary social movements. In a sample of 20 interviews to screen the motivations of the protesters to join the protest, the only common idea in the sea of demands was what I would later learn was the notion of refusal (See Figure 5). Refusal was widely discussed in the encampments, protests and assemblies as well as in literature read (or produced) by the activists (Hessel et al 2011; Comrades from Cairo 2011; Kingstnorth 2012; Sitrin 2012; Tormey 2012; Hardt & Negri 2012; Flesher Fominaya 2015; Van de Sande 2013; Farr et al 2013; De la Llata, 2020). There was a clear refusal of representative politics (Flesher Fominaya 2015). Slogans such as “They don’t represent us!” in Spain or the more straightforward ones of “Irhal!” (Leave!) in Egypt and “Ben Alí, dégage! (Go away, Ben Alí!) in Tunisia express a clear sentiment of weariness. The motivations for refusal were different in each context. In Europe, it was the alleged dismantling of the public health and education systems; in the United States, income inequality and the housing and financial crisis; in the Middle East, the lack of civil liberties; in Latin America, the rampant corruption and systemic violence. In general, refusal responded to the apparent failure representative democracy and therefore the encampments and general assemblies became laboratories to enact direct democracy and direct action beyond representative politics (De la Llata, 2020).



Figure 4. March in the context of the 15-O Global demonstrations. Source: The author. Barcelona, Spain. October 15, 2011.



Figure 5. Temporary occupation of the esplanade of Arc de Triomf in Barcelona in the context of the 15-O. Source: The author. Barcelona, Spain. October 15, 2011.

Occupy Wall Street activist and scholar, Marina Sitrin (2012) highlights this sense of generalized refusal: “our movements are the shouting of ‘No!’ The ‘Ya Basta!’ [Enough already!] The ‘Que Se Vayan Todos!’ [They all must go!] They are our collective refusal to remain passive in an untenable situation.” (Sitrin 2012, occupytheory.org).⁵ Similarly, in a communiqué to Occupy Wall Street, the Tahrir Square protesters said: “[a]n entire generation across the globe has grown up realizing, rationally and emotionally, that we have no future in the current order of things” (Comrades from Cairo 2011). The publication of Stephen Hessel’s⁶ (2010) pamphlet *Indignez vous!* was crucial in the articulation of a common language of refusal. The text is a call to reflect about the normalization of a system perceived as structurally and fundamentally flawed, and it was hugely inspirational to the square movements across Europe and North America (hence the name, *Indignados* movement). In the 2012 encampment of Plaza Catalunya in Barcelona, a half-letter size flyer cites a quote from the book:

It is true the reasons to be outraged can seem today less clearly related or the world too complex. [...] It is a vast world, of which we have a feeling of interdependence. We live more interconnectedly than ever before. But in this world there still are intolerable things. To see them, it is well and necessary to look, to search. I say to the young people, “Search little, and that is what you are going to find.” (Hessel 2010: <http://indignez-vous-indignacion.blogspot.com/>)

What Hessel describes here is not new. The book is in many ways an analysis of the current situation in the light of a recapitulation of his own struggle against fascism. And it was interpreted as a call for action to refuse contemporary (and less explicit) forms of totalitarianism. The concept of refusal is common in contemporary social movements, and it can be traced back to the end of the Second World War (Camus 1951; Marcuse 1955), but it has been decisively embraced by anti-globalization movements towards the end of the Twentieth Century, especially since the Seattle protests of 1999 (Holloway 2000; Hardt & Negri 2001) and the 2001 uprisings in Argentina (Collectivo Situaciones 2001). And, it has also been also a core concept for the Zapatistas in Chiapas since the 1990s. The square movements are in some way a continuation of such movements and what has been called the “Global Justice Movement” (Flesher Fominaya 2014).

Camus (1951 [2012]) had explored the concept before in *The Rebel: An essay of a man in revolt*. A rebel is someone “who says *no* (italics added by the author), but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation [but also] says *yes*, from the

⁵ In this quote, she refers to the Occupy Movements and the Indignados, but also to other anti-globalization movements, such as the Zapatistas and the Argentine uprising of 2001.

⁶ Stephen Hessel (1917-2013), a fighter in the French Resistance and the last alive (at the time of the square movements) redactor of the Declaration of Human Rights (1948), alerted that we were becoming increasingly compliant with authoritarianism.

moment he [or she] makes his [or her] first gesture of rebellion. [...] [Thus, saying no] affirms the existence of a borderline” (Camus 1951 [2012] p. 13).⁷ Herbert Marcuse also explored the notion of refusal throughout his work (1955, 1964, 1969). The “Great Refusal,” as he called it, was the response of the student movements of the 1960s to different forms of oppression and domination. In Capitalism, oppression is enabled not only because external desires are imposed but also because it is accepted and internalized by the oppressed (Marcuse, 1964). For Marcuse, life is reduced to consumerism and the internalization of false needs. Refusal opens possibilities for a new society, and refusal of oppression is an assertion of “life instincts” (even erotic drives) to recover its right place in existence. Refusing these imposed needs (and processes) is a response that asserts life desires and that has political potential as well (Marcuse, 1969).

The Italian *Autonomia* Movement also talked about the “strategy of refusal” (Tronti, 1980). And it is also a concept that Hardt and Negri (2000, 2003, 2006, 2012) have continued exploring ever since. In the same line, John Holloway (2002) writes about the notion of *the scream*: “a scream of sadness, a scream of horror, a scream of anger, a scream of refusal: *NO*.” (Holloway, 2002 p. 1). The “scream” is a response to oppression that serves as an act of stopping to reflect. It is interesting to point out the agreement about the visceral (not only rational) character of refusal and the keenness on becoming life-affirmative across these works, that is to say, the commitment to find an affirmative response (a *Yes*) that overcomes the refusal (the *No*). Refusal is then a first response to oppression. And, it opens the question about how to get rid of a system that enables it. This is where the notion of destituent power comes into play.

Destituent power. The desire to end injustice

In the first days of the 15M movement, an activist shared with me an early draft of a text that was collectively produced in the Plaza Catalunya encampment in Barcelona:

The occupied plaza is self-organized, in other words, it is in itself a process of self-organization. [...] In the plaza we are putting into practice the germ of a *Destituent Assembly* [Italics by the author]. It is clear that, in spite of what some of the voices present in the plaza say, we are not moving towards the direction of a *Constituent Assembly* [Italics by the author]. Constituent Assemblies have been

⁷ The notion of “one no and many yeses” has been widely used in anti-globalization movements since the 1990s (See Kingsnorth, 2012). In a recent publication Naomi Klein, reflects on the square movements and argues that “No, is not enough,” and that there is an urgency to find inspiring “yeses.” (See Klein, 2017). Zapatistas also talk about saying “No” to the current neoliberal system, which does not allow for other ways of life. The slogan “un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos” (a world where many worlds fit) is often seen in the Zapatista communities.

fundamental instruments for classic politics, a kind of politics that we explicitly detest (Autoorganizacion 2011 p.01) (Translation from Spanish by the author).

This was the earliest mention to the notion of destituent power that I identified in the 15M movement, but I later discover it was a central conversation in other square movements as well. This debate gained particular traction in Spain (especially in Barcelona) during the square occupations of 2011. The fragment reveals a longstanding tension between the notions of constituent and destituent power. They contrast the self-organization in the plazas and direct democracy with a constituent power that entails outlining a new constitution and developing a new form of government. But first it is worth giving an overview of the history and theory of the concept of destituent power.

*Destituent power*⁸ has been referred to as the act of overthrowing, removing, deposing or neutralizing power and it was common currency in the square movements. These movements were explicit about demanding the fall of, not only the leaders of regimes, but also regimes themselves. They shared a generalized idea that most governments (not only dictatorships and authoritarian governments but also some representative democracies) were illegitimate. In Spain, France, Italy and Greece it was common to hear about “destituent processes,” “destituent assemblies,” “destituent collectives” and, of course, destituent power. In Latin America, the term has been widely used since the times of the uprising that lead to the resignation of the Argentinian president in 2001 (Colectivo Situaciones 2002). But, with the rapid articulation of the different square movements across the world, the debate about both the means and ends of destituent power grew exponentially. The concept began drawing attention among English-speaking activists with the publication of the translation of Giorgio Agamben's (2014) lecture, “What is destituent power?” in the journal *Environment & Planning D: Society and Space*. The Italian philosopher read this speech in a conference in response to the square movements. Agamben builds on Tronti's⁹ and Benjamin's¹⁰ interpretation of the concept, and links it to his *Homo Sacer* project. More specifically, he contrasts destituent and constituent power, and proposes that “[o]nly a power that is made inoperative and deposed is completely neutralized [...] [Destituent power] deposes power once and for all” (Agamben 2013 p.65). Here, it is important to first explain the tension between constituent and constituted power. Antonio Negri (1999) describes *constituent power* as a potential (*potenza*) that is

⁸ The concept of *destituent power* is present in most modern revolutionary movements, but the term, however, -- since it comes from Latin languages (French, Spanish and Catalan: Destituir, Italian: Destituire) -- is relatively new in English-speaking countries. Here, it is worth mentioning that *to destitute*, as used in theories of destituent power, has nothing to do with the meaning of poor and “without basic necessities,” as often defined in English dictionaries.

⁹ See Tronti M, 2008, “Sul potere destituente: discussione con Mario Tronti”, in *Pouvoir Destituant: Les Révoltes Métropolitaines/Potere Destituente: Le Rivolte Metropolitane* (Mimesis, Udine) pp 23–32

¹⁰ See Benjamin, Walter. *Critique de la violence*. Éditions Payot, 2

unfolding through democratic and revolutionary processes and *constituted power* as consolidated governmental power (*potere*). Michael Hardt (1999)¹¹ expands on the concept and links it to the dialectic tension between Labor and Capital. He describes that, in the same way that, according to Marx, capital is "dead labor," government (*potere*) is "dead democracy" (Hardt 1999). In this line of thought, a government (even a representative democracy) is no longer potential but consolidated, systematized and ritualized power. Constituent power entails potential. It is becoming-power, i.e. political power that is yet to materialize.¹² Constituted power is the consolidation of a government via law-making processes, the creation of institutions, a constitution, and, ultimately, of a new social contract. In contrast, destituent power is the response to move away from this possibility.

A theory of destituent power (Gavroche 2013; Newman 2000; Wakefield 2013; The Invisible Committee 2015; Laudani 2013; Nowotony 2009) has been developed from the lessons of the square movements as well as from Agamben's response. Destituent power focuses essentially in making power inoperative, rather than in confronting it with violence (via an armed revolution) only to end up replicating its practices.¹³ Destituent power is presented as an alternative to the problem of revolutionary power that eventually consolidates into governmental power. It seeks to take action by being "indifferent" to power, rather than by confronting it directly (Gavroche 2017). Destituent power "[...] is not a question here of a new social contract, but of a new strategic composition of worlds" (The Invisible Committee 2014 p.85).¹⁴ Destituent power is, as the notion of refusal, prefigurative in essence. It does not seek change through taking power but through enacting alternatives (Holloway 2002).

Going back to the debate in Plaza Catalunya's encampment, the authors of the text make reference to the constituent-destituent power tension. They text refer to "classic politics" as the post-revolutionary processes of law-making and the creation of institutions, a constitution and a new social contract. The authors were responding to a sector of the movement that sought to write a new constitution that recuperated the spirit of the protest encampments and their

¹¹ See Hardt's prologue to Negri's (1999) *Insurgencies*

¹² Other thinkers have also juxtaposed government with democracy and suggest there is a fundamental difference between politics as a process and politics as an outcome. Here, we can cite Miguel Abensour's (2011) concept of "Democracy against the State," and Ranciere's (2010) differentiation between politics, the political and the police. And, it is also worth mentioning Trotsky's thesis on "The permanent revolution" in contrast to a consolidated revolution.

¹³ Gramsci explored this contradiction throughout his work. He suggests that counterhegemonic power can potentially become hegemonic power.

¹⁴ In reference to Benjamin, Agamben comments: "The difference between *veranlassen*, "to induce, to provoke", and *vollziehen*, "to accomplish, to realize", expresses the opposition between constituent power, which destroys and always recreates new forms of law, without ever completely destituting it, and destituent power, which, in deposing law once and for all, immediately inaugurates a new reality [...] It follows that the first of these operations is lawmaking but the second anarchic" (Benjamin, 1921 in Agamben, 2013: 71).

assemblies. This group became to be known as “Consituyentes” (The Constituents), and they had presence in several Spanish cities. During participant observation in one of their debates, a founding member of Consituyentes explained to me:

We have a government that developed after the fall of the Franco dictatorship, and therefore is not legitimate, neither is legal or constitutional. Therefore, we are assembled to redact a new constitution that recuperates the spirit of previous constitutions [especiallly The 1812 Constitution of Cadiz], as well as the ideals of 15M movement. Yes, at the moment, we are going through a destituent process, and after that it is time for a constituent process [...] We know some sectors of the 15M don't like us and are distancing themselves from us, but it is important that this [the mobilizations] results in the promulgation of a new constitution (Interview with Felipe, May 2012).

A few days before this interview, in a 3-day encampment planned for the first anniversary of the movement, *Democracia Real Ya!*, a collective that was instrumental in the organization of the encampments, mentioned in a communique, “We demand a new *constituent power* [Italics added by the author] to recuperate our own sovereignty [...] [W]e take to the streets once again with legitimate and majoritarian demands, and we call for mobilizations as well as a consumption boycott [a strike]” (democraciarealya.es 2012, last accessed July 1, 2018).

In the square movements, destituent power was often associated with direct action and direct democracy. The concept of direct action generated substantial debate in the movements, and most considered it essential for a destituent process. Agamben suggests, taking power (even via direct action) is problematic, as the focus of destituent power should not be in the creation of a new government but on the creation of an ongoing destituent process.¹⁵ In the movements, they considered direct democracy and prefigurative politics ways for achieving a “social revolution” (rather than larger political transformation).

Destituent power was used in reference to political economy both at the macro and micro level. Theoretical debates about destituent power focused more on the importance of destituent power to escape the hegemony-counterhegemony cycle at the macro scale. However, in the encampments themselves, the debates were more about finding different dynamics of communication and interaction

¹⁵ In the context of Occupy Wall Street, David Graeber and Chris Hedges, debated online about the justifiability of the destruction of property and physical confrontation (the so-called “diversity of tactics”) in a revolutionary process. The street combats in Syntagma Square in Athens and the blockade of the Catalan Parliament to stop representatives from approving laws perceived as unjust split opinions about the different interpretations direct action, and the attempt to stop the inauguration of president elect, Enrique Peña Nieto (in Mexico), on grounds of electoral fraud, revived discussions about the fragile tension between the legitimacy and legality of governments (De la Llata 2017).

to destitute hegemonic practices than to find means to depose hegemonic politics.

In the square movements, they were keen, for example, about assembly participants always speaking *ad personam*, about remaining open even to potential political adversaries, about not imposing rules and a sense of collective will in the encampments, about welcoming activists from other countries as part of the same international struggle, just to name a few. These practices reflect an awareness about what Foucault calls “microfascisms” (Foucault 1977). That is, practices that are latent in any revolutionary and democratic processes but that are the seeds of constituted power (and even fascism).¹⁶ Foucault, in Deleuze & Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* prologue, talks about the importance of “the tracking down of all varieties of fascism, from the enormous ones that surround and crush us to the petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives” (Foucault in Deleuze & Guattari 1977 p.v). Being aware of the potential of power crystallization becomes particularly important for uprisings happening in the context of socialist governments and representative democracies. In these contexts, it is more difficult to identify fascism nominally, as democratic governments can potentially engage in repressive practices and co-opt democratic processes. In the same way that democracy is not a regime, but a method and a process, fascism does not necessarily exist only in nominally fascist regimes – fascism is ultimately a practice.¹⁷

Destituent power, for the square movements, was the desire to explore relationships and interactions that sought to depose power structures at the level of micropolitics and everyday life. In fact, the protest encampments “emphasized the importance of transforming space as means of transforming social relationships” (Dhaliwal 2012 p.251). They appeared as seminal spaces and moments to test this kind of power at the quotidian level. Destituent power is perceived as a process that shifts power relationships, more than overthrowing power hierarchies. In sum, constituent power is in process of trans-formation. Constituted power is consolidated, crystallized power in the form of the state and government institutions. They exist in a dialectic dichotomy. Destituent power, on the other hand, is a political force that moves in the opposite direction (See Diagram 1). It seeks to disperse rather than

¹⁶ Foucault asks “How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behavior?” (Foucault, 1977: xiii).

¹⁷ Here, it is interesting to point out that most of the square movements (similar to the social movements of 1968) often made direct references to fascism and called for ways to challenge it. Foucault (1977) warned that activists should be aware of microfascisms *especially* in leftist movements, as they would be more likely to be unnoticed. Destituent power is perceived in the movements as key to prevent power crystallization and the cooptation of progressive struggles. As constituent power often shapes itself in response to constituted power – and often unconsciously –, the risk of mimicking its structures is always latent. The protest encampments were spaces in which people were particularly aware of these risks.

innovation and reflectivity” (Flesher Fominaya 2014 p.114) are essential to social movements in general. In the case of the square movements, horizontality, diversity, prefigurative politics and debate in general was perceived as a condition for creativity. Therefore, participants resisted uniformity and top-down organization as it was perceived to have a “stifling effect on the creativity and autonomy of the movement” (Maeckelbergh 2012 p.227). Creativity is a way to refuse the ethics and aesthetics, and the form and content of oppressive power. Destituent power is associated with making power inoperative by engaging in prefigurative experiments.^{18 19} However, creative resistance goes a step further as it operates, not necessarily against, but beyond power.

The encampments were true “urban laboratories” (De la Llata, 2014, 2016) where not only new forms of art were tested, but also new forms of organization, communication and exchange. The encampments, occupied social centers and events to reclaim urban spaces that were associated to the square movements operated as self-managed settlements (Stravides 2016). Creative resistance was expressed in endless ways in the square movements but there were three main arenas of experimentation: politics, economics, and art.



¹⁸ In *Now and Destituent Power*, Gavroche (2017) discusses the relationship between destituent power and creativity and the importance of withdrawing from power rather than to attack it: “The setting aside of any new constitution would seem to push away the ambitions of recuperation and novel sovereignty. The destituent gesture is one of withdrawal, but withdrawal is not escape; indeed, no escape is possible. (...) This is not an argument for passivity. It is rather an effort to intensify the implications of destitution.” (Gavroche, 2017: autonomies.org)

¹⁹ Reflecting on the square movements, the Invisible Committee describe how destituent processes operate vis-a-vis constituted power: “the destituent gesture does not oppose the institution, it does not lead a frontal attack against it; the gesture neutralizes it, empties it of its substance, it takes a step aside and watches the institution expire” (The Invisible Committee, 2015: 79).

Figure 6. Artistic performances in the context of the May Day General Strike organized by OWS (New York City). In the picture we see a group of artists braiding ribbons around a stick. This emulates a medieval ritual performed in small towns and that the activists used as a metaphor of collaborative organization. Source: The author. New York, New York. May 1st, 2012.

The relationship between art and activism has been well documented. Artists have historically been part of social movements and revolutions (e.g. Rimbaud in the Paris Commune, the Situationists in the French May, George Orwell in the Spanish Civil War, just to name a few) in the same way that activist and revolutionists have participated in artistic movements (e.g. Trotsky's involvement with the Mexican muralists, the Black Panthers involvement in graphic arts and music, Subcomandante Marcos' lifetime involvement in poetry and creative writing). The encampments were fertile ground for this kind of entanglement. In most protest encampments there were at least one commission actively dedicated to creativity. In the encampments, there were music performances, film screenings, open libraries, stencil workshops and architectural experiments using recycled materials. In Barcelona, the Art Commission, was among the three first commissions founded on the first day of the occupation of Plaza Catalunya (De la Llata 2016). The Zuccotti Park encampment hosted all sorts of music and art collectives and even a commission of urban planning and design, which was in charge of the spatial management of the occupation. The Acampada Revolucion, in Mexico City, was famous for the active involvement of poets and musicians in the organization of the encampment.



Figure 7. Marching band playing in solidarity with the 15M movement during a demonstration in Barcelona. Source: The author. Barcelona, Spain. May 12, 2012.

The square movements often hosted art symposia and workshops in parallel to protests. In a workshop taking place in the context of Barcelona's General Strike of 2012 in which I did participant observation, activists and artists met to discuss and test tactics of artistic resistance. One of the main overarching questions guiding the gatherings was, 'how can we reinterpret old gestures and symbols of resistance, and ultimately, transcend them by creating something new?' In the meetings, one of the presenters showed a slide with the picture of Catalan partisans in the Spanish Civil war, smiling at the camera with their left fists in the air. He asked the participants,

"Look at this picture. The fist in the air might meant something in 1936. It was a symbol of resistance. But today, it has been completely devoided of meaning. It means nothing in the context of yesterday's strike [The General Strike of March 29 2012]. It is a nostalgic gesture. We need to reinvent and rethink new symbols and tactics according to these times" (Fieldnotes in Activist Symposium 2012).



Figure 8. Activists' workshop in the context of the 27M General Strike (Barcelona). Source: The author. Barcelona, Spain. March 30, 2012.

Not only the symbols and tactics had to change but the tone of the actions as well. Thus, irreverence and irony, for example, were considered crucial to contest power, as they are inherently transgressive. Irreverence often highlights the seriousness and uptightness with which the power takes ideology. Humor is associated with rebellion, creativity and experimentation (Flesher Fominaya 2014) and it is a well-known form of subverting power. As mentioned before, the square movements focused on the quotidian practices and “aesthetics” of power, not only in the content.²⁰ These kinds of debates permeated the actions of the square movements.

The creative expressions were not only in the domain of art. The occupiers also experimented with alternative economies. In Barcelona, there was a commission dedicated to discuss alternative economics. Recurrent issues discussed were the finding of alternatives to monetary exchange and to the dependence on banks.²¹ Here, it is worth mentioning that these experiments operated at the everyday level, and therefore without clear agendas to expand to the level of macropolitics or macroeconomics. Thus, they operated independently of power -- rather than against it. For example, there were experiments with markets of barter that were later taken into other plazas as weekly events as well as networks of community gardens to produce organic and affordable food. In an interview, a participant working in a community garden explains: "we are part of network of community gardens and food sovereignty producers across town. There is no hierarchy. We decide and work horizontally. We can say that we are "federated" [quotes added gestually by the interviewee] in practice, but not officially. We chose the model of the network because it is the most robust and resilient kind of social structure" (Interview with activist at Aurea Barcelona May 2012).

²⁰ The outcome of this workshop, in which I participated, were a series of creative protest actions, such as "squads" that used ironic props to engage the riot police in unlikely humorous confrontations. An example of that was the "reluctant volleyball:" a gigantic air balloon that the protesters threw at the riot police, and which they repelled with their batons only to be thrown at them by the protesters. Another, action planned in these meetings were the creation of the "foreclosure tours," guided visits to show tourists buildings that had been subject of real estate speculation and foreclosure. This action built on the Dadaists tours to the "most iconic" places of Paris, which included dumpsters, dark alleys, etc.

²¹ In my interviews I discovered that a significant percentage of the movement's participants closed their bank accounts and opted for non-corporate credit and saving "mutuals." However, each movement had a different approach towards this topic. A participant in the Barcelona encampment mentioned how at the beginning, they did not want to have anything to do with money. However, later they received donations which they eventually used. Contrarily, in the OWS movement, they received money donations from the beginnings of the encampment. By the end of 2011, an assembly participant reported that the movement had more than one million dollars in donations. This money was mostly used to pay for the bails of participants that had been arrested. And, it was discussed that the NYPD, might actually had a strategy to arrest occupiers systematically in order to deplete the movement from this fund.



Figure 9. Aurea Barcelona's Public Library, a project created with donations and volunteer work from activists from the 15M movement (Barcelona). Source: The author. Barcelona, Spain. May 20, 2012.

