

“The River Told Me”: Rethinking Intersectionality from the Incommensurable World of Berta Cáceres

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Abstract

Inspired by the spiritual and political journey of Berta Cáceres (1973-2016), a fierce Lenca woman leader from Honduras who died in defense of sacred indigenous rivers, the essay aims to rethink the frame of intersectionality that has become axiomatic in feminist theorizing and activism. Against the backdrop of the January 2017 Women’s March in the USA, I interrogate inclusionary accounts that equate intersectionality with a pre-existing unity among women that leaves power differentials intact. I recover the intersection as an index of invisibility and violence by drawing on the intimate connections that Berta foregrounded between multiple structures of domination. However, I argue that recommitting to a frame of intersectionality that acknowledges the relational histories and geographies of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism that unite and separate women is insufficient for imagining more just futures that are hospitable to subaltern horizons. Feminist praxis must also interrogate the liberal conceptions of freedom and oppositional subjectivities that undergird its intersectional analysis in order to make space for worlds that exceed Western conceptions of agency, sociality and human-nature relations. Through an exploration of the indigenous cosmovisions, decolonizing efforts and transnational grassroots solidarity that coalesce under Berta’s name, I point to the importance of cultivating a disposition to listening to incommensurable worlds where rivers tell stories and call upon us. This is an ecofeminist vision capable of rooting intersectional analysis within decolonizing relations and alternatives.

Keywords: intersectionality; indigenous struggles; feminism; decolonization; incommensurability

Una se pregunta: ¿de dónde tanta fuerza?
... ¿De dónde tantas Bertas?
Que corra el río, que corra...

[One wonders where so much strength comes from
...From where so many Bertas?
Let the river run, let it run...]

From the song “Que corra el río”
Karla Lara, Honduran song-writer and singer

Who are the figures that guide the way we live, relate, think and write? From where do we draw our strength? And what do these sources of inspiration say about the worlds we want to dismantle and those we seek to build? The figures we cite and honor matter as they reveal much about these worlds. For Sara Ahmed (2017), in her affirmation of feminism as a way of thinking how to live, citation is how we acknowledge our debts to those who came before us. Foregrounding the need to reflect on the names and places that nurture our feminist commitments, Ahmed invites us to pose ourselves the following question: “When did feminism become a word that not only spoke to you, but spoke you, spoke of your existence, spoke you into existence?” (14). Here I honor the life and decolonial legacy of a figure that continues to speak my concerns and dreams into existence, the fearless Lenca leader Berta Cáceres.

I first met Berta in 2014 at the second national assembly of grassroots social movements that formed in opposition to the Honduran coup d'état of 2009. The spiritual and the theoretical were at home in Siguatepeque city, the “Hill of Women” in nahuatl language. Following an inaugural Garífuna tobacco-purification ceremony that summoned ancestral wisdom, a complex conceptual map of power dynamics was drawn out on a green chalkboard. The map looked like a spider web that tried to systematize the invisible connections between development projects, criminal gangs, private security companies, paramilitary groups and US-funded military forces; relations with severe consequences for the bodies and territories of the various peasant, indigenous, feminist, union, and LGBTQ groups gathered at the assembly. Unlike the formal spatial imaginary of rigid state and non-state boundaries, this map revealed the blurrier and transnationally embedded infrastructure of power in Honduras. Standing against this chalkboard, Berta insisted that this multi-layered killing machine of bodies and worlds could only be disassembled through cross-border solidarities that drew strength from spiritual and ancestral wisdom in the hopes of nurturing alternative designs of relating to nature and living beings.

Two years after this assembly Berta would be murdered by the very systemic links that she insisted on mapping between private energy companies and US-trained special forces

charged with combatting drug trafficking. “Berta did not die, she multiplied,” has become a popular chant at hundreds of rallies the world over demanding justice for her assassination and an end to the construction of the Agua Zarca Dam that she fervently opposed. Berta’s presence has multiplied indeed and her name is increasingly invoked by feminist, indigenous and environmentalist struggles that value her analysis of the intersections between structures of domination and exploitation.

