

## Border Thinking and Vulnerability as a Knowing Otherwise

Written by Rosalba Icaza

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ROSALBA ICAZA, JUN 9 2017

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For more than two decades, the vast production of post-structuralist/post-positivist feminist critique and postcolonial feminist thinking within the field of International Relations (IR) and, more recently, Global Politics (GP) have prompted critical investigations on their modern and colonial foundations (for examples, see, Sylvester 1993; Pappart and Marchand 1995; Gruffyd Jones 2006; Shilliam 2010). In doing so, different epistemological positions have been deployed in attempts to destabilize narratives that (re)produce dominant ideas about 'the international' and 'global politics.' Today, these contributions constitute a fruitful background to the current wave of academic interest focused on critically understanding the epistemic foundations of IR and GP as disciplines responsible for thinking about how power operates in international and global spheres.<sup>[1]</sup>

Decolonial thinking has recently played a key role in this critical endeavour (Icaza 2010; 2015; Taylor 2012; Icaza and Vazquez 2013). Belonging to a different geo-genealogy<sup>[2]</sup> than that of post-colonial studies, decolonial thinking takes as its point of departure the acknowledgement that there is 'no modernity without coloniality' (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2003; 2013; Walsh 2007; 2010; 2011; 2012; Lugonés 2010a; 2010b; Vazquez 2009; 2011; 2014). For the purposes of this text, the relevance of this affirmation is that coloniality as the underside of modernity constitutes an epistemic location from which reality is thought. This locus of enunciation, following Mignolo, means that hegemonic histories of modernity as a product of the Renaissance or the Industrial Revolution are not accepted but challenged in order to undo the Eurocentric power projection inherent to them. Precisely, in seeking to avoid becoming just another hegemonic project, decolonial thinking is also understood as an *option* — in contrast to a paradigm or grand theory — among a plurality of options.<sup>[3]</sup>

Furthermore, from the perspective of this option, 'Western modernity' constitutes a dominant civilizational project that claimed universality for itself at the moment of its violent encounter with 'the Other' and the subsequent concealment of this violence. This seminal encounter traces its origins back to 1492 when *Abya Yala* (the Americas) was conquered through the genocide of Indigenous peoples, their knowledges, and ways of being in the world (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2003).

Early writings on modernity/coloniality understood it as a co-constitutive binomial and a structure of management that operates by controlling the economy, authority (government and politics), knowledge and subjectivities, gender, and sexuality (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2013). From this perspective the 'coloniality of power' highlights 'the basic and universal social classification of the population of the planet in terms of the idea of "race" is introduced for the first time' with the Conquest of the Americas (Lugonés 2010a: 371). This analysis 'has displayed the heterogeneous and transversal character of the modern/colonial system' (Vazquez 2014: 176) counterpoising racial domination to Eurocentric Marxist theories of class exploitation.

More recently, it has been argued that modernity/coloniality is the binomial around which decolonial thinking gravitates, which has as a departure point the acknowledgment of the limits and exteriority of modernity (Vazquez

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2014). This is in contrast with thinking centred in the Western philosophical tradition, in which modernity in its different facets (i.e., unfinished modernity, plural and hybrid modernities, postmodernities, globalization, capitalisms, and so on) is assumed to be the totality of reality. 'For decolonial thinking modernity (with its modernities) cannot claim to cover all the historical reality. There is an outside, something beyond modernity, because there are ways of relating to the world, ways of feeling, acting and thinking, ways of living and inhabiting the world that come from other geo-genealogies, non-Western and non-modern' (Vazquez 2014: 173, my translation). From this perspective, awareness of modernity's underside (coloniality) provides a decolonial understanding of one's own perspective which allows for thinking and sensing situated in the exteriority of 'modernity' (ibid.; Dussel 2001). Furthermore, the binomial of modernity/coloniality as an epistemic position seems to question categorical separation in two main ways: specific categories (e.g., men-women, civilized-primitive) and also separation as a heuristic operation to represent, and hence appropriate, reality. For some thinkers, this later operation constitutes a key characteristic of Euro-centrism (Lugonés 1990; Vazquez 2014). But what seems more relevant for my purposes is that modernity/coloniality expresses a *duality*, which is not to be conflated with a binary<sup>[4]</sup> or a dialectic.<sup>[5]</sup> In short, modernity cannot be thought, sensed, and experienced without its underside: coloniality. From this perspective, the analysis of global development (either sustainable or 'green') cannot be done without unpacking its ethno-centrism. In the same way, the analysis of international human rights cannot be done without the analysis of the epistemic violence of monoculturalist and imperialist understandings of justice (Icaza 2010; Walsh 2011). Therefore, to think 'global politics' or 'international relations' from this perspective carries an inseparable duality.