The scale of the experiments is not circumstantial, but rather fundamental to the spirit of the movements. As one of the main issues in the square movements was the disproportion of corporate power vis-a-vis popular power, they advocated for small-scale social and economic organization that allowed for face-to-face interaction, direct accountability among members and compassion. In the political arena, the encampments and assemblies were in themselves experiments with politics. The general assemblies taking place in public spaces sought to be alternatives to the downsides of representative democracy. They were open to potentially all citizens, the issues were discussed transparently and people shared their opinions *ad personam* (not as part of a political party or organization). The hand sign language to approve and reject proposals used in the Spanish assemblies was later adopted by Occupy Wall Street, and the "People's mic" was adopted in turn by other Occupy movements. The so-called "progressive stack," a measure to ensure equal participation according to race, age, gender and class was another experiment tested in the Occupy Movement. The dynamics of the general assemblies were the result of both philosophical discussions about democracy as well as the practical testing of these ideas. But above all, the encampments were sites that were open to the autonomous appropriation and co-production of space -- or 'commoning' (Stravides 2016) -- and to experiment with forms of self-management.

4. Discussion. Do we really know what we want?

The practical philosophies enacted in the square movements are manifestations of a desire for transformation. They sought opportunities for emancipation at the personal and societal level. However, these approaches also posed a number of questions and challenges that are common to most social movements, especially refusal and destituent power. First, as these attitudes are responses to power, they risk being *in function of power*, that is, that the language of resistance articulates *only* -- or mostly -- around what the resistance is *not* about. Refusal, by definition, is a response to a state of things perceived as unacceptable. It is a necessary point of departure for transformation. Nevertheless, in that stage, transformation is only sought by differentiation -- the undesirable situation is identified, therefore anything that is different from that situation is perceived as a better order of things. Destituent power is perceived as the next step in this process, and it seeks to make power inoperative. It seeks to “starve power to death” and, it is in clear opposition of constituent power, as we have discussed. However, these first two stages are, somehow, reactive to power, in the sense that the discourse they use inevitably references power. Here, the key question is: Is it possible for social movements to overcome the reactive stage to move into a more creative and proactive resistance? Second, there is an often-imperceptible risk of dispersing *all* power (not only authoritarian power) and of potentially neutralizing the movements’ own power. Constituent power is becoming-power, while constituted power is crystalized political power (i.e power as *being*). However, destituent power is also a form of becoming-power, only it moves in the opposite direction. And, if that is the case, if there are constituent and constituted powers in tension, there must be also be a destituent and “destituted” power in tension with the latter being power that is completely neutralized. Agamben (2014) proposes that that is the ultimate objective of destituent power: to make power inoperative. However, once – or if – this is eventually achieved, what comes after power is no more? And, third, there is a pending – or at least incomplete – debate about how these philosophies operate at the everyday life level. Throughout the development of the square movements there was a conversation between intellectuals and activists, and, as mentioned in the introduction, the dividing line was blurry. However, there was indeed one clear difference between the debates in academia and activism: the issue of scale. Intellectuals discussed refusal and destituent power at the macro scale (i.e. at the scale of global political and economic power), while the activists focused more on everyday applications of the concepts and practice. Thus, we go back to the questions raised in the introduction: How do we transform ourselves in the process of seeking social transformation? And, this invites to think about what is the role we personally play in perpetuating systems of oppression. That is, not to explain power as detached from ourselves but as an interdependent processes in which everyone -- willingly or reluctantly, passively or actively, implicitly or explicitly - - participates. Finally, there is a manifest anxiety about replicating and mimicking power in the process of contesting it in contemporary social movements.

Regarding the first question, the danger of dwelling in these two first stages of resistance is that our language, our discourse and even our general sense of selves cannot be understood and articulated without referring to power, that is, that resistance stays at the level of anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, non-patriarchal, non-hierarchical, anti-racist, and so on. The means to effectively overcoming the reactive stage of resistance is inescapably through creativity.

After most of the encampments were evicted by the end of 2011, several movements moved on to the strategy of the general strike (an action clearly associated with refusal and destituent power). But in a post-encampment scenario, most of the movements moved on to smaller collectives, social experiments and neighborhood assemblies. In Barcelona, after the eviction of the encampment, the movement published this communiqué online: “[We will r]estructure the movement [for the] extension and reconception of the structural organization so that it can be decentralized creating a tight mesh across towns and barrios”(wiki.nolesvotes.org). A similar transition happened in other movements across the world. Occupy Wall Street continued having general assemblies and meetings after the eviction of the encampment, and they also engaged in neighborhood level organization.²² This is the least known stage of the square movements and it had been often interpreted as a defeat. The transition from one stage to another often represent moments of rupture in social movements, as there are strong disagreements in the actions and strategies to be used.²³

The tendency to “dwell” in the first stages is often a source of debate in social movements. Saul Newman (2009) analyzes the question of dwelling in resentment in revolutionary movements. By putting Nietzsche in an unlikely dialogue with theories of autonomy and anarchism, he proposes that overcoming resentment is key to revolutionary processes. Nietzsche was a well-known critique of progressive movements, such as communism, feminism and anarchism. He argued that they tended to live in resentment and to identify with what he called the *sklavenmoralen* (the morality of the slave). Newman proposes an approach to revolutionary movements, that takes Nietzsche’s critique into account, and considers rebellion with the intention of overcoming resentment and the morality of the slave. To achieve this stage, there needs to be a clear desire for personal and societal transformation. Nietzsche warned that in a post-religious world, the danger was to be left without values that could fill the vacuum left by religion. He proposed that art was the only way to transcend not only an externally imposed morality (i.e. by The State, The Church, The Society, and so on) but also a life without morality (i.e. a nihilist

²² Some authors (Marcuse, 2012) argue that the involvement of OWS in the neighborhood organization after the Sandy hurricane in New York (so-called #OccupySandy) was a practical application of the politics of Occupy Wall Street in the field. It was a creative gesture of direct action and prefigurative politics.

²³ For example, there was always strong disagreement about dissolving the encampments to move on to periodical general assemblies as well as about the place and frequency of the general assemblies.

view of the world, with no hierarchy of values whatsoever). He uses art in a broad sense (i.e. applied to life as a whole) and suggests that we treat our life as a work of art. Therefore, taking an experimental approach to resistance is the first step towards transcending the tendency to dwell in the reactive stage. To arrive to this stage, one has to articulate a discourse that frees itself from the language of power and transcends the “anti” stage of resistance. This takes us to the second question, which is the challenge of what to do after power is neutralized.

Destituent power is in opposition of constituent power, nevertheless they are both becoming-powers. They are not consolidated powers (*potere*) but potential (*potenza*). Understanding the question of *becoming-power* is key to analyzing this problem. Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1983), like Nietzsche, propounded for an “ontology of becoming,” focused on transformation in contrast to an ontology of being, which focuses on a fixed essence of things. Negri’s (1999) theory of constituent vis-a-vis constituted power builds on the ontology of becoming.²⁴ Constituent power (i.e. democratic, deliberative and revolutionary processes) are powers that are in flow. Arguably, Negri’s most important contribution is to analyze democracy and revolution as a becoming-powers.

An ontology of becoming transcends the binary dichotomies entailed in an ontology of being, i.e. things either *are* or *are not*. Through the lens of the ontology of becoming, things *tend to*, *tend towards*. They do not necessarily consolidate or crystallize, but “approximate” crystallization. In that sense, constituent power tends towards constituted power, in the same sense that destituent power approximates inoperative power (i.e. power that has been completely neutralized). For example, an assembly or an encampment in a plaza does not have a defined form. However, that does not mean they are completely amorphous either. The encampment *does* approximate a form. This was visible in the gatherings in the encampments. Even though they were technically boundless crowds, the agglomerations insinuated fluid boundaries (De la Llata 2021). Similarly, political processes differentiate from one another only insofar as they are becoming something else. Spatial and conceptual boundaries thus are never abrupt demarcations between adjacent realities. Instead, spaces, processes, identities differentiate in gradients. They are not defined realities but only the convergence of intensities. The temporality of constituent power is also defined by approximations. In the process of becoming, the political flows tend towards something, but never really reach *that* something. When the process of becoming concludes or becomes contained power, it consolidates and becomes constituted. Thinking about this tension graphically, we can say that, even though the forces operate dialectically, they move in the same axis. The condition of being-constituent implies that power is in the process of becoming

²⁴ In *Insurgencies* (1999), he comments: [I]f we isolate the extreme range of its epistemological impact between Nietzsche and Heidegger, Foucault and Deleuze, we find in the “alternative” currents of modern metaphysics (Spinoza and Marx) its constitutive process. This epistemological annotation is fundamental to the construction of the concept of “constituent power.” (Negri 1999 p.344).

constituted. In that line, power consolidates little by little, always tending towards crystallization. Historical evidence shows that most revolutionary struggles often end with the consolidation of authoritarian regimes that institutionalized, ritualized and turned into regimes similar or worse than the ones that were contested. And, in the opposite direction (the direction of destituent power) it tends towards making power inoperative.

The protest encampments and general assemblies were “spaces of becoming” – i.e. spaces in constant process of becoming something else and in which people could become something else (Astor 2021). The movement from constituent to constituted is “asymptotic” – it approaches but never quite touches the limit. Deleuze (1968) used the figure of *asymptote* to develop an interpretation of reality based on an ontology of becoming. The notion of *limit* illustrates how becoming-power (both constituent and destituent) is one that only approximates/tends constitution (and destitution), and that, in space, is recognizable when processes and flows become more intense without really crystallizing. Building on Deleuze’s reference to the asymptote, a diagram helps us situate both refusal and destituent power vis-a-vis constituent and constituted power. And, it helps us reflect about how to transcend the reactive stages of resistance. This takes us to the question of, how can we imagine and envision ourselves differently -- both at the collective and individual level?

The question of personal transformation vis-a-vis social transformation has also been discussed in the framework of refusal and rebellion. Castoriadis (in Chatterton 2005) differentiates *individual* and *collective autonomy*. For him, autonomy is always a process in which there is a personal acknowledgement of one’s own oppression and a desire to change it. Camus describes how in the process of acknowledging oppression individually, we develop a sense of collectivity and solidarity. This process even brings about an acknowledgement of one’s own existence: “*I rebel, therefore we exist*” (Camus 1951 [2012] p.14) (emphasis in the transition from the first person of the singular to the plural). There is, therefore, a simultaneous development of individual and collective autonomy. *Autonomy* (Auto=self, Nomos=Law, government, order) entails self-government or self-management. Therefore, at the individual level, it also entails the development of the self. Refusal acknowledges what the self *is not*, but it does not identify -- yet -- what the self *is*. Destituent power seeks to neutralize the identified and unwanted self.

In Žižek’s address to the Zuccotti Park general assembly, he raised the question of what comes after encampments. Žižek warns the occupiers should not “fall in love with themselves,” and that the challenge was to commit beyond the utopia created in the encampments. He makes clear references about thinking beyond refusal: “Remember that our basic message is ‘We are allowed to think about alternatives.’ If the taboo is broken, we do not live in the best possible world. But there is a long road ahead. There are truly difficult questions that confront us. *We know what we do not want. But what do we want?* [Italics added by the author] What social organization can replace capitalism? What type of new leaders do we want?” (Žižek 2011 www.imposemagazine.com). The question

then is, how can we imagine a new reality (individually and collectively) that rids itself of the language of power at the everyday scale, that is, at the scale of Foucault's notion of "microfascisms"? Here, it is key to acknowledge that "we come from the same world as power, not from a 'natural' world removed from it." (Newman 2006, libcom.com). Microfascism is domination that has become internalized. At the everyday scale, it is also crucial to recognize that "[...] the principal enemy of freedom is not the authoritarianism of others, but our own and unconfessed authoritarianism" (Octavio Alberola, *Revolucion o Colapso* in Gavroche 2017 autonomies.org). A collective (through the individual) and individual (through the collective) reflection is urgent in order to transcend the reactive stages of resistance.

The diagram almost poses a trap. It works as follows. If one opposes constituted power in whatever form, one has to locate oneself in the realm of constituent power. However, this field also approximates constituted power. If we move in the opposite direction, we engage in destituent power, but resistance tends towards inoperative power. Is there an escape? This is where creativity comes into play as an alternative. Creativity works in terms of what Deleuze and Guattari (1983) call "lines of flight." Here, "[t]o flee is not to escape. It is rather to create what Deleuze calls runoffs through the cracks of a social system. That is, the creation of forms of life beyond the State and Capital are already weapons, the only weapons worthy of a revolution" (Deleuze and Parnet in Gavroche 2016).

Differentiation (i.e. refusal) is important in a search for transformation, but expression, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is crucial to achieve autonomy: "The real distinction [is] between forms, but forms belonging to the same aggregate, the same thing or subject. Now, however, expression becomes independent in its own right, in other words, autonomous." (Deleuze & Guattari 1980 p.80). Following up on the previous question, articulating an original language (i.e. one that is not in function of power) opens the door for new forms of emancipatory expression. The Invisible Committee (2015) hints about the question of expression in resistance movements: "[t]he true fecundity of an action resides in its very interior. This does not mean that there is no question for us regarding the verifiable efficacy of an action. What does it mean is that the power of the impact of an action resides not in its effects, but in what it itself expresses immediately" (The Invisible Committee 2015 p.77). Expressiveness offers the opportunity of moving away from the trap of power presented in the diagram before. Creativity is a "line of flight" to experiment and imagine new realities.

5. Conclusion. Also saying yes

In *Engagéz vous!*, the follow up of the influential book *Indigné Vous!*, Stephan Hessel (2011) asks, "What to do?, then. In this strange and uncertain world, Should we discourage ourselves and drown in pesimism? No! [...] There are alternatives" (Hessel, 2011: 10). The question is not only, what are the

alternatives, but also what are the attitudes that we need to cultivate in order to find new alternatives. Art (in the broad sense of the word) and creative expression are a life-affirming attitudes to overcome the reactive stages of resistance. It is a form of going beyond what we do not want and start saying *yes* to what we want. To arrive to that stage, it is important to understand that power is not external to resistance. Oppressive processes can be replicated, reenacted and mimicked. In movements such as the square movements, transcending the “anti” stage is fundamental. In order to do so, one must transcend the anxiety of “not getting it right” in theory. Hence, it is fundamental to test alternatives in order to “make the way by walking” (Chatterton 2005). Moreover, the focus of creating alternatives is about creating new power, and not necessarily only (even though it can potentially happen) on taking power away.

Nietzsche warned that “whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.” This possibility has been a source of anxiety in the square movements, as well as in most movements in the last 20 years. Destituent power manifests that anxiety, as it backs up from power consolidation and the creation of a new order. Instead, it seeks to render power inoperative. These anxieties are not infused. History shows that the risk of counterhegemony becoming the hegemony is all too common in revolutionary movements. Creativity and prefigurative politics provide a line of flight to the power-counterpower-power cycle. Experimenting, imagining and creating alternative realities is key to overcoming the reactive stage of resistance. This entails, of course, that *the experiments might fail*. But that is a premise of any creative endeavor. Furthermore, we can consider “failures” as iterations of change.

After the dismantling of the encampments, many activists moved into small-scale creative projects in neighborhood associations, art collectives, students’ assemblies and so on. The dispersion of the movements is often considered as a defeat resulting from the apparent lack of clear objectives. Nevertheless, many activists carried on incorporating these philosophies in their everyday practices. In this sense, the encampments were “Temporary Autonomous Zones” (Bey 1991). Autonomy can survive in time but not necessarily in space. That is, if an occupied space in which autonomous practices take place is evicted, the autonomy can be preserved in practice and taken into another space. The protest encampments where seminal spaces of autonomy that, after eviction, became new spaces of autonomy through creative experiments. In the presentation of *The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City*, the editor said, “by evicting us from Zuccotti Park, they have hit the honeycomb with a stick, now there are bees all over the city” (Sparrow 2012). The practices and experiments tested in the encampments were not necessarily replicated in other spaces but rather transformed into new experiments. In many ways, this is how the square movement proliferated. Between 2011 and 2014, there was an uninterrupted occupation of public spaces, if we consider that at least one square in the world was occupied at some point. This transference of autonomy

was often done via sharing information and tactics online, but sometimes it was an actual transference of knowledge by occupiers who traveled around the world.²⁵ The square movements cannot be analyzed under the perspective of “success or failure [...] [or] an all or nothing position” (Flesher Fominaya in Humphrys 2012 p.3), as their focus was not on the outcome of the movement, but rather on the development (Humphrys, 2012). To borrow Holloway’s (2002) words, they aimed to “change the world without taking power.”

Creativity transcends the potential reactiveness created by refusal and the danger within destituent power of depleting political transformation from all power. Creativity does not try to escape the danger of failing. It rather embraces that there is no escape from potentially -- or eventually -- failing. Any creative endeavor (political, economic, artistic, etc.) is subject of potential failure. Technically, any program will become obsolete due to societal, technological or cultural changes. Creative resistance is not about rejecting the anxiety of failing, but about acknowledging it and transcending the anxiety to motivate action. This operates both at the individual and the collective level. Oppressive power transforms in the same way that internalized individual power adapts and becomes something different. We become others, not only by transforming our context, but by acknowledging the interdependent role we play in an oppressive system and by creating something beyond it (i.e. not in function of it). Experimentation is a way to create alternatives beyond a power that can truly transform both the individual and the social. That is, to create from within our own inner power and to use that power creatively and expressively.

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²⁵ After the eviction of Zuccotti, one of the organizers explained to me how during the beginning of the occupation there were “two young women, a Spaniard and an Egyptian, who actively helped in the organization of the encampment and the general assembly sharing the experiences of Tahrir, Plaza del Sol and Plaza Catalunya.” (Interviews with Brian at Zuccotti Park, February, 2012)

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“Save Temporary Protected Status” movement: non-citizens’ reach of civil rights

Cleovi C. Mosuela

Abstract

The Trump administration threatened to revoke Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a humanitarian blanket relief for hundreds of thousands of non-citizens living in the U.S. This article provides an analysis of the collective claims-making of TPS holders and allies. I suggest reading the emergence of the movement by drawing on the spatial and temporal strategies employed by non-citizens making claims on the state for ensuring civil rights and defining how they should belong. Rather than viewing non-citizens as always external to the political community, my analysis highlights the interactions between TPS holders – as collective actors – and state agencies. Through the concept of reach, this paper develops an argument that mobilizing around litigation, lobbying, and protests, creates spaces for TPS holders to reach across the ontological divide between citizens and non-citizens. I derive empirical evidence from the strategies deployed by TPS holders and activists to make political claims materialized through lawsuits, bus, and caravan. I also draw on media analysis and interviews with representatives of organizations engaged in or leading the movement. By bringing into productive conversation the literature on TPS holders and social movement, the discussion contributes to the scholarship at the nexus of social movement theory and migrant mobilization.

Keywords: Temporary Protected Status, social movement, migrant mobilization, reach, civil rights

Introduction

I only learned about [Temporary Protected Status] TPS when the president tried to end it for my mom. But as a child of a TPS holder, I didn’t think twice about standing up to the president to defend my mom and our family.

- Crista Ramos (14), lead plaintiff in *Ramos vs. Nielsen* (Aviles on NBC News, 2019)

As part of the Immigration Act of 1990, the TPS declaration has provided a vital form of humanitarian protection to hundreds of thousands of non-citizens living in the U.S. who are unable to return to their countries of origin because of armed conflict or natural disasters. It is a blanket relief for foreign nationals, already residing in the U.S. at the time of calamity, who may not meet the legal

definition of refugee but would nevertheless face perilous situations if to return to countries of citizenship. TPS recipients receive temporary permission to live and work and reprieve from deportation for a period of six to 18 months. TPS declaration for a specific country is also subject to renewal (Immigration Act of 1990).

When Trump took office in 2017, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) declared the abolition of TPS program for 98 percent of all TPS holders. Crista Ramos, from the quote above, is one of those 270,000 U.S. citizen children, each with a parent or parents who are TPS holders. They face the risk of family separation as their parent could get deported as TPS is lifted. As a response, the Save TPS movement emerged in 2017 as a series of collective actions across the country. This collective action, composed of faith-based organizations, labor unions, business leaders, and bipartisan groups of mayors and legislators, goes beyond acknowledging the importance of the TPS program and what it means for the beneficiaries and wider society. It has evolved into a movement that protects and promotes immigrant rights as civil rights.

The literature on TPS beneficiaries and families is instructive in the fields of demography and describing the marginalized conditions they have been facing (Kerwin, 2014; Menjivar, 2017; Griffith and Gleeson, 2017). However, the current state of the art does not address the emergence of collective action, identity, and “taking subjectivity” that TPS beneficiaries have assumed, which is dynamically evolving at the present conjuncture. This is the opening that my paper aims to fill. While it is important to expose how the TPS program itself leads to various forms of vulnerability, especially in relation to temporality, my paper highlights the aspect of precarity that constitutes the potential to mobilize as countermovement and to envision alternatives (Waite, 2009).

I argue that mobilizing around litigation, lobbying, and protests, creates spaces for TPS holders to reach across the ontological divide between those with and without formal legal and permanent status. In so doing, I suggest reading the emergence of Save TPS movement through the spatial and temporal strategies employed by non-citizens or undocumented migrants making claims on the state (see Bloemraad and Voss, 2020; Coutin et al., 2017; Squire, 2011). It is also important to note that, as political scientist William Walters suggests, non-citizenship does not refer to a given legal status or “the ‘other’ of ‘the’ citizen” but is an indication of “the space of possibility” encompassing political identities (2008, 203).

Critical citizenship scholarship has proven invaluable in opening the discussion of new ways of being political that challenge the boundaries between the categories of citizen and non-citizen (Nyers, 2003; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012; McNevin, 2013). The scholarship argues that mobilizing a non-citizen movement ruptures the norm about citizenship as a status recognized by law. Rather than viewing non-citizens as always ‘outside the law’ or external to the political community, undocumented migrant collective action demonstrates a co-constitutive relationship between political-legal subjectivities and spaces of citizenship (ibid.). For instance, the movement led by undocumented youth,

sometimes referred to as "DREAMers," in the U.S. has been analyzed based on its political implications for how membership is defined¹ (Nicholls, 2013; Nicholls and Fiorito, 2014; Schwiertz, 2016; Anguiano, 2011; Corruner, 2012; Costanza-Chock, 2014; Unzueta Carrasco and Seif, 2014).

My data could very well speak to this said literature and assert that non-citizens, who may not be equally seen as a legitimate political actor in comparison to someone who holds citizenship, are engaged in making claims on belonging. Rather, I want to use this as a springboard to consider the dynamic spatial and temporal relationship and the interactions between the state and those it categorizes as non-citizens, those without a path to permanent residence and citizenship. I am interested in how TPS holders of different ethnicity, race, migration background, reach across differences and make claims on the state as it administers immigration law (which I will explain further below). Moreover, through TPS holders' strategies, they become visible to each other; the process of which is tied to shared interests of protecting the program that defers their deportation. In relation to this, the Save TPS movement is geopolitically significant, especially as the TPS program is currently seen as an international migration relief tool to protect those displaced by extreme climate events, for instance (see Matias, 2020). Perhaps the TPS scheme was not intended to appear as a benevolent practice of protection, but it materializes as an exception to a securitized U.S. immigration governance (see Mosuela and Matias, 2015). This speaks to the program's ambivalence or complication in current changing geopolitical global relations. A detailed comparison between the Save TPS movement and other current or past immigrant movements in the U.S. is beyond the purview of this paper. But my discussion can potentially offer dialogues with the scholarship on a geographical understanding of social movement practice (Routledge, 2013; Nicholls, 2009) and on migrant mobilizations in and beyond the U.S.

I am sympathetic to how sociologists Irene Bloemraad and Kim Voss astutely show the tensions that characterize contemporary immigrant mobilization and claims-making in the U.S. (2020). Looking at the 2006 pro-immigrant movement and its historical context across the country, their research offers direct dialogue with the cornerstones of social movement theory, which typically assumes a citizen claims-makers in its theorizing. Bloemraad and Voss' analysis illustrates that the intersections of undocumented status and lack of citizenship affect claimants' resource mobilization, individual and collective identity, and framing issues. They argue that a true social movement by and on behalf of migrants has existed in the U.S. since the 1980s, although the constellations differ. The movement addresses the adversities confronted by undocumented

¹ In this manner, I do not intend to make comparisons between the TPS program and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals immigration policy. My concern here is how those who experience the threat of deportation realize the potential for countermovement while being in the position of abjection or precarity. As will be shown later in the section "Bus and caravan: mobile protests, building coalition," TPS holders build solidarity with the DREAMers and both groups fight for a humane immigration policy.

migrants or those who find themselves deportable when stay permits expire (Bloemraad and Voss, 2020).

This paper takes up the conversation between social movement theory and non-citizen mobilization. This means thinking through how those whose presence is labeled as temporary and would-be non-status "mobilize politics" to advance claims on belonging (Squire, 2011). The analysis focuses on the concept of "reach," articulated by human geographers Clive Barnett and Dianne Scott (2007). They argue that reach highlights a relational and dynamic relationship between state and populace shaped by both the capacities of state agencies to project authority and of the populace to engage with state institutions. Power is exercised over a distance which means the state carries out various forms of infrastructural power, where its authority is experienced in everyday contexts. In turn, the population draws the state in to ensure its accountability in its delivery of services or material claims. Barnett and Scott surmise that the relationship between the state and subjects is organized "around a set of interactions in which each attempts to make claims on the other" (Barnett and Scott, 2007, 10). In their analysis of the politics of ascribing responsibility on national governments and transnational corporations for industrial pollution in Durban, Barnett and Scott argue that environmental activists employ two modes or "strategies of spatial reach" to mobilize resources. These involve "reaching out across networks" to draw resources and "reaching out to influence" other agents (Barnett and Scott, 2007).

The concept of reach is germane to the discussion of TPS holders and pro-immigrant activists as they make claims to civil rights and political membership. They reach out across various migrant networks and make use of non-profit organizations to draw resources in to make demands on the state. They mobilize around litigation complemented with lobbying and protests. This strategy involves reaching out to other TPS holders who are living in different parts of the country to join the cause. I will add, though, that these modes of spatial reach encompass a temporal or historical dimension as the Save TPS movement reaches back to the themes from the U.S. immigrant rights movements that consolidated in the 1980s. This pro-immigrant movement mobilized around concerns ranging from the legal status of migrants to issues affecting marginalized and racialized populations and was influenced by the strategies, discourse, goals, and leadership of the civil rights movement in the 1960s (Bloemraad and Voss, 2020).

The strategies of reach speak to the relationship between movements and agents of the state, such as judges and legislature. They are means through which non-citizens as claim-makers come into proximity with the state. By making themselves visible, TPS holders and activists aim at getting traction on the state. Through litigation efforts and lobbying for a legislative solution to create a path for permanent residency, TPS holders and activists engage with and attempt to shape the law. In the process of making themselves visible to others, they become recognizable to each other and help construct collective identities. These modes of spatial reach, I suggest, are constitutive of political-legal

subjectivities, which come close to what political scientist Peter Nyers refers to as 'taking abject foreigner' or foreigners who demonstrate a taking-subjectivity (2003). Abject foreigners constitute those undocumented, asylum seekers, refugees, non-status residents, undocumented workers, so-called 'overstayers' and 'illegals.' Nyers' definition generally refers to those entering borders and whose entry might be restricted (ibid.). However, I focus on those already embedded in the society but whose status does not allow them to become full members, in terms of citizenship as a legal status, and whose category is to be cast as illegal and deportable.

Following Nyers, this abject condition is both a mode of subjectification and a site of active contestation. Drawing on Bonnie Honig's concept of "taking" as the "practice of taking rights and privileges rather than waiting for them to be granted by a sovereign power" (2001, 99), Nyers analyzes abject foreigner activism as taking space and taking voice/speech which rearticulate forms of citizenship (2003). These 'takers' make claims on political belonging, identity, and practice, thus contesting traditional terms of territorial citizenship that create divisions between those with and without formal legal status (Nyers, 2003).

I will briefly outline what TPS scheme is, its historical context, and its current situation. Then I analyze lawsuits TPS holders and activists filed, and protests held through bus and caravan – those spatial and temporal strategies of reach through which political belonging is taken, not given. The lawsuits and documented protests are either publicly available or those I gathered from media/social media reports and interviews with representatives of grassroots organizations, such as the National TPS Alliance and Adhikaar, and non-profit organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and American Friends Service Committee engaged in or leading the movement. The interviews were gathered between August 2019 and July 2020, when TPS holders are bolstering their campaign for permanent residence while waiting for court decisions through to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Temporary protection from deportation

The literature on the construction of TPS points to its ambivalence; its reasons ranged from humanitarian and moral to political to security, surveillance, and border control. A bipartisan act of Congress in 1990 created the Immigration Act of 1990 to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act (1952) to generally change the level and preference system for admission of immigrants to the United States. Devised together with the principle of "family unity," Congress created TPS that is "the statutory embodiment of safe haven" for non-citizens who meet the legal definition of humanitarian migrants, according to the Act. Although not defined in the Immigration Act, the term 'humanitarian migrants' refers to causes underlying non-citizens' justification for immigration and is not meant to imply that a sympathetic policy response is warranted, according to Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (Wasem and Ester, 2004).

Granting TPS is premised on more generalized conditions of turmoil or deprivation in the country of origin, in contrast to a more particular treatment of individual cases in an asylum process. It may also be the case that home countries are incapable of receiving their returning citizens or that the home state officially has requested TPS designation (Immigration Act of 1990). The concept of safe haven implies that the U.S. is the country where the non-citizen is residing when the catastrophe occurs in the country of origin (Immigration Act of 1990).

Between 1960 and 1990, the U.S. offered a similar haven procedure or relief from deportation to individuals who did not qualify for permanent protection as refugees under U.S. law (Frelick and Kohnen, 1995). Through its Extended Voluntary Departure (EVD), the Attorney General granted discretionary and temporary relief from deportation to non-citizens present in the U.S. regardless of visa status if their country of citizenship experienced armed conflict, foreign aggression, severe internal domestic conflicts, or massive human rights violations (Frelick and Kohnen, 1995; Oswald, 1986). EVD provided temporary sanctuary to citizens of Iran for 8 months in 1979 and for Czechoslovakia for 9 years between 1968 and 1977 (*ibid.*). A total of sixteen EVD grants were made between 1960 and 1981 (Frelick and Kohnen, 1995). Between 1982 and 1987 it was made possible to adjust to temporary resident status, which would eventually lead to permanent resident status. Fewer than 6,000 EVD recipients – mostly from Poland, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Uganda – applied for this adjustment (*ibid.*).

The Attorney General granted and extended EVD for humanitarian purposes but there were no eligibility criteria regarding the exercise of discretion. Some members of Congress and the public grew concerned about what they viewed as the arbitrary, and increasingly political, use of EVD. Specifically, concerns over the Reagan administration's refusal to grant citizens of El Salvador either refugee status or EVD led to a court case, *Hotel & Restaurant Employees Union, Local 25 v. Smith*. The Employees Union court found that the reasons for the denial of EVD to Salvadorans were influenced by foreign and policy objectives and not by humanitarian reasons (Oswald, 1986).

When there was ongoing litigation concerning EVD, another discretionary procedure was provided. George H.W. Bush Administration used Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) to Chinese students in the U.S. at the time of the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. DED did not differ in any substantial way from EVD. Bush also granted DED to El Salvador between 1992 and 1994 which did not require any statutory criteria, i.e., civil war, to be met (Frelick and Kohnen, 1995).

The creation of the TPS statute also designated El Salvador as the first country whose nationals were able to seek TPS to stay in the U.S. At the time, more than 500,000 undocumented Salvadorans in the U.S. were potentially eligible for TPS (Segerblom, 2007). They had fled El Salvador due to civil war and political uprising. Apart from humanitarian concerns, there were also political considerations in offering TPS. For reasons that the U.S. had to take

responsibility for those displaced Salvadorans when the U.S. was offering military aid to and was actively involved in the civil war in El Salvador (ibid.). This could also mean that the U.S. carried a moral obligation towards those displaced who were initially not given the proper asylum (Valdes, 2021). Although it deferred the deportation of undocumented Salvadorans, TPS was also designed for security reasons, that is, to maintain accurate records and make certain they leave the U.S. when TPS designation expires (Segerblom, 2007).

Country designation

The Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is obliged to consult with appropriate government agencies prior to deciding to designate a country for TPS (American Immigration Council, 2020). Although these other agencies are not indicated in the U.S. Code, these consultations usually involve the Department of State, the National Security Council, and occasionally the Department of Justice. The Secretary's decision to grant or deny a TPS designation is not subject to judicial review, according to immigration law. Research suggests that the Secretary of DHS considers national security interests (Segerblom, 2007; Seghetti, Ester, and Wasem, 2015) and may be influenced by domestic politics (García, 2019) when granting, denying, withdrawing, and terminating TPS designation. The conditions in the foreign state (or part of such foreign state) for which a TPS designation is in effect is subjected to periodic review for extension or termination. This review requirement also entails consultation with appropriate government agencies and further publication of notice in the Federal Register. The current TPS termination made by the Trump administration was based on a sudden "arbitrary interpretation" of conditions "breaking with decades of prior practice without explanation" (Ramos vs. Nielsen, 2018, 21). This will be further discussed later in the legal mobilization section.

In my conversations with Adhikaar, a community and worker center dealing with issues concerning Nepali-speaking migrants living in the U.S., it became apparent that the government does not automatically designate TPS. When an earthquake struck Nepal on 25 April 2015, Adhikaar immediately started a TPS campaign. Through the help of experienced groups such as the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), Adhikaar secured meetings with DHS and the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services and made certain that advocacy pushes happened. They submitted research-based documents to prove that undocumented Nepali migrant workers or those with limited means who find themselves suddenly affected by the earthquake at a distance needed TPS. The organization also collected petition signatures and made certain those estranged from their homeland understand what TPS is. Their campaign took only two months – a feat Adhikaar claims – for a designation to be granted.

These strategies of reaching out across migrant networks, as I have been arguing in the paper, were also at work among Filipino-speaking migrants in the U.S. in

their TPS campaign, albeit resulted in a different outcome. When typhoon Haiyan ravaged the Visayas region of the Philippines on 8 November 2013, 141 various organizations in the U.S., plus members of the Congress and the Senate, requested the DHS for a TPS designation for the Philippines as it struggled to address the significant loss of life, restore infrastructure, and provide adequate and timely assistance to millions of survivors. For Filipino migrant workers in the U.S, TPS status was seen as a potential lifeline to continue giving support to their families back home impacted by Haiyan. As part of the TPS campaign, some Filipino activists and domestic workers took to the streets and joined the People's Climate March in New York City on 21 September 2014. They took the occasion to bear witness to how climate change affects Filipino migration or how a disaster in the Philippines has direct and distressing consequences for its workers abroad. One Filipina domestic worker of 20 years in American homes and who has been looking forward to retiring in her hometown Leyte (an island in the Visayas) laments,

everything was gone. The interior is all ruined. My brother's livelihood, he used to have a piggery, now it's all washed out. I have 3 hectares of coconut plantation and mahogany trees, no more. Now, I have to start from scratch. That's why I would like to request from the US government to grant us this [TPS] so I can work with no fear (Macaraig, 2014).

Despite these reaching out efforts, as well as a bill introduced in the 113th Congress and the Senate's note that Filipino nationals will not pose any danger to national security, TPS was not granted. Without TPS protection meant that some, who have lost their families in the storm surge or endured other severe difficulties had to be deported.

As of 7 November 2019, according to the latest statistics of the Congressional Research Service Report, some 411,326 beneficiaries from ten countries are currently designated with TPS: Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen due to political instability; Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Nepal in the aftermath of natural disasters (Wilson 2020). Honduras and Nicaragua have had this status consecutively longer than others for at least two decades. TPS designation has allowed migrants 'to work, to build businesses, to continue their education, but most importantly, to live in peace and security,' as American Relief Coalition for Syria proposed (Entralgo, 2019).

The termination of TPS for El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras, Nepal, and Sudan was based on an assessment that these countries have recovered from the consequences of calamities and that they are safe to return to. Federal court orders have extended TPS indefinitely for beneficiaries from these countries pending a decision on whether the terminations were lawful. Because there is no legal right for TPS holders to access citizenship or permanent residence, all those who have been able to build a life in the U.S. lose the chance to work lawfully. And since TPS termination also means reverting to immigration status prior to the date of designation, individuals who were undocumented can now

be easily deported. In order to obtain permanent resident status, a TPS beneficiary must leave the U.S. to apply for a visa at a consular post (American Immigration Council, 2020). But for many TPS holders who initially entered the country without inspection, a visa application procedure would subject them to re-entry prohibition for up to 10 years.

Although TPS beneficiaries cannot sponsor family members, they are eligible for emergency Medicaid, public health schemes (e.g., immunizations), disaster relief, reduced lunch programs, and public K-12 education (Kerwin, 2014). The scheme has positively influenced the socio-economic integration of immigrants, through access to homeownership, social security number, and driver's license, which is seen by sociologist Cecilia Menjívar as benefitting the society as well (2017). TPS beneficiaries are expected to demonstrate their commitment to belong through holding at least one job, paying taxes and insurances, and having a clean criminal record (checks which are required every TPS renewal). However, beneficiaries describe their condition as being in limbo, engendering uncertainties from being neither undocumented nor permanent legal residents (Menjívar, 2017). Living lives in limbo have served to extend experiences of displacement (Mountz et al., 2002). This "in-between status" ensures that they have different and limited rights to social, cultural, economic, and political spheres of life compared to citizens (Menjívar, 2017).

Precarization and interaction with the law

The conditions of TPS holders, prior to the recent attempt to terminate the program, have generally been studied in the field of sociology or migration in relation to the bodies of law. Much of the literature shows how the law impinges upon the immigrant's immediate sphere of social networks and family, employment, and community-level participation, to say the least. Menjívar describes TPS holders trapped in a situation of "liminal legality," particularly because the program does not grant its beneficiaries a path to residency or citizenship (2017). Once the protected status on a country is lifted, nationals slip back into their status prior to TPS, which means those who were undocumented would be exposed to job loss and deportability (Menjívar, 2017).

Consistent with this view, labor relations and law scholars Kati L. Griffith and Shannon Gleeson aptly describe the conditions surrounding TPS holders as "precarity of temporality" (2017). TPS holders' experience is marked by temporariness highly dependent on the whims of the immigration agency administration. The administrative immigration regime in the U.S., or what Griffith and Gleeson call "adminigration," is a legal institutional space that helps set the broad dimensions of uncertainty TPS holders experience. With a specific focus on TPS workers' position vis-à-vis immigration law and broader legal institutional contexts, Griffith and Gleeson expose the ways that the legal environment can generate workplace precarity (2017). This condition hinders claims-making for authorized non-citizen employees, even when an immigrant's

employment status has no formal relationship to his or her immigration status (Griffith and Gleeson, 2017).

The literature on TPS is instructive when it comes to laws as mechanisms and sources of precarity, mostly in relation to temporariness. However, it is mostly concerned with cause-effect analysis which rarely illuminates the complex interrelationships, such as negotiations between the law and individuals whose membership is in question, that possibly generate social change. There is also an underlying assumption that power moves in a unidirectional vector from the state through its laws to individuals. And that this top-down movement delimits and constrains individuals' lifeworlds. Rather, as I will show, TPS holders turn this movement around as they reach back to the state using law as a resource. The relationship between TPS holders and agents of the state or courts, is therefore dynamic, not hierarchical, and their interactions go backward and forwards.

This relationship is similar to how undocumented youth access "deferred action" as a legal procedure. In their study of the temporal legal ambiguities facing undocumented youth who grew up in the U.S., Coutin and colleagues argue that the state and migrants are placed in a mutually constitutive relationship through seeking deferred action (Coutin et al., 2017). Non-citizen subjects generate documents where the traces of their presence have been recorded attempting to prove that they are non-priorities for deportation, thus attempting to sway the state's exercise of deferred action, as Coutin and colleagues suggest. Through the deferred action program, undocumented youth might obtain some reprieve from deportation but the very fact that the program is transitory makes non-citizen youth subject to heightened vulnerability (Coutin et al., 2017). Although precarity is experienced in a liminal status of deferral, as I have been suggesting, it creates spaces of interactions with state authority through legal inclusion where non-citizens take a stance against deportation, and define their own claims and rights.

Drawing on this discussion of how non-citizens and the law interact, I suggest that the law does not necessarily immobilize TPS holders in terms of claims-making. Instead, mobilization serves as the link between the law and the individuals whose residence or movement is controlled by the law (see Black, 1973). Rather than depicting the law solely as a repressive system, looking at law mobilization portrays the law as aimed at seeking justice and equality (Lehoucq and Taylor, 2020). The termination of the TPS scheme, the loss of protection, and the threat of deportation prefigure the position of abjection, borrowing Nyers' term (2003). Yet this partial belongingness, at least to the state, provides conditions for forms of political becoming. This means that the experiences of "precarity of temporality" can be understood not only as a condition but also as a catalyst creating possible points of mobilizing as resistance. This mobilization comes close to what political theorist Isabell Lorey observes when "subjective experiences of precarization are taken as a starting-point for political struggles" (2015, 6). As we will see in the following sections, TPS holders take rights and

take the lead in the campaign to stop their deportations and regularize their status in the U.S.

The reach of civil rights: legal mobilization

Barnett and Scott suggest two modes of reach to understand the dynamic interactions between claimants and the state, and how activists mobilize and give meaning to abstract rights. They observe that the strategies of reach are not mutually exclusive practices but for analytic purposes, I will first examine how TPS holders reach out to pull in legal resources in this section, then how they reach out to influence other actors to advance their cause in the next.

As the legal mobilization scholarship illustrates, a social movement's legal strategies are not isolated; they operate in a dialectical relationship with other collective action tactics (McCann, 1994). In this case, lawsuits against Trump and the Secretary of DHS make up the resources for advancing multiple forms of resistance. Litigation efforts are not necessarily about seeking a broad transformation of American law but turning to courts is a politically strategic move to buy TPS holders some time for reaching out to other actors and lobbying efforts to influence Congress. Because even if Plaintiffs win the cases, they will not be granted lawful permanent residence, unless done by the legislative body.

TPS holders make use of the resources of legal and civil rights activists to exert influence on the government. TPS holders are then able to translate grievances into frames of legal and civil rights injustice. Through litigation, they use the law "in an explicit, self-conscious way through the invocation of a formal institutional mechanism" (Lehoucq and Taylor, 2020, 168).

Several children of TPS holders and holders themselves from six countries whose designation is terminated have filed lawsuits challenging a different rule recently used to decide whether to terminate TPS designation. One case, *Ramos vs. Nielsen*, was filed on 12 March 2018 by U.S. citizen children, their non-citizen parents, and other non-citizen adults from El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Sudan; with the legal resources of the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Day Laborers Organizing Network, and a law firm Sidley Austin LLP. Kirstjen Nielsen was the Secretary of DHS who made the decisions for termination. Following the same line of argument and with the help of the same organizations, *Bhattarai vs. Nielsen*, was filed on 10 February 2019 by plaintiffs from Nepal and Honduras and U.S. citizen children of TPS holders from these countries. Another case, *Saget vs. Trump*, was filed earlier on 31 May 2018 by holders from Haiti, Haïti Liberté, a leading newspaper distributor in the U.S., and Family Action Network Movement, Inc., a Miami-based organization helping Haitian women and their families in their integration since 1991 and advocating for their protection since the 2010 Haiti earthquake.

Crista Ramos, the lead plaintiff in *Ramos vs. Nielsen*, is 14 (at the time of filing) and a U.S. citizen. Her mother is a TPS holder from El Salvador, another plaintiff Cristina Morales (37 y.o.). Cristina Morales has lived in the U.S. from

the age of 12 since 1993 and has held TPS status since 2001 following the earthquake that struck El Salvador. She has two children born and raised in the U.S. Crista, speaking on behalf of other U.S. citizen minors (aged 5 to 18) in the same predicament, are left with an unwarranted choice between leaving the place they have called home, and growing up without one or both parents (Ramos vs. Nielsen, 2018). Moving to a country they do not know or following their parents to El Salvador, for instance, would entail leaving behind their schools, their communities, and the benefits of being U.S. citizens. On the other hand, staying in the U.S. without a parent would mean being raised in foster care. They now exercise their right to live in the U.S., live with and be raised by their parents, and protect their interests "in not being compelled to choose between two alternatives when each alternative will deprive them of a substantial, constitutionally-protected aspect of liberty" (ibid., 34). Protecting hundreds of thousands of American children as a national security interest seems to have been forgotten in the 'America first' campaign of Trump's presidency.

Representing the plaintiffs in two cases, *Ramos vs. Nielsen* and *Bhattarai vs. Nielsen*, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) fights to reverse the termination of TPS. The ACLU is a non-profit organization that operates through court battles and federal advocacies to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of all people in the U.S. by its Constitution and laws. In my conversation with them, the ACLU makes clear that it is not the factual situation or determination of the TPS termination decision they are challenging but the procedure of decision. They claim that this procedure took a much narrower interpretation of conditions or improvements in home countries. DHS assumed a new measure that departed from long-standing practice without any reasoned explanation, in violation of the APA [Administrative Procedure Act]. Through the lawsuits, plaintiffs and legal counsel aim to challenge the legality of changing measures for making TPS designations or renewals. The APA requires federal agencies to provide "more substantial justification" when "its new policy rests upon factual findings that contradict those which underlay its prior policy" (Ramos vs. Nielsen, 2018, 34). Plaintiffs claim that the Trump administration's use of a new, significantly narrower interpretation of the TPS statute ignored a mandate and made procedurally flawed decision-making.

A related claim, terminating TPS violated the 'due process protections' extended to all persons present in the U.S. regardless of legal status. Due process means individuals are protected against arbitrary action. Thus, TPS holders' liberty interests are protected by the Due Process Clause in a non-arbitrary decision on TPS designation.

Considering the current coronavirus pandemic, the ACLU makes an even stronger case for TPS holders who work in industries deemed "essential critical infrastructure" by DHS (Arulanantham, 2020). The ACLU legal counsel filed a letter to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit detailing TPS holders' right to remain and work in various parts of the economy, such as health care,

food processing, and construction. More than 100,000 TPS holders are working on the front lines keeping the economy afloat (ibid.).

The process of invoking the law has helped the Save TPS movement gather support from other established groups. Seventeen associations, including civil rights groups, a grassroots organization, a non-profit civil rights legal defense fund, labor unions, national umbrella organizations, sought to influence the judicial agenda by filing amicus curiae brief in support of Haitian TPS holders' appeal, i.e. *Saget vs. Trump*. Plaintiffs and civil rights activists have condemned the termination of TPS as driven by "racial animus," as unconstitutional, and unlawful. Through the amicus curiae brief, supporters provided valuable insights for the District Court in examining the evidence of racial animus considered by the Court to be the main factor behind the termination of TPS. The stakes are high for each of these organizations in this case against Trump since their mission has been to fight discrimination and stand against racist ideologies, whether in institutions or the workplace. As one supporter, the Service Employees International Union, states, representing two million workers in the U.S. and Canada, "we believe our strength comes from our unity, and that we must not be divided by forces of discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical ability, sexual orientation, or immigration status" (Amicus curiae brief, 2019, 5-6).

Plaintiffs claim that the termination is a violation of institutionalized legal rights such as the right to equal protection. Intentional discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or national origin causes irreparable collective injury. The racially charged motives were proven by the district court in *Ramos vs. Nielsen*. The court also ruled that there was enough evidence to suggest that the White House (Chief of Staff John Kelly and Homeland Security Advisor Tom Bossert) exerted pressure at several levels to manipulate TPS decisions. The court also discovered that Elaine Duke, the Deputy Secretary of DHS, gave in to pressure, stating that Duke "expressly acknowledged that the terminations of TPS designations were . . . designed to fit the President's objectives on immigration which would put 'America first'" (Bhattarai vs. Nielsen, 2019, 4).

Plaintiffs in *Ramos* have won a preliminary injunction in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California in 2018 (Valdes, 2021). The injunction required the Trump administration to extend TPS protections and work permits to TPS holders from Sudan, Nicaragua, Haiti, and El Salvador while the lawsuit is ongoing. During this period, TPS holders from these countries will automatically receive nine-month extensions of their status and work authorization. The validity of termination will not go into effect while appeals are pending. Plaintiffs in the lawsuit *Bhattarai* seek similar protection.

As I have been arguing, litigation efforts are productive spaces for TPS holders to reach back to the state, examine the institution, and interact with the law. Through reaching out across various migrant networks and connecting with non-profit organizations, TPS holders draw resources in to make demands on the state. These resources include legal grammar and procedures and vocabularies of civil rights which enable TPS holders to reach across the

categorical boundary between citizen and non-citizen. It also implies that TPS holders, in this regard, are not peripheral to practices of political becoming.