This duality has recently been explained as two different historical movements or forms of relationship with reality to highlight their different loci of enunciation. For example, the historical movement of modernity from which hegemony and privilege has named reality, for example, refers to *Abya Yala* using the foreign name of Latin America. It also gives its peoples the name of 'Indians,' more recently also labelling them as 'indigenous' or 'minorities.' Meanwhile, the historical movement of coloniality is a moment in which the negation of realities and worlds that otherwise exceed the dominant modern geo-genealogy of modernity takes place when, for instance, normative systems outside or in the margins of the nation-state are denied validity (Vazquez 2014; Icaza 2015).

To understand this duality in relation to time is central for the identification of a third movement: the decolonial option. In this third movement, trajectories in knowledges and cosmovisions that have been actively produced<sup>[6]</sup> as backward or 'sub-altern' by hegemonic forms of understanding 'the international' and 'global politics' become politically visible (Santos et. al. 2007). This has been explored in relation to *sumak kawsay* ('the good living') and global trade politics in South America (Walsh 2011). I have also explored this in relation to customary law, the monocultural perception of 'human' rights, and global social dissent (Icaza 2015).

Decolonial thinking precisely introduces *border thinking* as an epistemological position that contributes to a shift in the forms of knowing in which the world is thought from the concrete incarnated experiences of colonial difference and the wounds left (Icaza and Vazquez 2016).<sup>[7]</sup> Moreover, through border thinking, the violence of the dominant epistemology grounded on abstract universality as 'a zero point' of observation and of knowledge is seen as disdainful by all other perspectives and forms of knowing (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Mignolo 2010). As such, border thinking is seen as a 'fracture of the epistemology of the zero point' and as a possibility for a critical re-thinking of the geo and body politics of knowledge, of the modern/colonial foundations of political economy analysis, and of gender (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Grofoguel 2007; Lugonés 2010a; 2010b). However, Argentinean feminist philosopher Maria Lugonés' interpretation of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* allows us to fully consider the epistemic contribution of border thinking as an *embodied consciousness* in which dualities and vulnerability are central for a decolonization of how we think about the geo and body politics of knowledge, political economy and, of course, gender in IR and GP (see Lugonés 1992). This will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

In what follows, I am particularly interested in addressing the invitation of the editors of this volume to consider the centrality of border thinking as one that sits in an embodied consciousness to 'show how the corporeal, fleshly, material existence of bodies is deeply embedded in political relations' including coloniality (Harcourt, Icaza and Vargas 2016). Likewise, I am also interested in understanding what happens when, in the process of that critical rethinking, 'the self-ascribed privileges of the West *knowing subject* are laid bare'. In so doing, I introduce auto-ethnographic reflection in a *dialogical* format as developed by Mexican anthropologist Xochitl Leyva (2013) as a kind

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of praxis of research of *co-labor* (collaborative research). From this perspective, the written text is a dialogue with the spoken and written word, with visuality, with past and present experiences and, with an imagined horizon of autonomy (Leyva 2013; Barbosa et. al. 2015; Icaza 2015).

This 'method' provides a way of imagining the world's 'self-ascribed' *epistemic* privileges of interpretation and representation as well as the state of vulnerability that implies un-learning them and refusing to accept them as the only possibilities to think/sense global and international politics. I am driven by the following questions: Is this un-learning a possibility of knowing *otherwise*? *For whom and for what purposes*?

These ideas are developed with the help of Lugonés' powerful interpretative analysis of Anzaldua's *Borderlands*. As such, this text has the following sections. The first introduces central elements in Lugonés' interpretative analysis of Anzaldua's *Borderlands*: border subjectivity, duality, and vulnerability. The following section presents three vignettes of different extensions and formats introducing places in the cartography of contemporary violence in Mexico: Las Patronas Veracruz, Ixtepec Oaxaca, and Ayotzinapa Guerrero. The vignettes are presented as dialogical auto-ethnographic reflections in which the global politics of migration and drug-cartel related violence are thought/sensed not from a zero-point of observation but from the embodied experience of the vulnerability that carries the un-learning and/or refusal to reproduce epistemic privileges of a 'subject' interpreting and representing reality. The final section offers some initial reflections about the questions considered throughout this chapter.

## Borderlands and Vulnerability in International Relations

Elsewhere, I have argued that Lugonés' work constitutes a powerful perspective for a critical re-thinking of the global politics of resistance to neoliberalism (Icaza 2010). In particular, Lugonés' feminist decolonial thinking contributes to a critical re-thinking of IR and GP by highlighting the dominant modern/colonial epistemology that informs these disciplines as disembodied, masculinist, and placeless when producing analysis about global or transnational resistance (Icaza 2015; 2016).

To avoid such dominant forms of knowing, feminist IR thinker Christine Sylvester already insisted in 1993 that 'We [who study IR] develop ourselves, our research skills, our capacities to see with less arrogance, by negotiating knowledge at and across experiences, theories, locations and words of insight and relationships' (Sylvester 1993: 271). Inspired by Anzaldua's *Borderlands*. *The New Mestiza* and Lugonés' border dwelling approach to knowledge, Sylvester (1993: 270) tells us about 'the need to see and theorize the domestic shadow lands around us.' But, what Sylvester does not tell 'us' is what might happen to the way 'we' think in IR and GP if *border thinking* is to be understood as an embodied consciousness and not just a discursive strategy to destabilize dominant narratives over 'the international.'

Ann Fausto-Sterling's work on the construction of the body offers some elements that help to address this question by telling us that 'as we grow and develop, we literally not just "discursively" (that is, through language and cultural practices) construct our bodies, incorporating experience into our very flesh. To understand this, we must erode the distinctions between the physical and the social body' (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 20).

However, it is Lugonés' decolonial feminism grounded in African-American, Chicana, and women of colour feminisms whose *border thinking* as an *embodied consciousness* of dualities and vulnerability brings to the fore the racialized body as an historical one produced in the colonial encounter, as the one that did not reach the standards of 'humanity' in order to be enslaved, raped, and exploited. In short, Lugonés' thinking from an embodied experience of enslavement and racialization invites us 'to think from the ground up, from the body, therefore averts the generalizations that are common to abstract modern/colonial thought' including dominant epistemologies in IR and GP (Icaza and Vazquez 2016: 69). Moreover, this embodied thinking can also help us to understand 'the limits of feminist anti-essentialist discourses that praise the performativity of identity as holding the only possibilities for desestabilization and resistance' (ibid.: 63). This is developed in what follows.

*The self-in-between, border subjectivities, and embodied dualities*

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For Lugonés, Anzaldua's *Borderlands* 'captures both an everyday history of oppression and an everyday history of resistance ... Her culture, though oppressive, also grounds her resistance' (Lugonés 1992: 32). This expresses, for Lugonés, two states of the self being oppressed and resisting — hence, the self as multiple. This is an important realisation that has informed my own work of re-thinking the one-dimensional view of the actors in social resistance that are prevalent in accounts of civil society and social movements against global capitalism in IR and International Political Economy (Icaza 2010).

Following Anzaldua's notion of mestizo consciousness, Lugonés tells us that 'there is the self oppressed in and by the traditional Mexican world; the self oppressed in and by the Anglo world; and the self-in-between — the Self — herself in resistance to oppression, the *self in germination* in the borderlands. If the self is being oppressed, then she can feel its limits, its capacity for response, pushed in, constrained, denied. But she can also push back' (Lugonés 1992: 32, my emphasis).

Lugonés' analysis also tells us about *Coatlatlopeuh*, an early Mesoamerican creator goddess that embodies both a dark aspect (Coatlicue) and a lighter side (Tonantsi). Through this, Lugonés not only brings to the forefront the duality of thinking about the social (or in our case the international and the global), but an *embodied duality* that invites us to transcend the abstraction that is so akin to dominant masculinist thinking.