Bus and caravan: mobile protests, building coalition

Just as TPS holders pull legal resources in, they draw others within reach – the second strategy of reach. They reach out to influence other TPS holders to collectively advocate for the protection of the TPS program for all beneficiaries and their families and network in the short term. For a long-term projection, TPS holders reach out to Congress lobbying for legislative principles and proposals for pathways to permanent residency. They claim that having a permanent residency status would be beneficial not just for their families but also for the communities they are part of. During demonstrations and through press releases, TPS holders argue that they are economically integrated into the American society irrespective of the absence of formal recognition. As one TPS holder from El Salvador explains, "all we want is permanent residence because we want to contribute to this country, to be good beneficiaries, and also for the sake of our families, so that we can help them. The people in our countries are in need of our help" (National TPS Alliance website). They believe they have earned their right to have legal recognition to become full members of society. In addition, they reach out to other organizations and build solidarity with them especially in political issues concerning the loss of protection and the possibility of deportation.

The strategy of reaching out helps to constitute or consolidate a movement's collective identity (see McCann, 1994). Firstly, TPS holders scale up to the national level through the formation of the National TPS Alliance in June 2017, which is instrumental in the projection of grievances into the public realm. Around 1,000 TPS holders from Haiti, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Nepal make up the Alliance. Other members include U.S. citizen children and family members of TPS holders, clergy, non-profit organizations, community leaders, and other stakeholders. Some ten non-profit organizations, unions, and several organizations which have historically been fighting for immigrant rights are currently providing logistical and technical support at different levels.

Non-profit organizations, such as the Center for American Progress, have been actively showcasing the key role TPS holders played in disaster response and recovery. For instance, between 2017 and 2018, California, Texas, Florida, Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina suffered from the devastation wrought by hurricanes and wildfires (Svajlenka, 2019). These are also home to large communities of TPS holders from El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti, countries which have witnessed catastrophic hurricanes and earthquakes, in addition to ongoing conflicts. It does seem to suggest that the boundaries between citizen and non-citizen are shifting – citizens suddenly finding themselves in a position that has something ontologically in common with the predicament of the TPS holder. This process of unsettling is worthy of attention but goes beyond the scope of the paper.

The National TPS Alliance also gathers support from some members of Congress. For instance, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of Queens joined their rally in front of the White House and quoted saying, "from Nepal to Honduras, we made a promise that we were going to be a safe haven. We are here to make sure that all TPS recipients become permanent members of the United States of America" (Feltz, 2019, para. 8). In Los Angeles, Petey Schey, executive director of the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law, introduced the L.A. Movement for Immigrant Justice and Equity. It is a coalition made up of members of the City Council, mayor's office, and several grassroots and faith-based groups "vowing to protect TPS recipients living in Los Angeles from arrest, detention or deportation" (Mejia, 2018, para. 5).

Secondly, just as they scale up, TPS holders move down scales at the neighborhood or local level across the country. Through the grassroots initiative "TPS Journey for Justice" – a bus carrying campaigners, TPS holders aimed to raise awareness about their campaign and build solidarity with other organizations. From August 2018 for twelve weeks, campaigners crossed the U.S. from Los Angeles, California to Washington D.C. to reach out to influence other TPS holders and networks. The Journey for Justice bus carried some 50 riders including TPS holders, family members, and allies living in different states. They made 44 stops along the way and shared their stories through townhalls, community fora, parades, assemblies, rallies, and press conferences. TPS holders have created local committees in their respective states. Some 35 committees currently exist across the country.

More recently, as protests against racial injustice were held across the U.S. and while the world was facing the COVID-19 pandemic, on 24th June 2020, the National TPS Alliance led a caravan, "On the Road to Justice: We are Essential, Now and Always." More than 150 decorated cars (i.e. placards, flags) drove in front and around the U.S. Senate offices in Washington D.C. With video recording and press conferences, they also took the occasion to become "the voice for immigrant justice" in the current U.S. politics (National TPS Alliance website). They stood in solidarity with current movements, Black Lives Matter, standing against racial injustice. TPS holders also share the victory of "DREAMers," who are defending Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals in the supreme court, having recently won an important decision against Trump's attempt to end the program. The 116th Congress introduced and passed The American Dream and Promise Act of 2019 to provide permanent protection from deportations and a path toward permanent resident status. This bill having passed Congress is a historic milestone, and TPS holders and allies are taking speech, speaking with elected officials, and sharing their stories on how the bill can give them the opportunity to remain in the country. The National TPS Alliance believes that the said Act is a humane immigration policy that would create a roadmap to citizenship for TPS holders and all immigrants (Ibe and Johnson, 2020).

Here, William Walters' concept of "viapolitics" is useful. He derives his thesis from the etymology of the word via, which means three things: being on the

road and in-between; means of transport and communication; and the Latin word for routes and streets. Walters proposes to focus on the vehicles, roads, and routes of migration – both as objects of problematization and governing and as means and “mobiles sites” of “the possibility of politics” (Walters, 2015a, 471-472) – to allow for an empirically nuanced analysis of contested politics of mobility. Viapolitics is well situated for understanding TPS holders’ mobile protests because by centering journeys, vehicles, and routes, the focus can be shifted away from the state and from the aspect of precarity that highlights only the conditions or impacts of immigration policies. The lens shifts toward constitutive moments of political agency and taking subjectivity.

The bus and the caravan “function as visual operators” of not being stuck or being in a limbo of precarity (Walters, 2015a, 476). They carry the visual power of mobility, of crossing state borders, and of moving up to and mobilizing politics at the national level and down to the local scale. The moving vehicles provide “counter-images” that challenge the politics of temporariness (Walter, 2015b, 103). They become a space to envision the future and a means to make the path towards status protection and seeking justice.

Moreover, the bus and the caravan provide a means of reaching out to the public, making their issue visible. As they become visible to the public, they become visible to each other shaping a collective identity. In line with social movement scholarship, collective identities are constructed through participation. Santos Canales, a Honduran national who has had TPS since 2001, says that the Journey “was the perfect opportunity to be a part of something greater than [him]... As a “Jornalero” (Day Laborer) we have a lot to overcome and I’m on this journey to elevate the voices of other members of my community and to fight to keep all of these TPS Families together” (National TPS Alliance website). As a construction worker, he also assisted with the reconstruction efforts following Hurricane Katrina. This means his workers’ rights intersect with immigrant rights. Some other bus riders have been actively involved with the fight for refugees and immigrant rights in the U.S. for years.

In keeping with reaching across state lines, generations, cultures, and languages, TPS coalition-building reaches back to both civil and immigrant rights movements, allowing for framing justice far greater than their precarity of temporality. The conception of “Journey for Justice” and “On the Road to Justice” as journeys by bus and caravan made a symbolic and material connection with the Freedom Rides of 1961 and the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride (IWFR) in 2003. The Journey riders literally made themselves mobile and drew a parallel or closer connection of seeking justice and taking rights concerning racial discrimination and formal recognition in U.S. society.

The IWFR was an initiative of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HEREIU), sponsored by the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, in collaboration with other unions, immigrant and civil rights organizations, faith-based, and community-based organizations across the U.S. (IWFR Documentary Project Collection, n.d.). This was a response to a shift in momentum in the protection of civil rights and civil

liberties for immigrants after the September 11 terrorist attacks (Nolan, 2003). During a twelve-day bus ride from 23 September to 4 October 2003, over 900 migrant workers and activists rode 18 buses setting out from nine different cities in the U.S. and ending in Washington, D.C. (Almassi, Nakagawa, and Noor, 2003; Atkin, 2005). They stopped at more than 100 towns and cities to boost relationships with local migrant and civil rights activists and to stage demonstrations (IWFR Documentary, n.d.; Shaw, 2011). The IWFR was in fact modeled on the Freedom Rides (Atkin, 2005). The original freedom riders took bus spaces and challenged the segregated public transportation system, with separate waiting rooms and restrooms for white and "colored" people. Although immigrant freedom riders were aware that they faced different forms of danger, such as risks of losing jobs or being deported, they did not have to face beating and arrests as in the 1960s (ibid.). As a nod to the original freedom rides, some IWFR buses from Houston, Miami, and buses from the West Coast made stops at some of the main sites in the civil rights movement (IWFR Documentary, n.d.).

It is important to note that migrant buses and caravans as mobile protests have been widespread not only in the U.S. but internationally and transnationally as well. For instance, the Caravan for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants has been collectively organizing "protest tours" to influence various actors at the local, regional, and federal levels in Germany since 1998 (Monforte, 2021, 451). Through the protest tours moving across cities, migrants, particularly undocumented ones, become visible in the public sphere where they are otherwise marginalized (ibid.). Going back to Walter's viapolitics, vehicles are "mobile places and knots of power relations in their own right" (2015b, 98). The tours, therefore, invoke a political claim to visibility, audibility, and public space.

On a transnational scale, the migrant caravans carrying people from Central America have created a safe space while crossing state borders through to the Mexico-U.S. border since 2017 (Rizzo Lara, 2021; Frank-Vitale, 2018). Zooming in on the physical geography alongside infrastructural spaces and systems, international relations scholar Pallister-Wilkins argues that "roads, transit areas, buses and pick-up trucks—are being claimed and used by Honduran migrants in their journeys to the United States" (2019, para. 17). The caravans, therefore, allow a collective action reclaiming migration security, visibility, and human rights (Rizzo Lara, 2021; Hernández López and Porraz Gómez, 2020). The caravan helps migrants collectively face natural obstacles and militarized roadblocks, border controls, detentions, coyotes, and bribing officials (Rizzo Lara, 2021; Pallister-Wilkins 2019).

Concluding thoughts

I have discussed the dynamic interactions between state agencies and non-citizens in the context of the emergence of the "Save Temporary Protected Status" movement. The current U.S. immigration law might obstruct

individuals' lifeworlds but the abject status of TPS holders and allies is co-constitutive of taking an active stance against deportation. Through employing different modes of spatial and temporal reach, TPS holders get traction and make claims on the state. TPS holders and allies' literal mobility and mobilization co-constitute their reaching back to the vocabularies of civil rights which resonate with the history of the fight for immigrant rights. In this regard, TPS holders' struggles create kinds of political claims which go beyond issues of loss of protection and the possibility of deportation. TPS beneficiaries envision a new kind of political relations in the terrain of citizenship, that is making claims on the state for residency and membership rights. Such an approach acknowledges the transformative potential of claims based on citizenship rights, although such claims may paradoxically sustain a citizenship rights regime that legitimized their exclusion, to begin with (see McNevin, 2013). The civil rights framing makes a universal appeal that includes all immigrants; although civil rights are rooted in a particular set of U.S. citizenship as an institution recognized by law (Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss, 2016). However, the repercussions of framing immigration issues as civil rights concerns still need to be studied (Voss, Silva, and Bloemraad, 2020). In any case, the civil rights appeal renders its salience on reaching across the divide between those with and without formal legal status.

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Social movement groups and freedom of information: frames, techniques, and networks

Jeff Yaremko and Kevin Walby

Abstract

Some social movement groups use freedom of information (FOI) law to push for greater transparency and gain access to records that reveal the conduct of the state, exposing information with social, economic, environmental, or racial justice implications. To examine the use of FOI by social movement participants and groups, we draw from literature on social movements and framing processes. We analyze a sample of 30 social movement groups and organizations in 21 countries engaging with FOI in numerous ways. The idea of framing helps us to better understand what role FOI plays in the research and mobilizations of social movement groups and how they conceive of information requests to the government. We argue that FOI-engaged movement groups use three frames in accessing government information: protection and promotion of human rights, open government and civic participation, as well as collaboration and partnership. We discuss the techniques these movements use and the networks created through FOI-based research by movement groups and FOI training. We conclude by discussing how our findings contribute to literatures on FOI and frames in social movements.

Keywords: frames; freedom of information; social movements; tactics; transparency

Introduction

Information and data politics are increasingly more important to social movement groups. Use of freedom of information (FOI) is just one approach within a broader focus on information and data within social movements (Beyer 2014) that mobilize for greater government transparency. Sociologists, other scholars, and journalists have long sought records about governments as a means of investigating the conduct of the state as well as catalyzing scandals and social change (Marx 1984). Meanwhile, many organizations and movements have engaged in advocacy for FOI, among the often-large variety of activities they undertake. Social movement participants and activists have their own relationship with freedom of information, which is important to examine to understand both how FOI is used and how movement participants strategize and act.

We are interested in social movement groups that use freedom of information requests as part of their work or that are somehow connected to questions of information access. Our interest in this topic stems from our sense that FOI can

be an important facet of critical inquiry into state practices. We are users of FOI and have a working knowledge of the benefits of using FOI in the social sciences as well as the challenges (Walby and Yaremko 2020; Walby and Luscombe 2019; Brownlee and Walby 2015). In this paper, we examine how movement groups concerned with transparency and accountability issues, including some formal organizations, use FOI as well as how they conceptualize it in relation to their broader strategies and frames for action. A content search for the FOI-based organizations and movements themselves was conducted. To examine the use of FOI by movement participants and activists, we draw from literature on social movements and framing processes. Referring to the vocabularies of motive that generate and support collective action (Benford and Snow 2000; Benford 1993), frames are only one aspect of social movements but they can galvanize struggles for change. Some of the groups we focus on are more grassroots while some are ensconced within non-governmental organizations or other formal organizations. The idea of frames helps us to understand what role FOI plays in the research and mobilizations of movement groups and how they conceive of information requests to the government or advocate for policy changes for open government and heightened civic participation.

The social movement groups and organizations in our sample have experiences with using FOI as well as the barriers that FOI entails, and these groups often push to hold the government (or private sector) accountable through records that can expose secrets or injustices. The numerous technicalities regarding the letter of FOI law are important to know to maximize the chances of a successful disclosure (McNairn and Woodbury 2009), and these groups develop some techniques to access information. However, as the groups we examine are also aware of, FOI requests are a state-sanctioned tool and have not gone without warranted criticism. Pozen (2016) offers a persuasive argument that access to information must go beyond current FOI laws and protocol given the many barriers to disclosure and bureaucratic cultures of secrecy in government that prevent full release of information and data. We also sympathize with Birchall's (2021) critique of openness and transparency as reifying state legitimacy. We know that FOI might be thought of as esoteric or irrelevant in some movement organizing. Indeed, many of the movement groups in our sample have a politics that negates the oppression and domination of the state and of capital. Many social movement users of FOI do so agonistically or ambivalently, aware that FOI is a state-created mechanism that has inherent and manifold limits. There is debate about whether FOI leads to more transparency or simply more clever attempts by government to evade scrutiny (Hazell et al. 2012). This reflects a broader understanding of co-option and capture that are significant in discussions of social movements in relation to the state and large organizations (Ismail and Kamat 2018). It is in part these tensions and ambivalences in the use of FOI by social movement groups that we explore.

The definition of social movements we use here may be seen as particularly broad. Our sample includes NGOs. The organizations and movements within our sample have all engaged with or used FOI law in different capacities. There is literature contrasting social movement groups with NGOs and CSOs

(Bornstein and Sharma 2016; Jad 2007), and some see NGOs as less contentious than CSOs or more independent movements. As a result, some NGOs are distancing themselves from the label by referring to their organizations as “voluntary organizations” (Brown 2012). Jad (2007) argued that professionalization and “project logic” may lead to more power being concentrated to technocrats and administrators. We define social movements as groups and organizations that are non-state actors engaging in activities that have the potential to create progressive social change, which goes beyond mere attempts to foster good governance. Progressive social change involves agitating for institutional transparency and accountability, dismantling discriminatory practices that harm marginalized populations, advocating for redistribution of resources, and working toward a more informed and sustainable society (Dixon 2014).

We begin by reviewing literature on freedom of information, social movement groups, and government transparency. We also situate our work in the literature on framing and social movements. We then explore the way that networks of movement groups use FOI as part of their campaigns and mobilizations for transparency and accountability in government and other institutions. Some movement groups use FOI to gain access to records that reveal the conduct of the state, or expose other information with social, economic, environmental, or racial justice implications, while others aim to educate and empower individuals or groups on utilizing FOI. We examine the frames these groups invoke as well as how these are reflected in techniques they use to access information and in the networks they form (see Crossley 2008). We show that social movement groups focused on government transparency and FOI use three frames to pursue their interests: 1. the protection and promotion of human rights; 2. open government and civic participation; and 3. collaboration and partnership. These frames provide a basis for the distinctive strategies used by movement groups, such as monitoring government institutions, engaging in research and litigation, as well as collecting, storing, and sharing information. We conclude by discussing how our findings contribute to literature on FOI and social movements.

Literature and conceptual framework

Freedom of information (FOI) law allows citizens to make requests for government records. Though this approach can be used to access revealing documents, there are many challenges and no guarantees when it comes to disclosures. In this section, we summarize some of the key findings from past research on FOI and we connect this to social movement organizing.

While most FOI, access to information (ATI), or right to information (RTI) laws have been adopted recently, the ideas behind public access to government records have been recognized for around two centuries. The first FOI law was accepted in 1766, when Sweden approved a Freedom of the Press Act which also allowed for public access to government information (Banisar 2002). The

establishment of the United Nations in 1945 had led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, involving freedom of expression and freedom of information as human rights. Article 19 of this charter states, “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (International Bill of Human Rights 1948). Article 19 of the charter now serves as a basis for many organizations and social movements that advocate for freedom of expression and freedom of information. Omotayo (2015) cited Article 19, noting that FOI as a concept emerged due to the rights of freedom of expression and opinion in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a part of Article 19. Costa (2013) adds that FOI legislation helps to keep voters informed and oppose corruption through allowing the press to directly monitor and observe a government’s actions.

Social scientists and activists have a history of using FOI to access government records (Walby and Luscombe 2019; Brownlee and Walby 2015). Globally, journalists, lawyers, researchers, activists, and concerned citizens use FOI to access government records in the name of transparency and accountability (Florini 2007). Michener (2011) notes that grassroots involvement, NGO activism, and the media are essential for FOI to function. Some jurisdictions have higher submission fees, others take longer to respond to initial requests, while others still may have politicized and overbroad sections of the FOI legislation that allow government agencies to redact and sever records (Holsen 2007).

One practical dimension that social scientists and activists share in common when using FOI is that both are “studying up” (Nader 1974), that is to say they are both examining the actions or inactions of elite figures and powerful political players in government (Larsen and Piché 2009). However, there are barriers to using FOI, including fees, delays, political interference, and amendments that have eroded FOI laws over time and made them less potent (Monaghan 2015). Many governments continue to restrict access to information and vouchsafe secrecy (Jiwani and Krawchenko 2014). Even when records are released, FOI users can be disappointed if the files are redacted using exemptions (Nath 2013). Given these limits, social movement groups are using freedom of information beyond FOI law through methods that include web scraping, hacking, leaks, whistleblowing, and other tactics (Beyer, 2014). Nonetheless, despite the limits of the notion of transparency (Birchall 2021) and the barriers and challenges of using FOI, we focus on the use of FOI by social movement groups advocating for transparency and openness to assess how movement groups are using it and why.

Below we examine how social movement groups rationalize use of FOI in their work. Social movements are shaped by assumptions, values, and goals. This assemblage of ideas and information is referred to as a frame (Benford and Snow 2000; Benford 1993). Frames animate the mobilizations and activities of social movement groups (Aslanidas 2018; Benford 1993), providing

vocabularies for motive and action. However, frames take several different forms. As Terriquez et al. (2018) puts it, diagnostic frames help activists conceptualize problems, prognostic frames help activists think of solutions, while motivational frames help to inspire actions. Past grievances can be a powerful motivating factor for social movements (Kuhn 2018). Social movement frames can change over time, even within one movement in one region or jurisdiction (Gahan and Pekarek 2013; Frickel 2004; Franceschet 2004). Even for online groups who have no direct or in-person interaction, frames can be shared in digital communications (Nulman 2017). Relatively autonomous actors in different jurisdictions can deploy the same frame (Söderberg 2013; Kubal 1998). When “schemata that integrate the specific agendas of diverse movements into central interpretative frameworks” (Carroll and Ratner 1996: 411) emerge, these are referred to as master frames.

Methodology

We conducted a web search and content analysis of the websites of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit organizations (NPOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), grassroots movements, among other types of movements or organizations that are dedicated to freedom of information (FOI) or right to information (RTI) issues. We acknowledge the line between social movements and non-governmental organizations is porous (Martens 2002), and there may be a sense that non-governmental organizations are disconnected from movements and vice versa. While there may be those who oppose the inclusion of NGOs (even an international NGO) within a sample of social movements, we consider this addition appropriate because there are NGOs that engage in advocacy and social change work. While our original focus was on small scale grassroots FOI organizations and movements, larger organizations that have dedicated themselves to FOI issues were included. An example is the Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD) based in Nova Scotia, Canada, which addresses FOI issues internationally. CLD is an NPO and NGO that has advocated for human rights issues but have also dedicated much of their programming to FOI and RTI. Similarly, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) was added to our sample as it fit all other criteria. We are aware of the excellent work done by organizations such as National Security Archive, but organizations that are part of universities, colleges, transnational (humanitarian) sub-organizations or government agencies were not considered as we sought organizations that are largely “independent.”¹ In addition, transnational organizations such as Article 19 were also excluded despite their productive international work on human rights and FOI issues.

¹ We define independent here as organizations or movements that are not part of or connected to government, universities, colleges, or transnational organizations (such as Transparency International).

Due to the universality of FOI issues, a broad range of organizations and movements involved in advocating for government (and institutional) transparency were selected with differing politics and organizational structures. We created profiles for a sample of 30 FOI-based NGOs, NPOs, CSOs, and social movements from multiple parts of the world (see Table 1).² To understand the context of this work, we examined FOI or RTI policies throughout various countries. We used thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001) to decipher trends in the data.

Table 1: *Sample of Social Movement Groups and Organizations by their Country of Origin*

| Country of Origin | Social Movement Group or Organization | Sample Total |
|-------------------|---|--------------|
| Canada | Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD) | 2 |
| | Right to Know Nova Scotia (RTKNS) | |
| United States | MuckRock | 4 |
| | Tennessee Coalition for Open Government (TCOG) | |
| | Californians Aware | |
| | American Society of Access Professionals (ASAP) | |
| Mexico | Collective Citizens for Transparent Municipalities (CIMTRA) | 1 |
| Uruguay | Centre for Archives and Access to Public Information (CAinfo) | 1 |
| Argentina | Infocudadana | 1 |
| United Kingdom | Campaign for Freedom of Information (CFOI) | 2 |
| | Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) | |
| Spain | Access Info Europe | 1 |
| Croatia | GONG | 1 |
| Bulgaria | Access to Information Programme Bulgaria (AIP) | 1 |
| Czech Republic | Otevrena Spolecnost (Open Society in Czech Republic) | 1 |
| Georgia | Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) | 1 |
| Armenia | FOI Centre of Armenia (FOICA) | 1 |

² We recognize this sample is limited and there are many other organizations and grassroots movements working with FOI and RTI. Our work is meant to provide a snapshot and understanding of those working for the right of access to information throughout different parts of the world as opposed to providing a comprehensive list.

| | | |
|---------------------|---|-----------|
| Israel | The Movement for Freedom of Information | 1 |
| India | Mazdoor Kisan Shakti (MKSS) | 2 |
| | National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information (NCPRI) | |
| Nepal | Freedom Forum | 2 |
| | Citizens' Campaign for Right to Information (CCRI) | |
| Pakistan | Coalition on Right to Information | 1 |
| Philippines | Action for Economic Reforms (AER) | 2 |
| | FOI Youth Initiative (FYI) | |
| Bangladesh | Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) | 1 |
| Uganda | Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC) | 1 |
| Nigeria | Media Rights Agenda (MRA) | 1 |
| South Africa | South African History Archive (SAHA) | 1 |
| International | Freedom of Information Advocates Network (FOIANet) | 1 |
| Sample Total | | 30 |

FOI movements and developments throughout the world

Baroi (2018) observes that literature on FOI considers the increase in FOI laws around the world as indexed to democratization. For countries that have experienced this “transition to democracy,” FOI could allow citizens to address past harms for the victims, victims’ families, and society to better understand these past harms (Banisar 2006). Some of the social movement groups request and archive records from the past while others focus on the present issues. Whichever the case, these organizations and movements are contributing to the broader FOI and RTI movement across the world.

In a country where press freedom has been restricted due to military rule, Omotayo (2015) considered Nigeria’s FOI bill a relief when it was signed into law in 2011. The Nigerian government had a culture of secrecy, classifying most government information. The movement for an FOI bill in Nigeria began in 1993 with three organizations: Media Rights Agenda (MRA), Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), and the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) (Omotayo 2015). Media Rights Agenda has been a leading organization in Nigeria’s FOI movement and has a Freedom of Information Advocacy Programme dedicated to FOI advocacy and promotion. MRA was established in 1993 as an independent NGO and NPO for the protection and promotion of freedom of expression and media freedom in Nigeria, which involves FOI issues (Media Rights Agenda n.d.). Similarly, Freedom Forum in Nepal is an NGO that focuses on democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, press freedom as well as the right to information. Freedom Forum was founded in 2005 with a mission

to work and advocate to safeguard the fundamental freedoms of citizens. Freedom Forum's objectives includes the advocacy for media practitioners' rights for "unhindered Access to Information" and improved conditions for press freedom, freedom of expression, and other democratic rights of citizens (Freedom Forum n.d.). MRA and Freedom Forum share similarities in their goals focused on freedom of expression, press freedom, and FOI, as the suppression of these rights have been experienced by their members.

South African History Archive (SAHA) is an NPO and "independent human rights archive" that is based in Johannesburg and was involved in a court case in 2018 that could have resulted in disaster for SAHA, activists, and FOI work in South Africa. SAHA requested information from the South African Reserve Bank (SARB) for apartheid-era records that SARB refused to release, leading to the court case that could have bankrupted SAHA. When the denied access request was taken to the South Gauteng High Court, the court sided with SARB and left SAHA with court expenses that threatened the organization's future (Pather 2018). In 2020, SAHA prevailed in the Supreme Court of Appeal after an appeal to acquire access to the information requested from SARB while also securing the right of access to information for South Africans, ending the six-year court battle (SAHA 2020). The apartheid-era secrecy being manifested by SARB and the South Gauteng High Court was exposed through the challenges SAHA and the right of access to information faced in this court case.

Independent organizations and movements that challenge government secrecy domestically or internationally view secrecy as a social problem. In Eastern Europe, Armenia and Georgia (which were once part of the Soviet Union until its collapse) have adopted FOI laws that organizations such as the FOI Centre of Armenia (FOICA) and the Institute for Development and Freedom of Information (IDFI) are promoting to ensure transparency and accountability of their respective governments. FOICA was founded in 2001 and aims to promote the Armenian FOI law, and advocate for government transparency and openness in Armenia. FOICA utilizes FOI as a tool to fight corruption in Armenia, where secrecy practices dating back to the Soviet era can continue to be a hindrance to information access (Banisar 2006). The FOICA was successful in advocating for the development of Armenia's RA Law on FOI which was adopted in 2003 (FOICA n.d.). North of Armenia, IDFI has been an FOI advocate in Georgia. IDFI aims for empowerment and inclusion in society through promoting human rights, good governance, open government, civic awareness, and advocacy. IDFI focuses on four "major strategic directions:" "good governance," "economic and social policy," "strategic communications and study of the past," as well as "media, internet, and innovations" (IDFI n.d.). Georgia's FOI law was established in Chapter 3 of the General Administrative Code of Georgia that was approved in 1999 (Banisar 2006).

Movements for FOI and the right to access government information can take different forms as every country has different histories and social challenges, with movements in India and Pakistan for example involving more grassroots movements to incite participatory citizen action. Throughout India, CSOs and

grassroots social movements have been pushing for RTI. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information (NCPRI) are among the most notable and recognizable FOI social movement examples in India. MKSS began as a grassroots movement that represented workers and peasants in villages to "strengthen participatory democratic processes," with their first struggle involving implementing the legal right to statutory minimum wage, leading to the struggle for RTI. Mishra (2003) noted that the MKSS movement encouraged the idea of the people's right to information as being fundamental for the "basic human right to survival and livelihood" (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan n.d.). Since its founding in 1990, MKSS is among the various CSOs and grassroots movements that paved way for an RTI Act which was officially enacted in 2000. Among these grassroots movements is NCPRI, which aims to question the Indian government over a range of issues such as land acquisitions, defence procurement, social security, functioning of hospitals, among many other issues through the use of RTI (NCPRI n.d.). Joint meetings held by MKSS and the Press Council of India in 1996 led to the creation of the NCPRI movement which involved various activists, professionals, and intellectuals for the draft RTI bill (Mishra 2003). Mishra (2003) noted how the intensive advocacy from NCPRI had contributed to an atmosphere that made the RTI Act in India more feasible.

The movement for information access and public records in neighbouring Pakistan has faced its own challenges. Banisar (2006) noted the Freedom of Information Ordinance in Pakistan that was promoted by President Perviz Musharraf. However, this ordinance had many limitations because it was promoted as a result of pressure from the Asian Development Bank (Banisar 2006). Since then, Pakistani CSOs have lobbied for an improved FOI act or law. In 2012, the Coalition on Right to Information (CRTI) was established and provides a network for NGOs, NPOs, CSOs, and community organizations to collaborate. CRTI aims to promote open information and communications policies at all levels of government (national, provincial, and district). CRTI has been involved in drafting model FOI bills and advocating for improvement and amendments to Pakistan's FOI bills (CRTI n.d.). In 2017, the Government of Pakistan enacted a more recent Right of Access to Information Act (The Right of Access to Information Act 2017).

Western "developed" nation-states in the Global North are not exempt from FOI movements. In a previous article (Walby and Yaremko 2020), we referred to FOI audits performed by the National Security Archive and News Media Canada where both federal governments in the United States and Canada were recognized as having unsatisfactory FOI performance in terms of compliance and release of records. As described earlier, CLD was founded in 2010 and is among the Canadian NGOs and NPOs in the movement working on local, national, regional, to international issues. In Canada, CLD has worked to ensure accountability of governments, while also collaborating internationally to support FOI movements (CLD n.d.). Right to Know Coalition of Nova Scotia (RTKNS) is focused more locally and nationally. RTKNS engages in local, provincial, and national issues while using education and advocacy to encourage

the use and development of FOI in Nova Scotia (RTKNS n.d.). The US has an overall higher number of organizations with FOI and open government focuses compared to Canada and other Western countries. Organizations such as Tennessee Coalition for Open Government, Californians Aware, MuckRock, among many others are based within various US states to advocate for governmental transparency and compliance with FOI law.

After the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, the US justified restricted access to information on the basis of national security. Banisar (2002) noted that Canada also followed suit. Yet activists, organizations, and social movements in Canada and the United States continue to challenge the restrictions to FOI. Tim Crews is an example of this as a founding member of Californians Aware and owner of *The Mirror* before his passing, who was recognized as a “controversial, bulldog investigator.” Tim Crews often challenged (with an already limited income) local government agencies in court if the agencies failed to disclose the information or records he was requesting, while reporting on the records he had received (such as injustices within the community) (August 2020; Funke 2017). Whether in Canada, the US, India, or Pakistan, FOI movements benefit from organizing, participation, and collaboration that is inclusive and driven by grassroots organizations.

Frames

FOI-based social movement groups employ frames collectively to gain access to, or assist others in accessing, information that is held by governments and other institutions. While the promotion and protection of the right of access to information is a crucial driver for many of the sample organizations, advocacy for the “average” citizen and ensuring human rights are being met are among the factors that motivate these social movements and organizations. Thus, the movement for the right to information goes beyond FOI but can also begin with FOI. Berliner (2015) noted how FOI goes beyond merely accessing public records as it can further seek to guarantee citizen participation, government transparency, and deter corruption. We observed three frames: (1) protection and promotion of human rights, (2) open government and civic participation, as well as (3) collaboration and partnerships. We consider the first two “master frames” (Carroll and Ratner 1996) since they are frames shared across groups and movements that generate action. We also suggest collaborating and partnering is not simply an action or result/outcome but a frame, since networking itself becomes a value and goal for these groups.

The protection and promotion of human rights is a prevalent frame for social movements and organizations found within our sample. For example, SAHA is dedicated to the documentation, support, and promotion of increased awareness of current and past struggles in human rights issues. SAHA was founded by anti-apartheid activists and freedom fighters in the 1980s and considers themselves to be not politically affiliated. According to their website,

SAHA is committed to “recapturing lost and neglected histories,” “recording aspects of South African democracy in the making,” and “extending the boundaries of Freedom of Information in South Africa,” among their additional commitments (SAHA n.d.). Indeed, the collection of public records to archive independently (especially those pertaining to historical or recent human rights abuses) might prove effective in the event that such records are destroyed by government officials, while also making these records accessible to the public. Moreover, SAHA’s objectives and beliefs are notably entrenched in the promotion and protection of human rights in South Africa. As noted, FOI is a citizenship right that the public is entitled to, and honest operation of FOI by the government can establish a basis for transparency and allow for the public’s confidence in their government (Omotayo 2015). Similarly, organizations such as Freedom Forum in Nepal, GONG in Croatia, IDFI in Georgia, CLD in Canada, CHRI around the Commonwealth, and Access Info Europe have defined human rights as a crucial element in their operations and movements. Clearly this frame builds on broader framing of human rights as a social good within liberal democratic regimes (see McEntire et al. 2015).

Another frame appearing across organizations and movements within our sample is the concept of open government and civic participation. Ackerman and Sandoval-Ballesteros (2006) advised that the ideas of open government alone will not bring significant social change. The contributions and efforts of CSOs and NGOs is considered to be “absolutely necessary” to achieving this while accelerating the global movement for open government and FOI (Ackerman and Sandoval-Ballesteros 2006). These elements are visible throughout all organizations within our sample. Certain organizations and movements with varying roles and services such as IDFI, Tennessee Coalition for Open Government (TCOG), Californians Aware, FOICA, as well as the Centre for Archives and Access to Public Information (CAinfo) in Uruguay actively refer to “open government” and “informed citizen participation” as their main objectives. Such organizations and movements can impact open government and civic participation through their advocacy, public education, raising awareness, and presenting their research findings in a way that most citizens can understand.

Finally, collaboration and partnership are a frame among the majority of organizations and movements to the extent that networking and movement building itself is defined as an important value and goal for these groups. The prominent method or feature for these elements are the networks created among international, national, and local RTI or FOI organizations and movements. These networks will be discussed more below. Collaboration also allows the organizations and movements to share knowledge (through workshops or training), gain support (for projects or monetary needs), exchange ideas and research, among many other possibilities. Imhonopi et al. (2013) noted collective behaviour and social movements as being instrumental in provoking and promoting social change as well as impacting societies’ policy spaces. Examples of this are evident in several forms. CLD and Access Info Europe collaborated to develop a tool that displays an assessment of RTI and

quality of information access laws in different countries throughout the world. In Nigeria, MRA had collaborated and partnered with grassroots community organizations to enhance support for a viable FOI law (Media Rights Agenda n.d.). These elements were also observed in the establishment of NCPRI through the joint meetings between MKSS and the Press Council of India. Themuto (2013) reflected on the importance behind collaboration between CSOs and the press in reinforcing their anti-corruption impact and potential in reducing FOI barriers. The collaborations and partnerships of these organizations take different forms but can lead to more productive and creative outcomes.

Techniques

While the FOI-based organizations and social movements that we analyzed hold many similar techniques, each organization and movement have their unique programs, projects, or services that respond to the needs of their own community or constituents. The categories can range from advocacy or research activities to empowering citizens, collaborating, or educating various groups on their FOI rights. These categories of strategies and techniques include the following:

1. Capacity building and empowerment
2. Archiving and information sharing
3. Monitoring and watchdog activities
4. Public interest research
5. Public interest law and lobbying

Risley (2006) observed that many of the NGOs in Argentina that promote FOI interests perform their services through monitoring the state, elites, and political institutions, while certain NGOs are also involved in public interest law and legal advocacy. Infocudadana (or Centre for Citizen Information Civil Association) is among the independent Argentine organizations advocating for FOI that engage in activities such as research, training workshops, and collaborating with CSOs and universities. One program that Infocudadana coordinates is “Preguntar al poder” (which translates to “ask power”) which invites politicians, officials, and leaders to a press conference that includes journalists and students for a space of public dialogue, while promoting information accessibility and distribution (Infocudadana n.d.). FOI and RTI advocacy can be achieved through different creative techniques in different countries. Yet, as noted, these groups also share techniques for accessing information.

Collecting and storing FOI requests for public access is one method found to be used by some organizations. An example of this is the US based NPO MuckRock that acts as a repository for public record requests and responses that can be accessed by users, while users can submit, track, and share their own public record requests through the website (MuckRock n.d.). Through this initiative, MuckRock's website allows researchers, journalists, activists, and citizens to contribute to the transparency in politics and governments. In Croatia, GONG along with partners had developed a similar web portal called "We Have the Right to Know," which allows citizens to demand information from authorities. Similarly, SAHA utilizes their Freedom of Information Programme to collect and preserve information retrieved from South Africa's ATI Act for the archive to make this information more accessible for research. SAHA has also been involved in a diverse range of projects such as their FOIP Capacity Building Project that provides communities with the knowledge and strategies to use FOI as an effective advocacy tool for empowerment through a "series of multiple workshops" (SAHA n.d.). Programs with training and workshops involving citizens, public servants, CSOs, or entire communities relating to FOI and public records access were found to be common throughout our sample of organizations and movements. Among the many organizations that engage in training and workshops are Californians Aware, IDFI, FOICA, American Society of Access Professionals (ASAP), Access to Information Programme Bulgaria (AIP), Collective Citizens for Transparent Municipalities (CIMTRA) in Mexico, Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) and Infocudadana.

Monitoring or watchdog activities is another prominent activity of groups in our sample and a critical element among FOI-based organizations and movements considering that FOI and RTI entail transparency of governments. Baroi (2018) advises that the implementation processes of the FOI or RTI Acts will require CSOs to act as watchdogs. The Movement for Freedom of Information NGO in Israel serves this function as it aims to advocate and promote transparency in public institutions, increase oversight of public institutions' activities, and inform citizens in Israel on using their right to information. The Movement for Freedom of Information had criticized the Israeli government for undermining the FOI Act during the COVID-19 pandemic by failing to provide members of the public with raw information on COVID-19 such as morbidity data (The Movement for Freedom of Information n.d.; Sadan 2020). Furthermore, GONG is a CSO in Croatia established with original goals of monitoring elections but have since extended their methodology to include RTI and FOI. According to their website, GONG aims to enhance democracy and the democratic political culture with a focus on decision making processes relating to good governance, rule of law, and human rights (GONG n.d.). During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, GONG warned of the Croatian government's attempts to suspend parliament's work and enact laws that would enable the government to monitor citizens' locations through cell phones (Preserve Democracy in the Time of Coronavirus 2020). Another example is provided by the FOICA in Armenia, which monitors Armenia's FOI legislation implementation through sending over 1000 information requests to national and local government bodies (FOICA

n.d.). Likewise, AIP monitors Bulgaria's FOI legislation, among their many additional activities (AIP n.d.). Around two-thirds of our sample (out of 30 organizations and movements) were involved in monitoring and watchdog activities.

Many organizations and movements focusing on transparency issues have also been involved in research, litigation, providing legal assistance, as well as advocacy for legislation and policies. In Bangladesh, RIB considers itself to be one of the "front runners to champion the cause of RTI" in the country. RIB was founded in 2002 for the promotion of knowledge relating to poverty alleviation in Bangladesh, while focusing on communities which are marginalised and socially excluded. Their main objective has been to support research that can contribute to these poverty alleviation strategies and support NGOs within Bangladesh (RIB n.d.). RIB has an additional webpage dedicated to RTI. In Nepal, Freedom Forum conducted a research study that involved evaluating the transparency of several major donor agencies such as USAID, UKAID, World Bank, among other international organizations. The study found that the donors openly provided government with information but showed reluctance in providing information to CSOs and the general public (Donors Working in Nepal Lack Transparency 2012). Alternatively, FOICA's website notes that they engage in "legal counselling" and "strategic litigation" among their many activities, which is akin to several other organizations within our sample. Further, the public interest group called Action for Economic Reforms (AER) in the Philippines (with FOI as one of six core programs) has employed research and analysis, legal action, building coalitions, public education, and lobbying (AER n.d.).

Organizations and movements within our sample have also been involved in influencing the FOI or RTI legislation and transparency-based policies through lobbying. Examples include MKSS and NCPRI in India (as demonstrated earlier), Otevrena Spolecnost (Open Society in Czech Republic) which had influenced Czech Republic's Information Act enforcement, FOICA in Armenia's FOI law development, as well as Campaign for Freedom of Information (CFOI) which successfully drafted and promoted several information access bills in the UK. CFOI was established in 1984 in the UK with goals of promoting and defending FOI while engaging in enhancing public awareness of FOI and public information access. Their website notes that the CFOI drafted and promoted bills which have become law in the UK such as the Access to Personal Files Act 1987, the Access to Medical Reports Act 1988, the Environment and Safety Information Act 1988, and the Access to Health Records Act 1990 (CFOI n.d.). The techniques described above including workshops, the collection of FOI requests, monitoring FOI institutions, and lobbying for FOI provide insight into the different techniques that social movement groups pursuing FOI issues utilize to either maintain, build on, or establish FOI law.

Networks

Collaboration, cooperation, and partnerships are critical for FOI-based organizations and movements to widen their support base, expand projects and enhance their influence in the political arena. Baroi (2018) advises that CSOs and NGOs must engage different stakeholders with RTI while making FOI or RTI law known to people. Engaging these stakeholders can improve the impact that organizations and movements have within communities, within the political arena, or with different organizations. We focus on the networks and coalitions between and among the sample organizations and movements. The majority of organizations and movements within our sample have engaged in transparency and FOI focused networks. Among the networking-specific organizations within our sample are Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC), Freedom of Information Advocates Network (FOIANet), FOI Youth Initiative (FYI) in the Philippines, the Collective Citizens for Transparent Municipalities (CIMTRA) in Mexico, and CRTI in Pakistan. Nearly every organization within our sample has demonstrated the use of partnerships with other organizations as well as the use of coalitions to extend their influence or impact.

Social movement groups that focus on networking facilitate membership from organizations and movements that advocate or work toward related issues such as FOI, while further promoting engagement between these organizations or movements with similar interests and goals. AFIC is a pan-African civil society network based in Uganda with over 40 CSO “members” that engage in FOI or RTI promotion and advocacy across Africa. AFIC networks and partners with local groups, community organizations, CSOs, international NGOs and groups (including Oxfam and FOIANet), among others in numerous African countries to promote and enhance FOI laws and government transparency. MRA in Nigeria is among those member organizations within this network. AFIC also produces reports on the state of ATI or RTI throughout Africa (AFIC n.d.). On the other hand, FOIANet provides more international networking. This website (founded in 2002) provides an “information-sharing” network of organizations and individuals internationally focused on issues relating to FOI and working toward promoting the right of access to information. FOIANet had established a discussion list for issues relating to the right of access to information, with involvement of various civil society representatives, academics, lawyers, among others (FOIANet n.d.). Over one-third of the organizations within our sample are members of FOIANet.

The following examples are more nationally based or local networks for FOI advocacy and transparency-driven movements. CIMTRA (while a member of FOIANet) focuses on the “collective” of CSOs and community organizations throughout Mexico. The objectives of CIMTRA include promoting, monitoring, and evaluating the transparency of local governments in Mexico. The CIMTRA collective includes different local groups throughout Mexico such as organized citizens, CSOs, community organizations, universities, among others. The main activities that CIMTRA engages in include monitoring, measuring, and

evaluating the transparency in municipal governments, delegations of the Federal District, and local congresses. Additionally, CIMTRA develops reports, provides forums, workshops, and acts as an alliance of organizations with similar interests of government transparency (CIMTRA n.d.). FYI in the Philippines provides a network example as a coalition of various youth groups and organizations from across the country. FYI consists of over two hundred youth and student organizations in the Philippines that demand government transparency, accountability, and citizen participation through an FOI Act. FYI has been involved in the promotion and advocacy of a People's Freedom of Information Act in the Philippines. This was the first youth-led campaign for an FOI Bill and this network has also held an annual FOI Youth Congress with the various member groups in solidarity with the FOI campaign (FYI n.d.). Finally, CRTI in Pakistan has engaged as a coalition of CSOs similar to CIMTRA. CRTI has been involved in publishing reports, advocating for RTI, and collaborating with organizations. CRTI has also been conducting an Annual RTI Champion Award that acknowledges common people (citizens, journalists, and even government officers) for their efforts in the use of RTI laws (CRTI n.d.).

Organizations and movements that are focused nationally or locally are invaluable for their role in coordinating with other CSOs, community organizations, as well as local groups in FOI advocacy and activism. Larger FOI-based organizations in the international community (or international NGOs) are found to influence the passage of stronger laws (including FOI laws) that are advocated to be the "international norms" that are often set by these international NGOs (Berliner 2016). CHRI is one such organization that can communicate with and assist a range of actors such as CSOs and grassroots movements, especially within the commonwealth countries. CLD is another international NGO that engages and collaborates with other international organizations, networks, and CSOs for FOI developments across the world. The global RTI rating tool mentioned earlier provides an example of partnership between CLD and the Spain-based Access Info Europe. The networks, coalitions, and partnerships allow for more coordinated efforts to fight for more access to government information and prompt improvements to government transparency. These connections could increase the likelihood of cross-movement solidarity and what Meyer and Whittier (1994) call "social movement spillover" between movements.

Learning from movements

Many organizations and movements working toward open government and more acceptable FOI systems have had successes to share and failures or mistakes to learn from. Calland and Bentley (2013) advised that sustaining momentum at the local community level along with understanding the macro political environment is fundamental for organizations (and movements), noting that MKSS in India and Open Democracy Advice Centre in South Africa have succeeded using this approach. Working with the local communities at the grassroots level while engaging with national or international communities can

be beneficial to movements. Collaboration and coordination can strengthen the FOI movement and generate shared resources, shared knowledge, and heightened support for the movement. Unfortunately, there are often cases where the FOI movement is suppressed by the government despite collaborative efforts such as that experienced by the FOI Youth Initiative in the Philippines when the 16th Congress failed to pass the People's Freedom of Information Act in 2016 (FYI n.d.). While several FOI networks already exist, perhaps an increase in collaboration, coordination, and inclusion between and within these networks can facilitate more awareness of new strategies (also see Choudry 2015). The following are recommendations for activists, lawyers, journalists, among many others involved in FOI-based organizations and movements based on our findings:

- Engage with social movement groups at all different levels (including internationally), but with a focus on grassroots and community level organizations and movements;
- Share released information retrieved from FOI requests and disclosures to raise the issue of transparency into the public realm and maintain momentum of the issue through various creative means;
- Collaborate, coordinate, and communicate with FOI-based organizations and movements with similar interests and goals while concentrating efforts on a plan that stakeholders support. Educate and spread awareness to those who may be unaware of transparency issues and how access to information can benefit them.

Discussion and conclusion

We have shown how social movement groups use multiple techniques to collect, share, and amplify information, among their many other strategies in promoting information accessibility. We have also explored how frames and techniques enable the extension of networks including cross-movement collaboration and solidarity. FOI movement groups engage in multiple strategies and techniques motivated by three frames: (1) protection and promotion of human rights, (2) open government and civic participation, as well as (3) collaboration and partnerships. As a result, their strategies and techniques span capacity building and empowerment, archiving and information sharing, monitoring and watchdog activities, public interest research, as well as public interest law and lobbying. Reflecting on the frames of a movement and those of others help movements see commonalities and build cross-movement solidarity (Vicari 2015). These findings show that social movement groups concerned with transparency and accountability use FOI in their work mobilizing for justice. The movement groups varied in terms of their level of formal organization and their political ideology, yet they all found ways to incorporate FOI as a technique for advancing toward their goals. At the same

time, some groups fought for greater government transparency but remain ambivalent about FOI and the liberal democratic state.

Though FOI is a state-sanctioned mechanism with its limits being well known, access to information is a part of movement actions, and can inform movement goals as well as campaigns that promote the transparency and accountability of government institutions. Most social movement groups have an agonistic relationship with power structures and state agencies, and this carries over into their use of FOI even. FOI requests are a government mechanism so there is little impression FOI itself will create drastic social change or that the state will naturally become more transparent and participatory. Some of the movements (and we as authors) are aware of the limits of liberal democracy and we do not wish to reify liberal politics (also see Vahabzadeh 2003; Hurl 2021). Several of the groups in our sample conceptualize their work as within and against the state. However, our analysis has shown that FOI disclosures can provide wins for movement groups as demonstrated by many of the groups in our sample. These disclosures continue to assist in opening the door wider to government transparency and accountability. FOI disclosures can also be shared among movement groups, public interest lawyers, and journalists who may collaborate on campaigns.