In speaking of how *Coatlatlopeuh*, in Anzaldua's *Borderlands*, becomes the chaste and desexed character of the Virgin of Guadalupe by the Spanish colonizers and the Catholic Church, Lugonés focuses on an important aspect of Anzaldua's ideas of borders and borders subjectivities: Chicanos/Mexicanos as people who cross cultures are tolerant to ambiguity *out of necessity*. Lugonés characterizes these subjectivities as 'a tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity, by the transgression of rigid conceptual boundaries, and by the creative breaking of the new unitary aspects of new and old paradigms' (ibid.: 34).

Border subjectivities rooted in a tolerance for ambiguity *out of the necessity* remind us of an important element of what a border epistemology — as a way of thinking — for IR and GP could entail: border thinking as a physical sensual experience of a self-in-between that is a plural self (ibid.: 35). This means an emphasis on a knowing that sits in bodies and territories and its local histories in contrast to disembodied, abstract, universalist knowledge that generates global designs (Mignolo 2009; 2010). Recognizing that knowledge is situated implies "[seeing] the world from specific locations, embodied and particular, and never innocent" (Rose 1997: 308).

### *On Vulnerability, (Epistemic) Privileges, and Coalitions*

Lugonés tells us that this self-in-between as a plural self 'is captive of more than one collectivity, and her dilemma is which collectivity to listen to' (Lugonés 1992: 35). In this listening, Lugonés identifies a deep sense of vulnerability: 'she effects a rupture with all oppressive traditions at the same time that she makes herself *vulnerable* to foreign ways of thinking, *relinquishing safety*' (ibid.: 35, emphasis added). A border thinking as a form of knowing otherwise is then an embodied sensual experience of vulnerability in which the safety of how one thinks/knows something is relinquished. This concerns our abstract universals, our detached and disembodied ways of knowing the international, our assumptions of objectivity to generate 'right' science, and so on.<sup>[8]</sup>

Considering the possibility of coalitional forms of resistance, Lugonés notes Anzaldua's interest in 'describing states in the psychology of oppression and liberation' that lead her to emphasize crossing-over as '*a solitary act*, an act of solitary rebellion...[hence] she does not reveal *the sociality of resistance*' (ibid.: 36, emphasis added). The sociality of resistance is central to Lugonés' interpretation of Anzaldua's *Borderlands* in her latest work (Lugonés 2003; 2010a; 2010b) to the extent that she emphasizes it in relation to a multiple self that resists and germinates in the borderlands. On this, she writes that 'unless resistance is a social activity, the resister is doomed to failure in the creation of a new universe of meaning, a new identity' (Lugonés 1992: 36).

In this way, Lugonés offers coalitions and coalitional selves as a necessary step out of that state of isolated vulnerability in which the border dweller finds herself: 'If rebellion and creation are understood as processes rather than as acts, then each act of solitary rebellion and creation is anchored in and responsive to a collective, even if

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disorganized, process of resistance' (ibid.: 36). The survival of the Spanish language among Chicanos/Mexicanos is an example that Lugonés brings from Anzaldúa to emphasize the sociality of resistance. The over 5,000 years of struggle of original peoples in the Americas would be another example of this sociality.

This sociality of resistance is central in Lugonés as she reminds us that 'this society places border dwellers in profound isolation. The barriers to creative collectivity and collective creation appear insurmountable. But that is only if we think of the act and of the process of creation' (ibid.: 36). To the isolation of border thinking as a form of embodied consciousness in which resistance sits, Lugonés counterpoises coalitions in order to break 'down our isolation against the odds prescribed by the confines of the normal' (ibid.: 37).

### Three Vignettes in the Cartography of Contemporary Violence in Mexico

#### *Las Patronas, Veracruz, Mexico*

For almost two decades, in the town of La Patronas, Veracruz, Mexico a group of women have organized to help immigrants, mostly from Central America, passing through their town as they make their way to the United States. The story of these women that today are called '*Las Patronas*' (The Female Patrons) began in 'February 1995 when two sisters, Bernarda Romero and Rosa Romero, were standing with their groceries at a train crossing in the village, waiting for the train to pass. Migrants on the first train car began shouting, "Madre, I'm hungry"' (Sorrentino 2012). Since that day, sisters Romero have been joined by a dozen volunteer women and children from the town and elsewhere, who have cooked hundreds of daily portions of food packed in plastic bags, adding refilled water bottles to hand to the immigrants while the train is in motion.