Social movement groups pushing for government transparency and FOI across the world are facing different barriers with governments or regimes. As we have found, geopolitical position does not entirely determine the success or failure of such movements as certain governments in Western “developed” countries have often failed to model participatory transparency and FOI policies. The power differences between many citizens and politicians will prove to be an obstacle to government transparency and openness. As Mishra (2003) notes about India, MKSS stressed the people’s right to information as crucial to the human right to survival and livelihood, while NCPRI had assisted in forging an atmosphere that led to more support for RTI law through intensive advocacy. Such power differences may become almost irrelevant through enough support, motivation, and intense advocacy for FOI and transparency as displayed in the India experience. The suggested next steps for the academic community then would be to develop the necessary methodology to assess these advances and impacts (Choudry 2015; Calland and Bentley 2013), to learn from social movement and help mobilize knowledge about FOI and RTI.

The question of NGOs’ connections to state and donors arises, with Bornstein and Sharma (2016) suggesting that NGOs can act as Trojan horses by challenging the state from within. Berliner (2016) presents evidence that international NGOs use their influence to guide leading policymakers in passing stronger laws, with the international NGO Article 19 and the passage of FOI laws cited as the focus in his study. We acknowledge that NGOs still have benefits to offer the FOI movement to varying degrees, but the debate around NGOs and movements continues. Further studies on NGOs, social movements, and CSOs (or community organizations) and their impacts on freedom of information are needed.

Building on these findings, it is important in future research to examine how social movement groups are drawing on digital and computational approaches (such as data scraping) to data collection and analysis (Gutiérrez 2018) in their struggle for access to information. FOI laws do change over time, usually toward decreased openness (Roberts 1999), although through struggle and advocacy social movement groups can force governments to pass progressive rather than regressive amendments. Use of FOI by social movement participants and activists stands to contribute to this change either through direct advocacy or indirect influence through disclosures and knowledge mobilization by movement groups.

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"ACTION=LIFE": What Toronto AIDS activists can teach us about mobilizing for essential services

Janna Klostermann and Chris Hurl

Abstract

In this essay, we consider how the methods of Toronto-based AIDS activists from the 1980s and 1990s can inform contemporary struggles related to essential services during and after the pandemic. AIDS activists are known for queer, creative and bold interventions. The research methods informing their activism are also worth learning from. Here we look behind the scenes at how activists shifted public attitudes towards AIDS by reframing it as an outcome of political decisions, rather than a natural condition. We trace the work of the late political activist ethnographer George W. Smith whose approach inspired social movement activists in the 1980s and 1990s and has incredible resonance/relevance now. His work helps us to appreciate how COVID-related deaths are not natural, but can be linked to decisions of governments. Further, through attending to "life work" and identifying political and institutional barriers to living, we can support political organizing during the pandemic.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS activism, political activist ethnography, essential services, pandemic, life work, Canada

Over the past year, the inadequacy of Canada's public infrastructure and social services has become apparent. Many have called attention to the shortcomings of public programs related to unemployment, child care, long-term care and social housing, while also advocating for major investments in public forms of care, and for equitable responses that put the care economy at the centre of policy-making (Armstrong et al. 2021; Peck 2021).

In building from this emergent wave of activism, we can learn from the strategies and tactics of past movements. Some have already noted the legacy of AIDS activism in informing how movements can make demands for essential services and public sector supports during the pandemic or to speak back against government inaction (Kinsman 2020; Shotwell 2020; Schulman 2021). Drawing on research we conducted with Alexis Shotwell and Gary Kinsman as part of the AIDS Activist History Project (Hurl and Klostermann 2019; Klostermann 2019), we would like to share what we have learned from the work of the late political activist ethnographer George W. Smith.

A long-time gay liberation activist, Smith was a key organizer with the activist group AIDS ACTION NOW! in Toronto through the late 1980s until 1994, when he died of an HIV-related illness. He was known for challenging the police

repression of gay men during the bathhouse raids in Toronto in the early 1980s and for demanding support and treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS. He was also a novel social theorist who worked with Dorothy E. Smith (no relation) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and contributed to embodied, social justice driven research (Choudry 2015; Hussey 2012; Mykhalovskiy and Church 2006; Shotwell 2016).

"To summarize his work," Smith's long-time partner and fellow activist, Sean Hosein (2014), notes, "it was about giving people the ability to see how they were being oppressed and to use that information to subvert the agents and agencies of oppression."

Smith's activism and thinking is notable in changing the frame through which AIDS was approached at the time. In the late 1980s, public policies treated AIDS as a death sentence. Care was approached in a palliative format and people living with AIDS were framed as "victims" under the assumption that they would ultimately die from the condition. Against this view, activists in Toronto worked to expose how death from HIV/AIDS was in fact an outcome of political decisions – the product of a political and economic milieu in which governments, medical experts failed to provide people with necessary support. As one AIDS ACTION NOW! flyer from the time notes: "Many of the barriers to proper care for people living with HIV infection are political not scientific."

Along these lines, AIDS ACTION NOW! challenged the political barriers to living with HIV/AIDS. They were successful in organizing around a range of issues, including access to drugs, medical services, sexual education and contraceptives, but also providing social support when people lost their jobs, helping people find doctors and navigate complex bureaucratic protocols in order to attain access to social programs. They recognized how people could encounter a range of different challenges depending on their distinctive location, and were central in mobilizing support for marginalized groups, including prisoners, sex workers, and drug users.

How did these activists organize and confront barriers to living? There are three points that are central to Smith's approach that can inform social organizing today:

1) From speculation to investigation

For Smith, AIDS activism wasn't just about getting loud, making noise or coming up with slogans. He challenged what he called a "speculative" orientation to social activism that attributed "agency to concepts such as 'homophobia' or ... 'red tape'" (Smith, 1990, p. 634). The central target, for Smith, should not be the homophobia of individual police officers or the slow response of governments.

Instead, he adopted a self-described "materialist" approach. This involved identifying places where people encountered obstacles in getting what they

needed to survive, charting the practices through which social services were delivered, and documenting how they were institutionally orchestrated. The aim of activists was to examine how society is put together in order to identify targets for activism and change.

2) Centring life work

Smith took the everyday work that people do to survive as his starting place. Beginning from what he called "life work," he documented the everyday activities that people engaged in to get what they needed in order to live.

Through interviews and social solidarity work, Smith built connections with people living with HIV and documented their challenges accessing drugs, long term disability support or employment insurance. As part of the 'Hooking Up' project with Eric Mykhalovskiy, Smith conducted interviews with people living with HIV/AIDS, tracking the everyday work of individuals to sustain themselves. Their goal was to learn about the embodied situated work that people do, as a way to learn about how social services and institutional processes shape people's lives.

But life work is not just undertaken by individuals. It also includes the work we do collectively to live differently. From this perspective, a central aim of social movements is to extend the capacity of people to live through collectively identifying and confronting barriers to living. As the AIDS ACTION NOW! slogan goes: "ACTION=LIFE."

3) Documents and demonstrations

Smith understood research and activism as existing in a symbiotic relationship:

On the one hand, research informed activism. By speaking with people living with HIV, activists got a sense of the obstacles that they experienced in getting what they needed to survive. This provided activists with targets that they could mobilize around.

On the other hand, activism was understood as a form of research or knowledge production. Smith's active engagement with public agencies through ongoing political confrontations generated further knowledge about these institutions, opening new doors to political organizing. We generate knowledge through social movement activism – learning from the response.

These ideas can help us to understand and organize in the current context.

AIDS activists' work helps us to grasp that COVID-related deaths are not natural. They are socially organized and based on the policy-decisions of governments. When a government refrains from rolling out social assistance to the unemployed, destroys homeless camps, refuses to relocate prisoners, or fails

to ensure the adequate provision of care for people in nursing homes, they are directly contributing to increasing death rates.

As we've learned from activists, tracking the work that people do to survive during the pandemic can provide a fitting starting place for mobilization. From accessing medical or social services or to ensuring safe working conditions or adequate levels of care, attending to our everyday work and considering how it is socially organized can inform actions.

By recognizing the symbiotic relationship between research and activism, we can use political mobilizations as opportunities to learn about how things are organized. Pushing governments to disclose information on their practices can open up new targets for organizing. Making a complaint about working conditions can further reveal how the institution 'works' (Ahmed 2021; see also Fernandes 2020).

"SILENCE=DEATH" and "ACTION=LIFE" are two expressions from the work of AIDS activists working in the late 1980s and 1990s. Learning from their efforts can spur political action aimed at understanding and transforming conditions of life. We can start where we are, get with the group, and both identify and confront barriers to living. It's well worth asking: What work do we do? How is it organized? And how can it be otherwise?

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Book Reviews: *Interface*, 13 (2)

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Review Author: Jeremiah Gaster

Review of Judith Butler's *The Force of Nonviolence*

Review Author: Benjamin S. Case

Judith Butler, 2021, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. New York: Verso. (235 pp., paperback, \$20.95).

The debate over “violence” and “nonviolence” in social movements is as old as it is contentious. Is revolutionary violence necessary to overcome oppression, or does it represent a moral failure? Does resisting violently enable or forfeit legitimacy? Is nonviolent resistance effective? Are all manifestations of violence morally equivalent? How do different types of action impact movements? And what do we mean by “violence” and “nonviolence” in the first place? Judith Butler’s 2021 intervention, *The Force of Nonviolence*, arrives at a moment when we are re-evaluating these questions.

Butler begins by acknowledging the contested concepts we’re working with. She correctly mentions that when we talk about violence and nonviolence, these terms arrive “already interpreted, worked over by prior usages” (p. 7), and she is right that the task of intervening in these interpretations is crucial for the left. Butler goes on to argue for a “forceful nonviolence” as both a form of assertive political action and as a method of reinforcing interdependent social relations.

Most page space in *The Force of Nonviolence* is focused on critical forays into the writing of Hobbes, Kant, Freud, Foucault, Klein, Benjamin, Einstein, Fanon, and others, as they relate to violence, death, and grief. For Butler, nonviolence demands a critique of individualism. Contra liberal conceptions of individuality, Butler demonstrates how human lives are inescapably interdependent, and on this basis argues for a politics of egalitarianism. More radically, she suggests at times that it is not just human life but the entirety of living systems on the planet which are all reliant upon others, implying an extreme broadening of the scope of equality.

In passages that evoke her 2016 book, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Butler emphasizes the concept of grievability, interrogating whose lives are grieved and who is treated as though their loss would be worthy of grief. She suggests a principled notion of equal grievability among humans (and perhaps all life forms) should lead to a politics of nonviolence.

The Force of Nonviolence is well written, and Butler weaves analysis of prior theory together with her own interventions like a master of the craft – it is Judith Butler, after all. Her commitment to justice and equality are palpable, and the push toward a holistic theory of life-affirming politics is welcome. But ultimately, the book feels like a missed opportunity.

As a philosophical exploration, *The Force of Nonviolence* takes a global approach and examines violence and nonviolence through ethical and psychological lenses, but its framing feels at once too broad and too narrow.

Butler states at the outset that she is setting out to “challenge some major presumptions of nonviolence” (p. 20) and articulate a version of aggressive or forceful nonviolence. Yet the “presumptions” she goes on to challenge feel contrived, for example that nonviolence is necessarily weak, passive, and useless.

Butler does not say who presumes nonviolent protest is useless, but from an organizer’s standpoint it seems quite the opposite. The emphasis that media, public figures, and many of the most prominent social movement commentators put on strictly nonviolent protest as opposed to any type of violent action indicates that nonviolent tactics are not only widely perceived as legitimate and effective but are often treated as the *only* appropriate means of effecting change from outside the system. Indeed, the case for assertive and efficacious nonviolent action has been well made by many practitioners and theorists from a variety of perspectives. Not only are prior theorists of nonviolence all but absent from *The Force of Nonviolence*, by the end of the book we aren’t even left with a clear articulation of nonviolent force.

There are several, interrelated issues which hinder the otherwise generative observations in *The Force of Nonviolence*, all of which stem from a central issue: Butler’s arguments are not grounded in real world movements.

Who is theory for?

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the dominant position on the global left was that revolution required force of arms (see Mao 1937; Guevara 1963; Taber 1970). At the same time, there were some who argued for unarmed and nonviolent rebellion on primarily moral and spiritual bases (see Day 1936; Gandhi 1927; King 1963). Following the repression and collapse of the 1960s global revolution, the Soviet Unions’ dissolution, China’s turn toward capitalism, and the rise of the non-profit industrial complex, the pendulum swung in another direction. The notion of “strategic nonviolence” became the standard for many social movements – that is, the idea that the most effective method of political struggle from below is through nonviolent protest (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Engler and Engler 2016; Sharp 2012).

Now, following racial justice uprisings and the resurrection of fascism as a political force in the US and around the world in recent years, the meanings of violence and nonviolence in movements are back up for debate.

The Force of Nonviolence is clearly meant to relate to movements for justice. Its opening sentences and closing remarks are about political transformation and collective action, its cover image is of a protest, and the book jacket claims: “Butler shows a way forward for social movements.” But while movements are mentioned here and there in the book, Butler does not ground her discussion in the dynamics of real life social and political struggle that has brought the conversation over violence and nonviolence back to the fore. The result is a book

on nonviolence that is better suited for a philosophy classroom than an organizing meeting.

After reading this book ostensibly about the force of nonviolence, I was left without a sense of what Butler thinks of the events that drive the urgency of the conversation around violence and nonviolence today. I don't know what Butler thinks of protesters burning down the Minneapolis Third Precinct after Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, nor the tenacious persistence of George Floyd Square at 38th and Chicago. I have no idea what she thinks of the limousine fire or Richard Spencer's punched face outside Donald Trump's 2017 inauguration. I don't know what Butler thinks of antifascists physically confronting neo-Nazis in the streets, Palestinian protesters throwing rocks at Israeli tanks, activists popularizing the slogan "kill your rapist," militants sabotaging railways to stop pipelines through indigenous territory, or the People's Defense Units and Women's Protection Units in Rojava.

To expand on one example, in the book's postscript Butler lauds nonviolent street performance in Taksim Square during the 2013 uprising in Istanbul (p. 195). But she fails to mention the moments during that same uprising when activists attempted to defend their occupation of Gezi Park against brutal police attacks by throwing rocks and fireworks and tear gas canisters that had been fired by riot police. Should we understand from Butler's example that the Gezi Park uprising was an expression of forceful nonviolence, during which the street performance was an exemplary moment? Or is it that the street performance was an example of nonviolent resistance counterposed with the moments during that episode when activists did not behave non-violently? Butler does not mention the latter instances, so we're left to guess. Or perhaps to ignore the moments that do not fit the argument.

For some reason, Butler also decides not to put her arguments in conversation with the most prominent voices discussing nonviolent action. We do not meet Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (2011), who made the now-famous argument that nonviolent struggle has been more effective in overthrowing governments than armed struggle. Nor Stellan Vinthagen (2015), whose holistic view of nonviolence in theory and practice accounts for both moral and tactical approaches, as well as nuance around application of force to resist systemic violence. Nor April Carter (2015) or Sharon Erickson Nepstad (2015), who have outlined the history, theory, and practice of nonviolent struggle. We don't meet Elizabeth Hinton (2021), who argues for the centrality of violent urban uprisings in the history of Black resistance to white supremacy in the US, or Vicky Osterweil (2020), who unapologetically defends looting, or Charles E. Cobb (2014), who writes about the importance of armed community defense in the Civil Rights era – including among nonviolence advocates. Like her sparse interactions with movements, Butler's lack of attention to contemporary debates over violence and nonviolence makes the book feel strangely out of touch.

Butler does converse with the likes of Frantz Fanon and Walter Benjamin, but, incredibly, she evades those thinkers' arguments for the use of violence. Butler brings up Fanon's racial schema from *Black Skin, White Masks*, but does not

engage with his well-known argument for revolutionary violence in *Wretched of the Earth*. Instead, she dismisses his revolutionary violence as a “fantasy of hyper-masculinity” in its “imagining of the body as strong enough to overthrow the fortress of colonial power” (p. 143). This appears to me as a stunning misrepresentation of Fanon. Not because Fanon’s writing cannot be criticized for its masculine disposition, but because his argument for violence is not at all based on imagining that colonialism can be overcome through bodily force. On the contrary, Fanon’s revolutionary violence has to do with the bodily struggle that he argues is necessary for the colonized subject to overcome the inferiority complexes engendered by colonial rule, an overcoming which itself is required to build a liberated society. Either way, Butler’s evasion of Fanon’s theory of violent resistance, as well as the context which informed that theory – Fanon was a clinical psychotherapist who treated both colonizers and the colonized in Algeria before joining the Algerian Revolution against French occupation – makes her selective use of his earlier work difficult to interpret.

In her 1968 pamphlet, *On Revolution and Equilibrium*, Barbara Deming uses Fanon’s theory to argue for assertive nonviolence. In that work, Deming proposes that we read Fanon by swapping out the word “violence” and substituting “radical and uncompromising” action in its place (Deming 1968: 4). For Deming, when Fanon says “violence,” he is getting at the psychological effect of confronting power, something she argues can be accomplished through nonviolent methods. In this example, Deming *engages* with Fanon’s work to argue for nonviolent action, whereas Butler simply mentions Fanon for his ideas of racial schema, dismisses the resulting theory of anti-colonial violence, then moves on.

Same for Walter Benjamin, to whom Butler devotes a substantial section. The focus is on Benjamin’s 1921 essay, “Critique of Violence,” in which he argues for the revolutionary force (or violence) of the general strike. Benjamin wrote this piece following the 1920 Kapp Putsch in Germany, in which he had witnessed liberals turn on and repress the radical left after a general strike had defeated a far-right coup (see Stuart 2021). The betrayal undercut the power of the left, reinforced state violence, and set the stage for the rise of fascism. (In the US we might do well to revisit these lessons today.) Benjamin highlighted the power of the general strike, which can deploy a type of radical force that he argued can overcome the violence of the state. Butler accepts the critique of oppressive violence but glosses over the forms of violence that Benjamin implies are required to displace it. Likewise, Butler endorses the logic behind Benjamin’s argument for the inherent violence of the state, but distances herself from its “anarchist conclusion” (p. 136) without discussion of why. Then she moves on.

Butler’s social-political argument against individualism is compelling, but it would be stronger without nonviolence attached to it. Our lives are indeed incontrovertibly connected in a grand network of interdependence that spans the globe. It is also true that, philosophically speaking, this should imply a radical equality. The world as we know it is characterized by horrendous systemic violence, and we are figuring out how to counter it and build a world

for the living. Where Butler inserts nonviolence, however, the argument loses its sense of direction. For example, Butler argues that our interconnectedness, morally equal grievability, and the impulse to preserve the life of the other lead us to a convergence of being: “Could it be that even now, in destroying another, we are also destroying ourselves?” (p. 98). Surely such a question bears pondering, but it is purely abstract, devoid of power dynamics, and only tangentially related to real life strategic and tactical discussions.

Butler argues that “we cannot, or may not, take away the lives of others we would rather see gone [because] we cannot consistently live in a world in which everyone does the same” (p. 82). But we *do* live in a world where some people directly and indirectly take away the lives of many others. In fact, we live in a society in which such an arrangement is legal and profitable. The question is what we can do about it. In answering, it is unclear why we should use destruction and killing as a foil. Regarding a critique of state violence, such a focus might make sense, but concerning resistance it misses the mark. The book’s arguments completely overlook the types of actions by protesters and militants that drive violence/nonviolence debates in real life – not death drives and killing but rioting and looting, vandalism and equipment sabotage, traffic obstruction and physical blockades, community defense formations and combative antifascism.

Beyond the binary

The most venomous debates over violence in movements relate to rioting, unarmed protester violence, and other forms of physically destructive but typically non-lethal actions. Butler focuses on the centrality of preservation of life and grievability – in other words, violence as related to killing, and in some examples, sexual violence. The connection is presented as a kind of slippery slope, in which the use of any violence “licenses, implicitly or effectively, the use of violence more broadly,” making the world a more violent place (p. 14).

Throughout *The Force of Nonviolence*, Butler examines violence-as-killing in abstract, at times almost romantic ways, for example when she argues that “the blind rage that motivates war destroys the social bonds that make nations possible” (p. 154). The suggestion that wars are motivated not by power and profit but by “blind rage” entirely ignores historical and structural explanations for conflict as well as the gross power disparities at work in resistance. How does such an approach help us understand someone who is incensed and heartbroken at the police murder of a community member, who expresses the impossibility of the status quo via a brick thrown at police lines? Is this really the blind rage that leads to war and destroys social bonds? Are we certain that this act licenses the use of violence in general?

Nearly all mass uprisings of any consequence involve riotous moments (Case 2018). During the 2020 racial justice uprising in the US, sometimes called the George Floyd Uprising, researchers have shown that the vast majority of protests were nonviolent (Kishi and Jones 2020), challenging widespread

misconceptions that the movement was frequently violent. But that finding was quickly repackaged into claims that the movement was *exclusively* nonviolent, as though the small number of instances in which people set things on fire or fought police were insignificant or were not really part of the movement. We saw something similar in the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, which was at the time widely hailed as a nonviolent phenomenon (e.g., Chenoweth and Stephan 2014; Engler and Engler 2016). Many accounts of the uprising that led to the overthrow of the Mubarak regime left out the fact that dozens of police stations were burned in the opening days of the revolt (Ismail 2012; Ketchley 2017). A violence/nonviolence binary encourages us to associate our enemies with violence and ourselves with nonviolence, and therefore either ignore or dismiss moments of violent resistance.

Rioting is not nonviolent, but also is not the same as the violence of oppression or war. Furthermore, riotous resistance has deep and widespread resonance. The 2014 fires in Ferguson ignited a global resurgence of racial justice struggle. The burning of the Minneapolis Third Precinct in June 2020 had a massive nation-wide impact as a symbol of resistance to racist police violence and was followed by what was possibly the largest movement in US history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). The symbolic power of riots is clear in the images of Molotov cocktails and burning squad cars that frequently appear in leftist art and imagery (sometimes even deployed by individuals and organizations who rush to distance themselves from the people who actually set those fires).

When we hear from rioters themselves, it becomes clear that we are dealing with violence that operates primarily on a symbolic level (see Case 2021; Dupuis-Déri 2014; Meckfessel 2016). Property destruction, fires, and thrown projectiles are typically not meant to physically defeat the forces of the state, white supremacy, and capital in the long term. Instead, rioting signals the depth of resistance, fortifies seriousness of dissent, and communicates that the status quo is intolerable. In an impossible situation, rioting can be a method of reclaiming and reaffirming our shared humanity. Dismissing these moments as “violent” in direct association with the violence of war obscures the ways in which histories of oppression, exploitation, and police violence accumulate in people, are embodied, and in some circumstances can be released and converted into political energy via a brick thrown at authorities. There is a reason the Stonewall Riot continues to serve as a radical symbol until today.

This is not to romanticize riots either – riots are frightening and dangerous and often lead to enhanced repression. Certainly, people can and do get hurt at the hands of protesters in these moments, and there are undoubtedly bad actors among rioters – as there are amidst nonviolent protest and just about everywhere else. Associating violent protests with death is not only misleading, but it can also reinforce a logic of repression: that rioters are driven by the will to chaos and a desire to kill and therefore must be stopped. Butler undoubtedly does not mean to do this, and she quite correctly points out that accusing protests of being violent is itself a tool of oppression. But she nevertheless

argues for maintaining a hard distinction between violence and nonviolence without telling us where the line is or what she thinks of protesters who cross it.

Likewise, Butler mentions the nonviolent power of labor strikes, but does not talk about when workers damage machinery or fight with scabs and strike-breakers. A common misconception among advocates of nonviolence is that strikes are a fundamentally nonviolent tactic, since at its core is the refusal of labor. In reality, the labor strike grew into a powerful mode of class combat specifically through the use of militant and often violent tactics (see de Cleyre 1897; Clover 2016). It is precisely this potential that Benjamin points to in his argument for the force of the general strike.

Butler repeatedly refers to the ambiguities and ambivalence around nonviolence, and she also states at one point that she does not dispute the possibility that violence could be necessary in political struggle, but she usually follows these statements with rhetorical questions posed to negate them. The suggestion that violent resistance brings more violence into the world falls flat without an explanation for how or why hyper-local and low-level expressions of violent resistance get scaled up towards a totalizing, endemic notion of violence-as-war. Most importantly, the argument for nonviolence is entirely banal if it avoids discussion of the types of actions that complicate the term.

Nonviolence has become a story we tell about movements – a story that sometimes tells us more about the storyteller than the characters. Violent urban uprisings have been a longstanding aspect of resistance in the US as much as anywhere else. On the ground, most unarmed political struggles worldwide involve nonviolent actions alongside or in addition to rioting, sabotage, and physical fights with police and political opponents (Piven 2012). *The Force of Nonviolence* does not tell us anything about the many grey areas that complicate the violence/nonviolence binary and, consequently, it struggles to tell us much about real world nonviolent action.

The force of radical action

Butler has elsewhere admitted that there are extreme scenarios, for example the rise of a fascist regime, in which she would partake in violent resistance (Butler 2017). Beginning there, what if we accepted Butler's arguments for interconnectedness and grievability, but instead of concluding at nonviolence, we took a different path? Just as Deming proposed attempting to read Fanon by replacing "violence" with "radical and uncompromising action," I want to make an inverse proposition. What if in the place of "nonviolence" in Butler's work, we substitute "radical and uncompromising action." In Deming's time, she was pushing back against a left that often assumed the need for armed struggle. Deming argued against this assumption, even using examples from revolutionary warfare, for example highlighting how kindness toward captured state troops by communist Chinese and Cuban guerrillas often resulted in widespread recruitment for revolutionaries (Deming 1968: 22).

In our time, we face a left that has become too comfortable with the parameters of nonviolence. Radical and uncompromising action remains an excellent benchmark for movements, and best of all enables us to focus on our goals while relieving us of the need to litigate the granularities of violence and nonviolence in every moment of uprising.

In the framing of radical and uncompromising action, perhaps nonviolence can be approached the way Benjamin explains the commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.” For Benjamin, that commandment exists not as a judgement, but rather “as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it” (Benjamin 1921: 250). While it might be unspoken, this strikes me as largely consistent with the ways radical movements approach resistance. Movements for social justice do not want to hurt and destroy, but to heal and build. We are however sometimes faced with realities that emotionally or strategically demand a physical response. Or at other times, a physical response is simply an organic reaction to being pushed too far. We can and often do take responsibility for these moments with their power, their potential, and the harm they sometimes cause without needing to see them as failures through the virtue of their non-nonviolence alone.

Butler appears to care dearly about the fate of struggles for life and liberation, and her commitment to radical transformation is evident. And it is true that in the broadest sense, the structures of oppression and exploitation operate on logics of separation and violence, and for our resistance to be transformative it must organize around logics of connection and justice. The problem is not that Butler gets this conclusion wrong, it is that the violence/nonviolent language through which she is operating obscures the dynamics of real-world social struggle. When Butler focuses her analysis on the violence of the law and the carceral state, as she did in her recent lecture on the topic at the University of Chicago, she provides significant insights. The book would have benefitted from focusing more on these areas.

Nonviolent action certainly plays a major role in fighting for a better world, but it must be understood in a context that transcends an overarching violence/nonviolence dichotomy. I am encouraged to witness the trend of activists and commentators increasingly refusing to retreat from the reality that resistance sometimes means setting things on fire. More and more we are refusing to succumb to the false “slippery slope” idiom that would equate throwing rocks at a squad car with genocide in the same murky sphere of “violence,” and refusing the rejoinder that doing so means we have become like our enemies. Butler’s book repeatedly nods to this context, and includes the requisite qualifications, but overall, it feels like the book is trying to refocus us on ethical nonviolence in a conversation that is moving on.

Not that it isn’t enjoyable to read someone as brilliant as Judith Butler musing about written correspondence between Freud and Einstein – it is. But when it comes to the extremely meaningful and fraught debate over violence and nonviolence, we need analysis and theory that grounds itself in struggle and

which helps us organize and resist. As Butler correctly points out, the consequences of real-life struggle against the forces of domination are serious, probably decisive for the future of the planet. *The Force of Nonviolence* presents an erudite contemplation of a concept but fails to provide struggles for liberation with a theory that helps us, as the book jacket says, find our way forward.

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**Review of Benjamin Heim Shepard's
*Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action***

Review author: Chuck Morse

Benjamin Heim Shepard, 2021, *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action: Case Studies in Dialectical Activism*. London & New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield (275 pp., hardcover, \$115).

"Alienation extends everywhere, but so does connection," writes Benjamin Heim Shepard in the first line of *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action: Case Studies in Dialectical Activism* (p. 1).

Against left-wing pessimists who think capitalism's grip on social life is total, Shepard believes that we have reasons to be hopeful about our capacity to build a society organized around connection. There is a creative, coherent movement for radical social change right before our eyes, he argues. By reflecting on its politics, exploring its ideas, noting pivotal events in its history, and getting to know some of its personalities and the spaces that they inhabit, Shepard believes that we can enrich our experience of the present and make the future seem less grim.

In fifteen fast-moving chapters, *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action* brings readers into the history and culture of left-leaning protest movements in New York City from the late 1990s up to the Covid pandemic. The author describes mobilizations to defend community gardens, Critical Mass bike rides, squatter and housing rights organizing, activist groups like the Lower East Side Collective and Reclaim the Streets, among other efforts to make New York more democratic and ecological.

Shepard considers the key ideas in these movements—he touches on neo-Marxism, anarchism, queer theory, the DIY ethos, and play as a paradigm for radical politics— and details his own experience as a participant in this activism. The text swings from reportage to memoir to interviews to theory, all of which are enhanced by photographs of protests and Caroline Shepard's lovely portraits of organizers.

Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action "is intended to be a bit loose and decentralized" like the movements it studies, although it is more accurate to say that it reads like a fanzine authored by a professor (p. 21). Well-written and exuberant, the book provides a vivid, multi-dimensional sketch of groups and individuals fighting for an alternative in a crucial global city during a particularly fraught moment in time.

By organizing his analysis around a conflict between alienation and connection, Shepard gestures to his indebtedness to an expressive worldview born of the 1960s that understands history as an epochal battle between the forces of "life" (variously conceived) and the forces of "the system" (variously conceived).

Contrary to those who think that politicians and politics are the primary agents of social change, he argues that the activist scene that he chronicles presupposes and promotes a radical vision of social life built upon a devotion to the values of horizontalism and interdependence.

Although this milieu typically mobilizes around protests designed to accomplish a specific goal, like defending a garden against developers, what drives it, Shepard claims, is a commitment to resisting "the commodification of water, air, and our bodies [and to creating a] livable, autonomous, and sustainable urban space" (p. 23).

Drawing on the writings of Hegel, Marx, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Murray Bookchin, and others, Shepard maintains that dialectical thinkers' investment in flux and change enables them to supply a conceptual vocabulary that articulates the dynamism of connection while mitigating against the rigidities of alienation.

Shepard also insists that openness to change is a pillar of the political culture of the activist world that concerns him. If some see "urban space as a commodity [from which] to extract profit," these "dialectical activists" regard it as a generative site of "life, liberty, and multiple expressions of happiness" that cultivates "ideas and [inspires] connections between bodies and cultures" (p. 4, 17).

Shepard's depiction of this activist scene is persuasive. His survey of actions, individuals, and groups, rooted in extensive interviews and a deep familiarity with movement literature, makes it clear that this chapter of New York's left is not only invested in discrete policy goals but also motivated by a broad social project that comes alive in the continual navigation and re-navigation of the links between facts and values and particular issues and the totality of society.

Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action reveals how campaigns to save community gardens presuppose and foster "a resistance culture [and] model of social action" based on an anti-capitalist environmental perspective; the author demonstrates that bike activism puts forth an ecological message while reminding us that traversing the city can be a source of delight, etc. (p. 39). He also shows that movement discourses can possess an unappreciated complexity by pointing to the common ground that queer theory and anarchism share and by outlining how the rhetoric of "harm reduction" deployed by some social workers frequently rests upon an affirmation of pleasure generally.

Shepard's accounts of his own participation in mobilizations and projects are integral to his "case studies" and betray a novelist's sensitivity to nuance and character. In addition to affirming the existence of this vibrant oppositional current, Shepard challenges a common trope about New York City. Home to the Stock Exchange and site of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which are often invoked to justify contemporary modes of state repression, many think of the city as the epicenter of global neoliberalism.

Though Shepard focuses primarily on lower Manhattan, particularly the Lower East Side, he defies this view of New York by making it clear that it is also home to a diverse community of radicals who have waged a decades-long fight for an ecological, democratic vision of urban life and who understand their contributions in the context of a legacy of rebellion that stretches back to the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the Stonewall riots, and the Living Theater, among other groups and episodes. The range and intricacy of Shepard's narrative, his reflective and playful prose, and his dedication to illustrating ties between ideas and events all seem to embody the enthusiasm for connection that inspires the book.

Shepard's reliance on an anti-political vocabulary, which defines activists primarily by what they do (activism) and minimizes their convictions, leads him to overlook opportunities for insight. Although he describes the values of the movements that he examines in general terms, he does not inquire into their concrete political and economic goals. We are left wondering whether participants want to create a Swedish-style social democracy, an anarcho-syndicalist society organized around workers' councils, or perhaps a radical municipalism that would please Murray Bookchin.

Of course, activists fighting for things like community gardens and better bike infrastructure will likely embrace disparate and conflicting ideologies, but what are their aspirations and how have activists negotiated the tensions between them? Shepard does not discuss this, and steers clear of events that would engender a reflection upon the broader goals of the left-leaning protest movements he describes. *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action* does not examine cases in which authorities effectively repressed and defeated activists, or occasions in which internal divisions prompted groups to splinter.

Strikingly, Shepard does consider the spectacular rise and fall of Occupy Wall Street, which occurred in New York during the years that he was collecting material for this book. A propensity to erase difference is also evident in his commentary on dialectical thinkers. While he rightfully asserts that theorists such as Hegel, Marx, and Bookchin share significant commonalities, he does not acknowledge that they also advanced many irreconcilable ideas and typically understood their respective projects as means of negating their predecessors' legacies.

In 1807, when what we now know as dialectical thought initially began to take shape, Hegel chided Friedrich Schelling, his peer and competitor, for depicting a world in which "all cows are black" (Hegel 1977, 9). This was a way to assert the centrality of differentiation to the dialectical worldview: it can help us grasp the spaces that exist between absolute connection and absolute alienation.

By documenting the existence of a vigorous radical tendency in one of the world's most important cities, *Sustainable Urbanism and Direct Action* shows that left-wing doomsayers are wrong to imagine the present as a site of unadulterated capitalist dominance. This hopeful message relies on a method of reading capitalism that appreciates its vulnerabilities, which is hopeful in its

own right. Shepard is less successful in his effort to theorize this opposition, but, at the very least, he formulates the question in an engaging way and provides an affectionate portrait of groups and individuals who are helping to keep resistance alive.

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About the review author

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Review of Thea Riofrancos' *Resource Radicals*.

Review author: Irmgard Emmelhainz

Thea Riofrancos, 2020, *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. (264 pp., softcover, \$24.65).

Throughout the first decade of the 21st Century, Latin America heralded a new left that seemed to mark the defeat of neoliberalism and the Washington consensus. Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Ecuador became part of what the media called the “Pink Tide,” an umbrella term for a variety of political tendencies that promised progressive-left governance, highlighting the role of states in building local and regional economic alternatives to neoliberalism, and even, in some cases, the building of “socialism for the twenty-first century.”

The economic policies of these leftist governments, however, established a new form of political polarization: If social movements in the 1990s and early 2000s fought to nationalize resource extraction against neoliberal privatization, under the Pink Tide, leftist governments built economies to further development from below based on the re-nationalization of resource extraction.

This, in turn, led to the birth of a new anti-extractivist left, which fought for territorial defense against extractivism of any kind, and the importance of Indigenous rights. In the wake of the collapse of commodity prices in the 2010s and general demise of the Pink Tide, a confusing shift to the right has taken place in Latin America (Bolsonaro in Brazil, Macri in Argentina [before it swung back to *Peronism*]; Maduro in Venezuela; López Obrador's populist militarized economic re-nationalization in Mexico) all struggling to build new hegemonic socio-economic political projects.

Thea Riofrancos', *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*, takes Ecuador as a case study for these historical developments, positioning the small, South American country as a privileged site to understand the conflicts generated by a leftist government committed to a development model based on extractivism.

Riofrancos seizes a unique historical moment in which the same social movement activists who helped Rafael Correa to power, turned against his radical national resource policies. She analyzes how shifts in government policy and opposition were re-signified around a discourse adopted by social movements in the 1990s and early 2000s opposing neoliberalism. This discourse was re-signified by Correa's government as the banner for a State-led development program based on the commercialization of raw materials in global markets. Part of the problem was that, even though it was led by a leftist government, Ecuador's economy continued to be based on the export of

commodities such as natural gas, soy, and oil. The business elite were kept content, and (neoliberal) capitalist structures intact.

Resource Radicals lays out the charged history of resource extraction and governance in Latin America, from colonial plunder to mid-century nationalist projects of oil-fueled modernization and the subsequent privatization and deregulation of hydrocarbon and mineral sectors.

Riofrancos's story begins with the discovery of oil in the Northern Amazon in 1967 by Texaco Gulf. In 1971, then President of Ecuador Velasco Ibarra declared oil the "inalienable property of the state," eliminated the concession model, and replaced it with a contract model that stipulated taxation and royalty rates. This policy was short-lived, however. In 1980, neoliberal oil governance –defined by privatization, deregulation, and foreign investment– was introduced, and remained in place in Ecuador until 2006. Under this scheme, the profits from oil extraction were primarily realized as corporate profits and payments for foreign debt.

Claiming an end to the "long neoliberal night" in 2006, Correa's government prioritized state-led mining and drilling for oil reserves in Ecuador, enacting legislative reforms that gave way to contract models which increased state revenue from extractive projects and/or increased the share of state ownership. Correa used this new revenue to fund social programs such as a monthly cash transfer known as the *bono de desarrollo humano* (human development payment).

As Riofrancos observes, there was a decrease of poverty over this period in Ecuador, the structures of inequality remained untouched as new groups enriched themselves through links with the State. When commodity prices plummeted in 2015, cuts in social spending resulted, and mass impoverishment returned with a vengeance. Riofrancos argues that Correa's post neoliberal capitalism was problematic in part because it depended on the insertion of the region into the world economy as a supplier of primary goods, establishing a continuum between colonial history and the global division of labor that relegated Ecuador to peripheral status in an unequal exchange of raw goods for refined or manufactured imports.

Resource Radicals is based on over a hundred interviews with bureaucrats in the Correa administration, opposition politicians, corporate representatives, public intellectuals, professors, NGO personnel, and social movement activists in Indigenous, environmental, human rights, student, and labor union organizations. The author witnessed and accompanied protests, activist meetings and mining and oil conventions in Ecuador between 2011 and 2017. Through interviews, archives, and on-site documentation of historical events as they were unfolding, Riofrancos tracks the discursive construction of natural resources extraction as a site of radical politics. Her focus is on how each political-economic model left ideological legacies that shaped policy making and protest, giving way to a new post-developmental model based on *buen vivir*, the translation of the Quechua concept *Sumak Kawsai*.

Buen vivir refers to a form of public coexistence in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve a good way of living. It further implies ensuring Indigenous rights, battling environmental pollution and labor exploitation, and defending territorial autonomy and local self-determination. These forms of opposition emerged as means to resist Correa's nationalization of oil, gas, and mineral resources. Riofrancos sets out to elucidate the paradox of how activists who resisted neoliberalism for decades ended up protesting Correa's leftist government. This led to two versions of the left: the "left-in-power" and "the-left-in-opposition," each based on contradicting positions regarding the economic model, the relationship between nature and society, and the territorial self-determination of Indigenous nations and peoples.

According to *Resource Radicals*, the origin of this oppositional left in Ecuador was in the fourth year of Correa's administration, at "The Gathering of Social Movements for Democracy and Life" in 2011. At this gathering, diverse social organizations condemned Correa's government for "representing an authoritarian and corrupt model of capitalist modernization" (page 49). Opposition to Correa's "extractivist-populist" emerged after four years of Correa's presidency, and Riofrancos notes that state actors and opponents did not recognize each other as legitimate counterparts. Each accused the other of perverting the language of radical transformation. Correa even dismissed grass-roots activists who contested oil and mining for being misinformed and "proto-imperialist" (p. 53).

In *Resource Radicals*, Riofrancos lays out the mechanisms through which government discourses and social movement positions bend and shape each other in a sort of dance. In her view, this dance crystallized in Ecuador's Constituent Assembly, which led to a new constitution being signed in 2008. Riofrancos notes that constitutions were also rewritten in Venezuela and Bolivia, as leftist presidents were emboldened to rewrite constitutions due to their perceived need to re-found the state, so as to definitively end the legacies of colonialism, exclusion and capitalism that had traditionally structured politics.

In Ecuador, the 2008 Constitution was written in dialogue with social movements representatives, and it defined the country as a plurinational state oriented toward Sumak Kawsai or *buen vivir*. Paradoxically, the new Constitution laid the groundwork to establish the state as the central economic regulator. In other words, the same document that recognizes nature as a rights-bearing subject also makes non-renewable resources and even biodiversity the exclusive, inalienable patrimony of the state.

In her examination of the political life of the 2008 Constitution, Riofrancos conducted many interviews to determine how the new Constitution established a technocratic approach to social participation. In this context, it meant informing communities about the impact, mitigation measures and environment management plan. Within this framework, communities could express their opinions, but were expected to conform to a technocratic model of

“*consulta previa*” (prior consultation) with regards to megaprojects in their territories.

Correa’s “post-neoliberal” economic policy was based on radical resource nationalism: collective ownership of oil and minerals, which is just what anti-neoliberal activists once fought for. This model was, however, met with strong opposition, since extractivism creates dependency and exacerbates corruption while destroying the environment and entire peoples and their means to sustain their lives. Beyond nationalization, in the face of globalization, contemporary popular movements in Ecuador and elsewhere are calling for radical sovereignty over resource extraction. As Amazonian communities identified resource extraction as a threat to their territorial integrity and self-determination, a counter-left emerged to propose models of resource governance based on Tom Perreault’s formulation of the political and economic coordination of socio-natural relations” on the part of state and corporate elites (p. 6).

Despite some conceptual juggling that is sometimes hard to get through, Thea Riofrancos’ *Resource Radicals* convincingly argues that anti-extractivist movements in Ecuador shifted from struggling to state ownership and regulation to fighting more localized battles against socio-environmental devastation and for territorial integrity. This nuance allows us to acknowledge that Pink Tide governments inherited and intensified a model of accumulation based on extractivism and serve as lessons in the fight for a post-extractive future.

I write from Mexico, where opposition against Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s reconfiguration of the economy inspired in resource nationalism and militarization has found little room to respond through collective expressions of resistance. Anti-extractivist struggles are local and fueled by the urgency of short-term survival of communities across the country that are also besieged by State, paramilitary, and subcontracted violence. A cohesive, organized opposition against López Obrador’s populist absolutist capitalist political economy is lacking. In *Resource Radicals*, Riofrancos asks: How do we build an opposition when the government is anti-neoliberal and claiming to act on behalf of marginalized populations? Her question is very relevant to the contemporary Mexican context.

In the face of the lack of global political will to stop global warming –as evidenced by the recent COP-26 meeting in Glasgow– the unprecedented participation of Indigenous peoples to protect the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador showed once again that frontline communities can be teachers and leaders in fighting against climate change and for the possibility of a human future on earth through an anti-extractivist, counter-left that binds urban and rural populations across territories against “post neoliberal” absolutist capitalist states.

About the review author

Irmgard Emmelhainz is a professor, writer, researcher, and translator based in Anahuac Valley (Mexico City). Her most recent publications are *Toxic Loves, Impossible Futures: Feminist Lives as Resistance* (Vanderbilt 2021) and *The Tyranny of Common Sense: Mexico's Postneoliberal Conversion* (SUNY 2021).

Review of Pankaj Mishra's *Temptations of the West*

Review author: Isaac K. Oommen

Pankaj Mishra, 2007, *Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond*. London: Picador. (365 pp., paperback, \$25).

Pankaj Mishra's collection of essays, *Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond* is by no means easy to categorise. Kicking off with a prologue called, "Benares: Learning How to Read," one might at first imagine that the book is a memoir. It sort of is, but is far more than just that.

The prologue helps set readers up to think about how they digest political essays, through an analysis of Mishra's own bookworm academic beginnings within the context of poverty and politics in India. As much as Mishra the college student was a library-loving chap, he also had close interactions with a fellow student that went on to become a hitman.

These close encounters with the chaos and mayhem that are Indian life/politics are a needed setup to what come in later chapters: A deep look at political upheaval in north India (Mishra specifically notes that his work deals with the north) as well as the titular "beyond" – Kashmir, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Tibet. The prologue becomes doubly important as the book carries on, since one does wrestle with how to read these essays.

More than a memoir and definitely more than on-the-ground reportage, *Temptations of the West* is an analysis of these geographically and politically connected regions in light of their influences from the west.

These influences can be best seen in Mishra's analysis of India, on which the book is focussed. He writes how middle classes in Indian cities live in "Subdued fear and foreboding," which, "created during colonial time, had inherited the British instinct for law and order" (p. 65). It is this fear that leads so many middle-class Indians to send their children abroad to study at university and is realised in contemporary India where order can turn into chaos overnight, the pogroms against Muslims in multiple cities being examples.

This fear is not present in India alone: Mishra uses the examples of a westernised elite in Afghanistan styling a much-accosted "Paris of the west" look for Kabul before Taliban takeover (p. 362), as well as a western-educated, radicalised Nepali prince massacring his own family (p. 389).

It is against this backdrop that Mishra analyses populist movements across South Asia, from Hindu nationalists to Afghan Taliban to Nepali Maoists. Like the middle and ruling classes that they came to combat (and sometimes collaborate with), these movements are strongly influenced by the west.

Mishra calls attention to analysis that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as well as the many other wings of the Sangh Parivar (the umbrella term for the organisations that make up the Hindu fascist right in India) of which it is part, started gaining support first among diaspora Indians in the USA and UK before it took real hold in India. He also notes how the Taliban along with Pakistanis trained to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviets received, at least initially, generous support from the US.

The author points out that similar “western temptations” plagued Indian prime ministers including Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, both of whom somewhat re-discovered and wanted to re-form India after their education in Britain. It is thus that Mishra draws a convincing parallel between these moderate (Nehru) as well as extreme (Gandhi) heads of state.

The modern India that emerges from these western temptations is one of both chaos and a strange order. Hindu nationalists create massive chaos across the country by targeting Muslims and other minorities. At the same time, Mishra notes how said Hindu nationalists are a force for order among all the messes of modernizing India, bringing together lower and middle castes that felt disenfranchised by the Congress party. “The superior organization of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) [the volunteer organisation that works alongside the BJP]... is its strength in a chaotic country like India” (139) he notes, especially in how it permeates throughout institutions from political parties to labour unions to religious sects.

The RSS meets modernity in the BJP’s love for the free market (p. 140), and in newer methods of war against Muslims and other minorities. One of the most poignant and horrific recounts of this modernized extermination process is that of Gujarat in 2002 in which “Benetton-clad young Hindus carted off the loot of digital cameras and DVD players in their new Japanese cars” (p. 151).

Though many analysts look at India specifically in terms of Hindu supremacy and right-wing nationalism, it is Mishra’s holistic analysis of “India and Beyond,” that brings together the crisis of westernised modernity throughout northern south Asia. *Temptations of the West* does look at the cyclical creation of Islamic extremism in India and Kashmir, when the author interviews a Muslim activist from Nagpur, Professor Saghir Ahmad Ansari, who says that after a Hindu mob attacks and rapes “You can’t hope that the victims won’t dream of revenge...I fear...that the idea of jihad and terrorist violence would find new takers among the 130 million Muslims in India” (p. 144).

A similar outcome is noted by Mishra in Kashmir where, after Indian military killings, torture, and rapes; people who otherwise would not have become radicalised into militancy (p. 264). Maoist insurgency in Nepal similarly comes about because of the ruling family’s actions (via the military) against Nepalese lower classes (a militancy that then comes across the border to the northeast states of India).

One final and important sign of western influence is in the creation of bogeymen, both real and imagined, in all these countries and areas. Much like

America mythologized the idea of Islamic terrorist attacks, northern South Asia also mythologizes its enemies – from Hindu nationalists talking about Muslim population explosion conspiracies in India, to the Indian government talking about Muslims being radicalised in Kashmir, to the Nepalese government labeling villagers as Maoists. There may be a sliver of reality to some of these notions; however, they are bloated out of proportion by national imaginaries and propaganda machines. For instance, the myth of Muslim moguls ravishing Hindu South Asia, is a myth that Mishra notes contrasts with how said moguls governed India – mostly in harmony with the Hindu populace.