In international media outlets and academic analyses, *Las Patronas*' actions have been framed as a form of 'motherly' solidarity and as an example of an ethics of care (Buzzzone 2012; Grant 2014). What is common in this sort of analyses is their emphasis on correctly understanding *Las Patronas* and what they represent in the geopolitics of migration and diaspora. It seems to be about how 'a knowing subject' — the academic, the activist, the media correspondent — understands *them*.

I have not stopped thinking about *Las Patronas*. I hope to never lose the steady thumping of the rushing freight train that I still feel each time my heartbeats. As I move about my days, slight motion sickness disturbs the remnants of nausea that I felt in the heat of the glaring sun. I know the nausea I felt that day was not just a physical response to the heat (Veracruz is a state with average highs in the 90s during the month of May) but an emotional torrent pushing and pulling and grasping at my gut — still stirring in the pit of my stomach (Price 2013: 13).

The words above from Cassandra Price describe her physical state in her encounter with *Las Patronas*. In her text, featured in the Global Perspective section of Loyola University's *Women and Gender Studies Journal*, Price tells us of the high risks that migrants from Central America face on their way to the United States, which range from accidents while riding *la Bestia* or *the Death Train* to human traffickers and corrupt authorities. However, her account about migrant vulnerability turns into a reflection of her own physical vulnerability when confronted with the extenuating work of delivering food to migrants hanging from the fast-moving train as done by *Las Patronas*:

I had reached my limit. I walked dizzily back to the bus to sit down out of the sun...I felt my condition worsening. I could hear the group sharing a beautiful meal, filled with laughter and true gratefulness. I couldn't eat...since the moment the train had passed I felt my entire body inside out begin to boil. I closed my eyes and began thinking about the way dehydration can make a person delirious. I imagined the heat of the metal... I thought of what it must take to drive a person to leave behind everything and everyone they know and love. I thought of how many people are forced to take such risks in hope of a better future for their families. I thought of my family, my friends and how I would likely never have to make such a journey. I breathe in and out slowly to the beat of the freight car still thumping in my head (ibid.: 15).

The words above aim to display what would happen if/when the experience of *Las Patronas* became/becomes the starting point from where a 'knowing subject' is questioned in their self-ascribed privileges. This could be, for

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example, about their objectivity and abstract universals from which Mexican women like *Las Patronas* are 'studied.' In the encounter with *Las Patronas*, Cassandra Price's words bring forward some elements to start addressing how in the (social) construction of our bodies we also incorporate 'experience into our very flesh' (Fausto Sterling 2000: 20).

### Fieldwork Diary Notes on the Going Glocal Program<sup>[9]</sup>

*August 7<sup>th</sup> 2013, visit to the Migrant Shelter "Hermanos del Camino"*

Today, we visited the migrant shelter 'Hermanos del Camino' (*Brothers of the Road*) in Ixtepec, Mexico. We had arrived the night before in Juchitan, where we spent the night. As our visit to the shelter was previously organized, the volunteer staff warmly welcomed us. The residents of the shelter, mostly young men, greeted us reluctantly and with curiosity. After five minutes of awkward silence, the main coordinator of the shelter, Catholic Priest Alejandro Solalinde Guerra, appeared to welcome us. He told us that the shelter was founded in 2007 and explained that they provide temporary humanitarian aid, which includes food, shelter, medical, psychological, and legal help, to migrants from Central America.<sup>[10]</sup> We are told the residents of the shelter stay an average of three days. A female volunteer indicated that in 2012 they received a total of 11,000 people, and by June 2013 they had supported a total of 7,100 from which 90% are men from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

Solalinde continued to explain that the place is run with the help of Mexican and international volunteers. Then, he showed us a big map on the wall of the shelter's small clinic:

Look, most of our brothers enter through Guatemala walking around 275 kilometres to the city of Arriaga in Chiapas where they get into the train. After ten to twelve hours they arrive to Ixtepec, Oaxaca. Seven-hundred kilometres later they will arrive to Lecheria in Mexico City. From there have to travel around 2,800 kilometres hanging in the train to reach Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, or Matamoros which are the main entry points to the US in the border with Mexico.

A deep silence followed Solalinde's explanation. A few seconds later, the silence was broken by a female volunteer's invitation to visit the shelter's facilities. During the visit, we found a very young single mother from Nicaragua and her two-year-old daughter. They were also on their way to the United States. The mother told me that she had to stop in the shelter because her daughter became ill. While I translated this for the students, I noted that some of them were holding hands. Is this an act of mutual physical comfort? I was wondering that when Solalinde invited us to sit down and hold a conversation with the residents of the shelter.

All the residents were called and we formed a circle. Each of them shared their name and nationality. We did the same. I volunteered to do the translation from Spanish into English. One of the students asked *why they left their families and countries*. Poverty, unemployment, violence, gangs, no future were their answers.

After one hour, the jokes broke out. One Cuban asked me to translate: 'Tell them that I might not want to go anymore to the US, I think that I will want to go to the Netherlands.' Everybody laughs until one of the students asked what they could do to *help them*. Solalinde's reply was straightforward: 'We don't need your help here, we need your help back in Europe. You need to help migrants there.' Another man replied too: 'go back home and tell your friends and family what *you have been able to see here*'. Total silence again.

Once more the silence was broken by a warm invitation to have a meal together with all the residents of the shelter who actually had cooked the food to share with us.

On our way to the small dining room, one of our young female students collapsed. She was crying, shaking, sweating. As the only female member of the teaching team, I volunteered to take her back to the rental vehicle and to stay with her. On our way to the vehicle I thought of the food and conversations I was about to miss.

Once in the car, she couldn't stop crying. Her whole body was shaking; her pale skin had become bright red. I offered her some water, which she drank. She started to talk to me about her family and friends back home in the

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Netherlands. She couldn't stop talking to me. I simply listened and thought on how important it seems for her to tell me about her loved ones and how important they are to her. She fell asleep. I thought in silence that all is okay now and that she suffered the effects of the harsh heat. One hour later, the group came back. She woke up and everybody comforted her. We continued our journey to Chiapas.

Ten days later, during our final group session in Mexico, this student shared with all of us the following: 'I don't know where to start, but I always knew there were many harsh questions to ask to myself, and it is only when I came here that I realized how much I needed to ask them.'

While listening to this, I cannot stop asking myself if we have just witnessed a self in germination out of a conscious realization of her own vulnerability? Is this a form of knowing *otherwise*?

The above shared words are the notes gathered during my participation as one of the coordinators of the Dutch program of education on global citizenship in higher education entitled 'Going Glocal.' In Mexico, this program included a field trip that brought student of the University College Roosevelt in the Netherlands to meet with social activists and their communities in two prominent Mexican indigenous regions: Oaxaca and Chiapas (Vazquez 2015: 92).

In reporting about the experience, the main coordinator of the program in Mexico reflected on the idea that 'the geographical trip did not guarantee that the participants would be able to travel beyond their world of meaning, beyond their position of consumers of the world, or beyond the "selfie tourist" position' (ibid.: 95). Therefore, the trip was designed and implemented as an intercultural encounter between university students with the concrete struggles of Oaxaca and Chiapas indigenous communities and of Central American migrants on their way to the United States.

At its core, the program was grounded on a decolonial framework and the deployment of pedagogies of positionality and world traveling. The former is understood as promoting critical self-reflectivity in the students as members of the consumer society regarding their privileges (socio-economic and epistemic) as being built upon the destitution of 'others.' The latter understood as providing students with (a) critical awareness of their own location as a historically situated site of enunciation, but also with (b) the option of 'relating to the world' as a place of different words of meaning, instead of a place that is there to be consumed (ibid.).

### Eurocaravana 43: Thinking Through the Vulnerability of a Sick Body

On 26 September 2014, the town of Ayotzinapa, Mexico made global headlines when 42 male students at the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural School, some of them minors and indigenous, were kidnapped and, according to Mexico's attorney general's office, killed and burned by members of the drug cartel *Guerreros Unidos*.