Mishra ends the book with a slim chapter on Tibet, which like Kashmir, is a region that is occupied by one of the largest powers in Asia. His chapter on Tibet stands in stark contrast to the others in the sense that the Tibetan leadership in exile are native to the region, and because Tibetan resistance is far different than the others he covers in this volume. In Tibet, Mishra writes of a mostly non-violent resistance movement against Chinese occupation, in stark contrast to armed insurgencies elsewhere. This is also an insurgency that is not foreign influenced, unlike the Islamic jihads and Maoist rebellion. Mishra also highlights that there is a variety of resistance in Tibet, including armed militant struggle, exemplified by a young nun who took to the gun and attacked Communist headquarters (p. 432).

Unlike the other places and countries he covers in *Temptations of the West*, Tibet seems to be the only one Mishra sees as having the potential to come to some sort of resolution in terms of its government, elites, and underclasses. Even this idea he balances with the grim reality of the Chinese government's call to bring more Han Chinese to take over the area and turn Tibet into a soulless tourist trap. However, he does note changes on both the side of the Dalai Lama as well as the Chinese government in terms of the status of Tibet may come one day soon. In this a major factor may be that Tibetans, whether those who follow principled non-violence or radical insurgency, both have eluded the temptations of the west.

Though published in 2007, Mishra's book is well worth reading in our COVID riddled reality. Amidst the recent victory of the farmers' protests in India against the Hindu-fascist central government's farming deregulation reforms, Pakistan's financial crisis that is reaching the levels of Lebanon, and US withdrawal from Afghanistan after a 20-year occupation (with the ensuing chaos of Taliban re-takeover), readers can see the results of the economic and cultural modernisation schemes outlined in the book.

About the review author

Isaac K. Oommen works in post-secondary education and is based between Allapuzha (Kerala) and Vancouver. He is also a freelance journalist. Although he travels a lot for work, he despises airplane travel, as much as he enjoys visiting West Africa and the Middle East. He can be found at @3ikos on Twitter.

**Review of Susana Narotzky's edited collection
*Grassroots Economies***

Review author: Maria Vasile

Susana Narotzky, 2020, *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe*. London: Pluto Press (272 pp. paperback, £24.99).

Since 2008, Southern European countries have been greatly impacted by the economic recession and structural adjustment measures. Public spending cuts and welfare state retrenchment (also called austerity) have resulted in an increasing share of the population living and working in precarious conditions, and growing social inequalities (Knight and Stewart, 2016; Sarapioni and Hespanha, 2019).

The ten pieces gathered in Susana Narotzky's edited volume *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe* explore, through ethnographic accounts and analyses, the contemporary socio-economic crisis as experienced by ordinary people in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal.

The authors, who are anthropologists working together as part of the research project "Grassroots Economics: Meaning, Project and Practice in the Pursuit of Livelihood" (GRECO), use ethnography and comparison to analyse the impacts of austerity from the point of view of local populations' everyday lives, ways of making a living, needs and struggles.

In each chapter, the reader becomes acquainted with the life experiences of different people, such as Anna and Marco, two Italian small entrepreneurs who went bankrupt and are indebted and isolated (Loperfido); Maria, a market vendor in northern Portugal, who does not manage to meet municipal regulations and develops her own response (Leidereiter); and Thomas, a Greek miner working at a power plant, whose salary and benefits are cut as the energy company is being restructured (Vetta).

While each of these stories are contextualised and to be read within their specific historical, political, and economic contexts, their broader significance emerges through the authors' original analyses and the common framework through which they are approached and organised.

Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe begins with an introduction that addresses its theoretical concerns and overarching themes (Narotzky) and is further divided into three sections: "Making a living," "Social Reproduction," and "Experiencing and Embodying Austerity."

The reader learns not only about current transformations (in the ways in which people are impacted by, navigate and resist austerity), but most importantly how reading through daily practices is key to gain a deeper understanding of

what large economic phenomena translate into, for different people, in specific contexts.

A red thread throughout the volume is the “widespread acceptance of austerity” and the “continuous dispossession of the means of livelihood” (p. 13) that people experience while developing strategies for making a living. Central to these processes are what Narotzky calls “valuation struggles”:

Valuation is the process that creates social systems of categorisation that describe and evaluate social life... Valuation struggles are not only fought around “evaluation” (the process of ranking) but also over the framing system itself (what is defined as relevant). Most of the cases that we present in this book are struggles around the categories for valuing human worth (p.16).

The analyses presented in *Grassroots Economies* resonate with the issue of valuation, from various perspectives. Welfare, its transformation, and related changes in the definition and evaluation of people’s welfare entitlements, are discussed in chapters by Pusceddu, Homs and Matos. These authors discuss workfare schemes, the social economy’s welfare responsibilities (and subjection to the logics of capitalism) and the popular reconfiguration of social rights into needs, respectively.

Another set of authors illustrate how, as part of such transformations, people increasingly must rely on family support, finance, and assets (Palomera). Such dependency on family resources and care work entails tensions and anxiety. People face difficulties accepting their condition, which contrasts with hegemonic imaginaries of individual autonomy and success (Narotzky and Pusceddu).

Hegemonic imaginaries, approached in the book in terms of the neoliberal morality (see also Muehlebach, 2012) intermesh with and recast local understandings of labor, the economy, and the crisis (Vetta; Sarkis and Amarianakis). These ideals often also clash with how people decide to resist and to “refuse to silently accept the blame for austerity, to be pushed into low-wage labor or to buy into the narrative of austerity as exception” (Leidereiter, p. 89).

Such tensions and contradictions between neoliberal moral values and actual everyday life under austerity also have dramatic effects on people’s identity and sense of self and translate into embodied forms of oppression and resistance (Loperfido; Sarkis and Matos).

Overall, *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe* provides important and fresh insights into neoliberalism and austerity as an encounter between restructuring processes at different scales and everyday life experiences in Southern Europe (and beyond).

Importantly, all authors developed rich pieces, pointing to the complexity, paradoxes, and ambiguities of “living with austerity,” sometimes resulting in forms of dispossession and resistance at once. Their focus on the working class

and women particularly allows one to grasp these tensions, while the overall effects of neoliberal policies, like poverty, precarity, downward mobility, institutional void, depoliticization of rights, domestication of alternative political and economic practices, oppression, also remain central to the discussion.

Grassroots Economies raises questions about the future of welfare, employment and livelihoods, social fragmentation, people's sense of self and, more generally, citizenship. Though this last concept is not particularly at the forefront nor explicitly theorised, all contributions highlight aspects of contemporary redefinitions of citizenship rights, related moralities and people's ways of understanding and reacting to their (new) conditions.

All these queries and research directions could not be more important today, as the COVID-19 crisis increases livelihood instability and vulnerability. While a variety of grassroots solidarity and mutual aid initiatives have emerged (see for example Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, 2020), it remains an open question whether people's mobilisation and institutional responses will challenge the reproduction of social inequalities and processes of dispossession examined in this book.

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Review of three recent books on Venezuelan social movements

Review Author: Jeremiah Gaster

Dario Azzellini, 2017, *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*. Leiden, NL: Brill (303 pp., paperback, \$28).

Geo Maher, 2016, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso (138 pp., paperback, \$15).

Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert, 2020, *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle: Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press (376 pp., paperback, \$22).

“Outside Venezuela, almost nothing is known about the process through which local self-government structures with direct, non-representative democracy have been created by means of communal councils and communes.” *Communes and Workers' Control* (p. 2)

There is much that is not known or understood about what is happening in Venezuela. Add to the mix, a mainstream media in the global north quite often inaccurate in its reports on Venezuela, and we will tend to have an incomplete picture. It is true that politics have been continuous and quite contentious in Venezuela for decades, and that many have fled Venezuela's shores, but this does not mean that what has been occurring is without any support from Venezuelans.

In *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle: Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution*, Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert, two political science professors employed in Venezuela, put it bluntly: “Despite the diversity of their prescriptions, all mainstream positions on Venezuela systematically deny that the masses are capable of purposeful world-changing activity” (p. 14).

Since February 27, 1989, the Venezuelan people have completely and thus far irrevocably changed the Venezuelan political landscape. After years of research, I believe that Venezuela has one of the most organized, largest, and most experienced social movements in the world. Yet most outside of Venezuela do not know about this wealth of experience and have little sense of the strength of these movements.

Each of the three books reviewed here, are important in their own way, and together these four different professors of political science, describe in some

detail, the experiences of resistance, of creation, and of solidarity within Venezuela. According to these authors, the Venezuelan people have organized an impressive collective experiment in solidarity that has lasted for at least three decades. In different ways, these books layout how, why, and what has changed in Venezuela since 1989. Each of the authors also insists on the importance of field work in understanding Venezuela's movements in all their complexity.

These books all insist that to understand what has been happening in Venezuela it is necessary to understand the politics of the people is the core of the political community of Venezuela, and that the people are the driving force in Venezuelan politics.

By the end of the twentieth century poverty rates had risen substantially in Venezuela, with following monetary devaluation on February 18, 1983 (called Black Friday) (see, e.g., Maher p. 3-4; see also Roberts 2003, p. 59, Lopez Maya 2002), and neoliberal restructuring, poverty was spiraling out of control. But even with some increased protests at the time, nothing changed (see Lander & Lopez Maya 2005, p. 95). Because of the way the political system was constructed, the Venezuelan people were consciously excluded from participating in it.

Then came the events that would forever alter the course of Venezuelan history.

In the first few days of the second term (February 1989 – May 1993) of Carlos Andres Perez, a suite of neoliberal reforms and policies was announced by Perez (this came as a surprise to many, as he had been elected as somewhat of an anti-neoliberal, see e.g., Coronil and Skurski p. 295, 312). Shortly after, on February 27, 1989, Venezuelans woke up to around a 300 percent hike in bus fares (Coronil and Skurski, p.315). Venezuelans responded with days of rioting, leading to intense class warfare between the poor and the state, which completely altered the Venezuelan political landscape. According to official numbers, between 300 and 500 people were killed by state (and paramilitary) forces in the following week (see: Coronil and Skurski 1991, 325-326). Unofficially between 1,000 and 5,000 people were killed, and the attempted reforms were never implemented (Maher, p. 5; Coronil and Skurski 1991 p. 325).

The *Caracazo* (as these events are known), came at a moment when Venezuelan society was already highly polarized. Azzellini calls the Caracazo "a rupture in the continuum" of Venezuelan politics.

Pascual Marquina and Gilbert (2020) questioned one of their interviewees, Edgar Perez, a popular organizer from La Vega - a poor Caracas neighbourhood, about the Caracazo. "During those days, people, humble people, took over the streets — we made them our own ...It was a totally spontaneous insurrection" (p. 160). Perez goes on to say "We affirmed our existence in a process of expropriation of the expropriators... It was us, the people from the *barrios*, doing justice, taking what was ours..." (p. 160) (see also: Coronil and Skurski 1991, p. 297, 315-319).

Indeed, Perez describes the Caracazo quite succinctly: “We are talking about two or three days when the people were center stage, and they corralled the political class and the rich” (Pascual Marquina & Gilbert, p. 160). I would suggest that, in fact, this “corralling” continues to this day, remaining one of the most important aspects of Venezuelan politics. Moreover, understanding the Caracazo also helps us understand the continued *Chavista* experiments in moral economy.

Pascual Marquina and Gilbert’s *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle: Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution* is made up of 35 interviews with different people by two Political Science professors. It could amply serve either as an introduction to Venezuela’s situation or form a consistently *Chavista* perspective as a complex series of primary documents on the revolution. For Pascual Marquina and Gilbert, the Caracazo was both “...an expression of our rejection of neoliberal policies, but it was also a move to access the promised land, the land of goods and merchandise...” (p. 160). Chávez’s elections only cemented the social revolution, but the moral economy of 1989, echoed in the years since throughout Venezuela’s political outburst in 1989, previous even to Chávez’s election, the masses were unruly.

As in the case studies by Maher and Azzellini, the interviews in *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle* read as erudite interventions of not just a few Venezuelans in their own lives. This is where we can see that it is necessary to listen to the millions of Venezuelans who are involved in creating their own political order. Pascual Marquina and Gilbert’s book exemplarily amplifies the voices of Venezuelans creating, constructing, and criticizing their system as it existed in 2019. This is the second such a collection, but it is the first collection compiled by Pascual Marquina and Gilbert. The interviewees in *The Present as Struggle* are from eclectic walks of life: from famous political analysts through to locally active *Chavista* activists. The interviews run the gamut showcasing the strengths and discussing weaknesses of *Chavismo*. Overall, the interviews seem to represent political conversations that could have taken place all over Venezuela, and that continue to take place today. As I saw in July 2018, these conversations like these occur on the streets, and in people’s homes, work, and in community spaces and are clearly the continuation of much collective thought and discussion.

Building the Commune is a slim but potent volume that invites us to engage with this country in which politics have been turned upside down. For his part, Maher suggests that the Caracazo was among the first “rebellions against the spread of neoliberalism” (p. 2). Maher further writes, in *Venezuela*, “...[T]he Caracazo led not only to Chávez’s election, but also to a long and continuing experiment in radical democracy that continues to this day...” (p. 7).

Chavismo is not an uncomplicated thing, and Maher takes us through some of its various tendencies. His writing style transports us to Venezuela, where we can share in a *Sancocho* (communal soup) (p. 83-84), be immersed in the poorest neighbourhoods of Caracas (p. 43-44) and take part in upper class protests (p. 53).

Building the Commune also traverses the country to the border of two Venezuelan states, to a Commune called El Maizal. Maher defines Communes as “...new institutions of local self-government” (p.7), which he then suggests can be used and made to go beyond the local. Like all communes in Venezuela, El Maizal is constructed in the interstices of the state, in its case the two states of Lara and Portuguesa (p. 84-94). My own fieldwork also partially took place in *El Maizal*, a beautiful place of communal hope, with corn fields, cow sheds and runs, many areas of recovered vegetable cultivation, and a huge pork complex, all run communally.

Maher’s book is clear on the larger themes of the purpose of mass movements, and their roles in constructing socialism. For example, “...the fundamental demand to control one’s own everyday life, a search for the kind of collective power that Marx sought when he described the commune as the ‘self-government of the producers’” (p. 22) is one key passage. Alternatively, Maher suggests this would mean that “Venezuelans would increasingly take control over their own lives. They would elect their own political delegates and police forces; they would decide what to produce and for who. Everyday people would be constantly involved in managing their local communities, and institutions would no longer stand above and apart from the people” (p. 24).

To be clear, all four authors practice similar methodological tools in interviewing and parsing the everyday lives of their subjects, the four authors are also logically consistent with each other’s arguments, and all four political scientists would seem to hold similarly cogent positions.

In the longer volume *Communes and Workers’ Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*, Dario Azzellini launches into a discussion of different case studies from Venezuela. Like Maher, Azzellini describes the multiple tendencies and currents which came together within Chavismo in defense of the revolution’s polarized participatory *protagonismo*. Protagonismo is a term that Venezuelans use to signify that the poor do not just participate in the system, rather they are the engine that drives how the system is structured.

That what has been occurring in Venezuela is polarizing, cannot be disputed. What Chavistas dispute is whether polarization is the fault of Chavismo or the fault of the capitalism that has bled Venezuela during the twentieth and thus far throughout the twenty-first century. Chavistas yet describe what has been occurring in Venezuela as participatory protagonismo. Participation has been a claim that allows Venezuelans to specify the involvement of the poor in a system that had long excluded them.

Communes and Workers’ Control in Venezuela goes on to examine institutional structures that people utilize at their workplaces to induce worker control, including cooperatives, attempts at co-management, and companies that are communally managed whose purpose is not profit but sustenance (p. 169-177) and similar communal projects and thus Azzellini reveals much work has been done in Venezuela around the topic of social property (p.159-172). Other attempts at worker control documented by Azzellini include worker’s councils,

recuperated companies, and even (state led) efforts of nationalization (p.178-242).

Azzellini highlights discussions about how to define concepts like the masses/people (p. 23-33), processes of constituent power (p. 33-51), and the difference between social movements and popular movements. Like Maher, Azzellini examines the two key institutional structures that Venezuelans had begun to utilize to great effect: community councils and communes.

If the political occurrences in Venezuela since 1989 are accurately described as a revolution, what does this experience tell us about what revolutions are?

Trotsky's adage that "revolutions are the direct interference of the masses in historic events" (Trotsky 2008 [1932/1961], p. xv) would indicate the necessity of a high level of mass participation in a revolution. I would argue that in Venezuela, this adage has been shaped into common sense. For further example of this concept of protagonismo: The return of the social revolutionary wave in Venezuela during the weekend of April 11, 2002, which led to the unprecedented, the return of a President from a civil and military led coup d'état, only being one of the many examples.

In the 1999 constitution, there was a broadening "conception of participation that, besides redefining political participation, encompasses social, economic, and cultural rights, with collective rights for specific groups" (Azzellini, p. 5). This form of participation is fully claimed by the Venezuelan masses, and wherein, in the view of the four authors, the Venezuelan masses have made this participation their foundation for a new Venezuela. Even with strong polarization throughout the country, as this review goes to print, I believe there is still strong unification behind the project of Chavismo.

One might argue that participation is not a sufficient threshold for a revolution, and Venezuela's experiences are also cases in point. All four authors illustrate that the concept of protagonismo, as defined by *Chavistas* is the direct action, control, and initiative of the broadly defined poor in Venezuela, and this concept has been Venezuela's strength, is central to the Bolivarian revolution, and is also a self-defined term expressed by Venezuelans to explain their situation.

Building the Commune contains a good description of the Communal Councils (CCs, also called Community Councils). "The building blocks for this new socialist democracy were the communal councils, established in a 2006 law" (Maher, p. 15). So, what are these institutions? According to Maher the CCs are "directly democratic and participatory institutions for local governance" (p. 15). Azzellini writes "The April 2006 law specified that CCs were to be autonomous bodies of popular power" (p. 96). He then quotes from the law itself:

The communal councils in the constitutional framework of participatory and protagonistic democracy, are bodies of participation, articulation and integration between the various community organizations, social groups, and citizens, which permit the organized pueblo to exercise directly the detailed

work of public policies and projects oriented to respond to the necessities and aspirations of the communities in the building of a society of equality and social justice (Azzellini, p. 96).

The point is that through organization, and protagonismo, the people can be responsive to and resolve their own problems.

Maher notes these structures became very popular:

These councils ...quickly numbered in the thousands as neighbours began to come together weekly to debate and discuss how to govern themselves. Whether in a dingy room adorned with little more than a poster or mural of Chávez or outside around a collective stew pot, the debates ranged from banal to engaging, from the local to the national and everything in between (p. 15).

Azzellini's numbers indicate that around June 2015 there were 44, 794 CCs (p. 94). We can see the importance of these structures, given that they are supposed to be working institutions (enabling communities to do projects based on need). They are thus predicated on empowering communities to make their own decisions. In addition, this decision-making process is based on the general assembly of the community.

Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela notes "The CCs skip over all the intermediate levels between central government and communities" (p. 97). As such, both "the mechanisms for their constitution, as well as the procedures for the formulation of projects and obtaining of resources, have been simple and fluid, with few bureaucratic mediations," (Azzellini, p. 97).

In this regard, Azzellini reveals that what has begun is a process wherein "Many communities began to discuss their problems and needs, formulate their own solutions, and administer their projects. This strengthened the social networks and the culture of participation in the communities" (p. 97).

As working bodies, the CC's must constantly study the conditions of the community, at every step along the way. Such social investigation is a key part of the process of formation and activity of CCs which have a specific role as problem-solvers for communities.

But it is not enough for the local to be organized into community councils: there needs to be an institutional structure that helps structure the cc's beyond being local. Anacaona Marín, a member of the Chavista *Alexis Vive Patriotic Force*. This organization can be found in the *Barrio 23 de Enero* in Caracas, and Marín in an interview with Pascual Marquina and Gilbert, says: "The commune is the historical subject; the commune and its people, the *comuneros*, that is where the revolution really begins" (p. 32).

It is quite true that the Venezuelan state still needs to change quite drastically for the communities to fully gain control over their own lives. I too heard the

same in my interviews with people involved in mass organizations during July 2018. I too found many people tell me that as M. Lía Grajales', a member of "*Surgentes Collective*" part of the larger *Chavista* movement, argues in an interview with Pascual Marquina and Gilbert.

The state is a disputed territory and [entering it] is necessary if we want to promote popular interests, but state power is not in any way the goal. In any effort to build popular power, there must be synergy between the bottom and the top" (p. 56).

All three books take us through the need to break the capitalist state and discuss the need for something to replace this capitalist state.

All three books discuss building the communal state, this includes the four authors and many of the different interviewees throughout the three books do as well. They affirm the need to work towards ending this capitalist state. Maher, Azzellini and many of the interviewees also talk about the need to break capitalist relations, and thus the need to change the "system of production" from private property to one "rooted in social property" (Maher, p. 21), and thus have created a form of moral economy in Venezuela.

Each of the books point towards worrying trends in Venezuela. For example, interviews in Pascual Marquina and Gilbert, demarcated the hopes of the new Constituent Assembly (2017-2020) which could have deepened the revolution by altering the already revolutionary 1999 constitution and making it more radical. However, the assembly ended without engendering a new constitution.

The books also tell us about splits within *Chavismo*. One of the key splits within the larger movements is between the officials who would claim to be revolutionary and who are not and *Chavismo* of the base and masses, who constantly struggle to deepen the revolution against the officials. This has been a long struggle, with no clear winners as yet.

Also discussed in all three volumes is the fact that President Maduro is a contradictory figure, both on the side of the revolution, but also potentially aligned with counterrevolution. The authors, and the interviewees in each book, insist that Maduro's role is not as clear as Chávez's, that Maduro himself is less well understood, that some of his policies and decisions have been backwards, and that he is too lenient on the opposition. The revolutionary *Chavistas* quoted in these books and in interviews I conducted in July 2018, insisted that they support him, for now.

Notwithstanding internal issues for Venezuela, all the authors reviewed here identify the main problems facing Venezuela with external problems, the various blockades, sanctions, and the vicissitudes of global capitalist markets. It is not just that the price of oil has dropped: there is an economic war against Venezuelans.

The economic situation has gotten harder and worse since Chávez's untimely death in 2013, but since Chávez's election in 1998, these problems have long been evident. Imperialism has been gunning to help the Venezuelan elite re-take political power in Venezuela, ever since Chávez's election, and the elite have been trying themselves to re-gain power since 1989.

In my view, much of the deterioration of the standard of living for Venezuelans is due to the economic war against it, enacted since 1998. All three books identify the problems of state mismanagement in the Venezuelan case, but they reveal that as Venezuela remains as a capitalist state, even if the revolution has captured the state in quite a unique way, the nature of the Venezuelan revolution is a bigger problem for Venezuelans than state mismanagement.

In many ways, for the revolution there is not much the state can do against either capital flight, or open imperial blockade. Both of which have also contributed to the general unease created by billions of cash flows both leaving Venezuela, being taken away from the lawful government, and - some of which is then returned to Venezuelan soil through attempted coup d'état adventures - but what is lost is invaluable. Venezuelans are caught in these imperialist traps, but they are struggling to get out of these traps. Many have left Venezuela, but there are also those who have stayed and many who still believe in the project of Chavismo.

Between the structures of the CCs and the commune, Venezuelans have found tools such as differing and yet very similar experiences of a different moral economy to help each other out of the traps of imperialism and capitalism.

As an expert on the Bolivarian revolution and Venezuela's present political conjuncture (master's research project, main case study of my dissertation both in political science), I enjoyed and learned from all three books, which could also provide excellent introductions to the topic for a beginner. Mainly because, the three books get to the roots of the problems and success in Venezuela. Indeed, these three books all pack a punch, whether read individually or read together.

All three of these books were written between 2016 and 2020 and show readers the various dynamics at play: The rising arc of the Venezuelan masses, 1989-present, the dynamic reasons for their continued control of Venezuela, including their organization in community councils, and other forms of social movements, including communes. These three books illustrate the struggles of the Venezuelan people against capitalism, in their attempts at constructing moral economies, we can find the analysis and possibility to fulfil the need for humanity to move beyond capitalism. Conclusively, the authors show that the solution for Venezuelans is the need to end the misery that imperialism and capitalism impose on our lives, and the experiences within Venezuela show that this potential can only be achieved through building a collective moral economy.

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