A few hours after these tragic events, the hashtags *#todosomosayotzinapa* (we are all ayotzinapa) and *#ayotzinapaaccionglobal* (ayotzinapa global action) began trending on twitter in Mexico. A few days after, massive street demonstrations, performances, and flash mobs were organized in different Mexican cities as well as across the United States, Europe, and Asia. Meanwhile in Europe, local human rights organizations started to organise social media campaigns to raise awareness of the events (Icaza 2016). Between 17 April and 19 May 2015, the *Eurocaravana 43*, as an international awareness-raising tour of Ayotzinapa students' representatives and their families, visited eighteen cities and fourteen European countries.<sup>[11]</sup>

In the *Eurocaravana 43* organisation process, young Mexican activists resident in the Netherlands expressed to me their concerns regarding the role that academics might want to play in the planned events: 'we think that the Ayotzinapa students' representatives and families need to play a central role, not the academics nor their institutions. We don't want that the relatives or their terrible and painful experience to be taken by academics as something to be analyzed, as an object of study'.<sup>[12]</sup> Like other conversations held with activists, these words express, in a daring and clear way, the dominant ways of working in IR and GP in which people's experiences of violence become an 'object' that is studied, but not from which one theorizes and re-learns the world (Icaza and Vazquez 2013; Barbosa, Icaza, and Ocampo 2015; Icaza 2015). But, then how can one actually do such un-learning and re-learning?

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In the Netherlands, the *Eurocaravana 43* visited the city of Leiden on May 16 and Amsterdam the day after. As a feminist IR academic of Mexican background, I was invited to participate in the different academic-activist events organized to raise awareness in the Netherlands on the tragic events of September 2014 in Ayotzinapa. I had to follow the events from my bed in Twitter and Facebook, and the academic conferences through livestream.<sup>[13]</sup> An unexpected complication of undergoing cancer treatment didn't allow me and my sick body to do more. Feminist Yoanna Hedva's 'sick women theory' reflects on the modes of protest that are afforded to sick people. My participation was reduced to limited forms of distant solidarity: 'I listened to the sounds of the marches as they drifted up to my window. Attached to the bed, I rose up my sick woman fist, in solidarity' (Hedva 2015).

But in contrast to Hedva, the sense of vulnerability that sickness brought with it was an opportunity to re-think and further question the always-capable-healthy-fit-mobile-body of an academic doing research in contemporary academia on social resistance (Icaza 2015). In other words, not to be physically able to participate in the planned events of the *Eurocaravana 43* brought with it a deep sense of understanding, an embodied one, of the vulnerability of the body and of feminists analyses denouncing the epistemic violence of academic writing that stems from nowhere and is bodiless (Lugonés 2003; Escobar and Harcourt 2005; Adichie 2009). It is from that placeless/bodiless position that the histories of certain bodies as the 'normal' ones (the head of state, the male financial broker), of certain places (Washington, D.C, Brussels, Paris), and of certain events and memories (Charlie Hebdo killings) are universalized and reproduced as 'common' senses from which 'we' think in the international and the global (Icaza 2015).

## Three Vignettes, Some Common Questions

The vignettes above were introduced as one possible way to present moments of vulnerability of the 'knowing subject' from which a *knowing otherwise* is in germination. What are the elements of that knowing? And in which ways is border thinking as an *embodied consciousness* central for a critical re-thinking of how we think/sense the international and the global? In this final section, I present some initial elements that I hope can help address these two questions.

First of all, it is central to understand that one of the crucial limitations of the dominant epistemology in IR and GP is grounded on a one-dimensional self: the one able to observe, scrutinize, and analyse the international, including other selves as well as their places and communities, who are there to be observed, scrutinized, and analysed.

Second, the self in germination is not only an invitation to re-think that supposedly 'unitary observant self' but also their gaze over other selves and to consider the creative force that inhabiting the borderlands entails. In other words, it is an invitation to consider what kind of selves germinate in the borderlands and what this germination tells us about supposedly unitary/homogenous selves observing 'the international' reality. In this text, through the vignettes, I am trying to display the power that this gaze has had over the analysis of the international and the generation of knowledge, or what Mignolo calls the geo and body politics of knowledge.

Third, border subjectivities are central for a critical re-thinking of the dominant epistemologies of IR and GP not just as discursive sources that destabilize binary thinking, but as embodied epistemic sites of enunciation in their own right. This embodied episteme invites us to think seriously about selves and 'the international' that these selves inhabit in a way that implicates us/them in the global dynamics of migration and diaspora and the interconnectedness of resource exploitation to people's lives.

As such, the vignettes aim to transmit the vulnerability, even physical vulnerability, as one's way of thinking about 'reality' to countering the placeless, abstract, bodiless epistemological foundations dominant in IR and GP. This is the kind of gnosis that aims to be stressed in each vignette, of a vulnerable 'knowing subject' as a detached, objective observer. The main purpose in emphasizing this is in line with Snyman who argues for the decolonial challenge of thinking *otherwise* from a position of privilege as requiring a hermeneutic of vulnerability 'of the self as a perpetrating agent and of those who still bear the brunt of [coloniality's] aftermath' (Snyman 2015: 269).

## Notes



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[1] International Relations is understood in this text as a discipline mainly concerned with the understanding of nation-states (i.e., unified rational actor, sovereign entities, etc.), the operations of power between nation-states, the nature of this power (i.e., as domination, relational, etc.), and the system or environment in which they operate (e.g., anarchical, cooperative, complex interdependent, etc.). Meanwhile, Global Politics is taken here as a field of analysis in its own right that contests the narrowness of state-centric approaches (i.e., their methodological nationalism) for thinking power operations in political economic structures, institutions, actors, and discourses under complex conditions of supraterritoriality or globalization. I am using the term *otherwise* following Arturo Escobar's seminal article 'Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise' in which he speaks of the modernity/coloniality program as crossing the borders of thought, as 'a decisive intervention into the very discursivity of the modern sciences in order to craft another space for the production of knowledge, another way of thinking, *un paradigma otro*, the very possibility of talking about "worlds and knowledges otherwise"' (Escobar 2007: 179).

[2] Vázquez explains the relevance of geo-genealogies for decolonial critique in order to stress the site of enunciation. In his view, a geo-genealogy is a genealogy that acknowledges its relationship to a geographically situated origin (Vázquez 2014).

[4] One of the key contributions of feminist anti-essentialist approaches reveals the complex and multiple operations of power in binary thinking. But, what happens when duality is thought from a different geo-genealogy to that of feminist anti-essentialist approaches? The thought of Gloria Anzaldúa and Maria Lugonés is crucial for an understanding of duality *otherwise*. In the same way, the work of Mexican ethno-historian and feminist Sylvia Marcos (2006) on Mesoamerican civilizations' eroticism and spirituality reveals an exteriority to Western feminist anti-essentialism.

[5] When thinking duality not just as a dialectic, I have in mind a proposal by Enrique Dussel (2001) for transmodernity.

[6] I am using 'produced' in an active sense, hence not an accident or natural circumstance following Santos. He speaks of the historical power asymmetries *produced* by European cultural imperialism and capitalism, which have led to the imposition of epistemologies and ways of knowing at the expense of other existing knowledges (Santos et. al. 2007).

[7] Inspired by Maria Lugonés' decolonial feminism, I am thinking here of the colonial wound not only as a cultural expression, but also the physicality of the enslavement, racialization, rape, and dehumanization of some bodies.

[8] Here I try to emphasize that to relinquish safety is an act of resistance to oppression. In that sense, it is a liberatory act of those selves and coalitions that delink from the confines of intelligibility, of what we are told or allowed to think/sense. As such, this liberatory act is not only a possibility or a choice for just some 'oppressed/colonized' people, but a potential to create coalitions with those who also delink from different epistemological privileges.

[9] The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs financed this program through a SBOS grant. See: <http://www.goingglocal.nl>.

[10] See <http://www.hermanosenelcamino.org/english.html>

[11] Social media also played a significant part using Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/Caravana43>) and on Twitter (with the handle of #Eurocaravana43).

[12] Interview with representatives of *Eurocaravana 43*.

[13] For the proceedings, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9kRtzTe9fA>.

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