Intersectionality that Kills

In the *Guiding Vision and Definition of Principles* of the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, Berta is acknowledged as one of the revolutionary leaders who paved the way for the march. I was surprised that Berta Cáceres and not Hillary Clinton appeared in the list of honorees, especially since the march I saw unfold on the ground was a testament to the tremendous influence of the latter. At a sister demonstration in Minneapolis, Hillary was everywhere. Berta was nowhere. From the march’s theme, “women’s rights are human rights,” which recalls Clinton’s utterance at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women to messages such as: “I’m With Her,” “Don’t Blame Me, I Voted for the Blonde With Brains,” “When They Go Low, We Go High,” “Hillary Won,” “Stronger Together,” “Nasty Woman” and “Love Trumps Hate,” Hillary was documented in chants and on handmade signs, buttons and printed banners. It was clear that feminism had come to many from Clinton. If Clinton spoke them into existence, what did this say about their feminist commitments and the alternative worlds they dream of?

Despite much hesitation regarding depoliticized calls for women’s unity, a desire to express collective outrage at the new authoritarian instantiation of the colonial project of dispossession exemplified by the Trump administration moved me to join the march.¹ I woke up early the morning of January 21st and decided that if I walked, I would only do so from an intersectional feminism, the kind that emerges out of a systemic analysis of the historical and global entanglements of power—intersections that Berta Cáceres, Richa Nagar (2014), bell hooks (1984), Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) and Kimberley Crenshaw (1989) had taught me to be attentive to. Emboldened by their diagnoses of global power, I made a cardboard sign with a message that Berta delivered in her acceptance speech at the 2015 Goldman Prize ceremony (Cáceres 2015): “Let us wake up, humankind! We’re out of time. We must shake our conscience free of the rapacious capitalism, racism and patriarchy that will only assure our own self-destruction.” The message was pretty clear, as a man who walked past my sign remarked. The intersectionality that Berta highlighted in her speech was not about inclusivity, a discourse which subtended calls for adding Hillary to the list of honorees. Her reference was to an

¹ It is important to note that simultaneous women’s marches voicing distinct struggles and demands took place around the world.

intersectionality that destroys bodies and worlds, the intersectionality of structures of subordination that killed her. I found this kind of intersectionality largely absent at the march, obscured by depoliticized versions of it.

The Politics of Inclusionary Feminism

A line over a rainbow sign at the march captured the acute dissonance between the national committee's intersectional platform and what intersectionality meant for many at the demonstration: "Intersectionality, not divisive feminism, is for everybody." The conceptual frame of intersectionality, which is rooted in a long history of struggles against racism, is here supplanted by a frame that heralds the arrival of a post-racial moment. The opposition that it assumes between intersectionality and divisive feminism signals a broader discursive shift that, for Chandra Mohanty (2013, 967), is depoliticizing antiracist, women of color, and transnational feminist intellectual projects.

A cursory survey of Facebook posts and blog comments by attendees of the women's march tells us that divisive feminism is the label that primarily white women give to feminist calls that urge them to understand their privilege and role in histories of oppression. For instance, in response to a diversity statement released by the national co-chairs and posted on the march's Facebook page on November 20th, 2016, an attendee wrote: "No woman, no matter what race you are, is 'privileged' in this culture ... This *division* has to stop." Another white woman added: "I will march. Hoping that someday soon a sense of *unity* will occur before it's too late." Bell hook's quotation posted on this page was also considered divisive because it contends that a strong sisterhood can only be forged if women learn to confront how they have dominated and exploited other women through sex, class and gender. In response to this quote, a woman wrote: "I'm starting to feel not very welcome in this endeavour." This small sample of reactions showcases a reversal of the key feminist construct "the personal is political" to "the political is personal," since the process of recognizing as systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated turns into a normative judgement about how systemic analysis is exclusionary of the self. These reactions also reveal how intersectionality is increasingly equated with some pre-existing "unity" among women that disavows the relations of power that many times separate them. This is not an intersectionality that kills bodies and worlds, but a plea for including all women in a framework that leaves power differentials among them intact.

Whereas the space of the intersection within the inclusionary disposition points to a presence, the intersectional way of thinking that foregrounds power relations shows an absence. If the former imagines the intersection as the horizontal site where all women peacefully converge, the latter reveals a space of violent reduction and invisibility. The critical impetus behind Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) introduction of the concept of the intersection was

to redress the invisibility of black women in law and social movement discourses. When taken separately, categories of race and sex, bound to whiteness and masculinity, obscure the experiences of those who are dominated by both categories. The use of homogeneous and atomistic categories relies on the affirmation of the dominant element in the group as the norm. For instance, if the category of “woman” centers the experiences of white women, the category “black” centers the lives of black men. As Lugones (2010) argues, rather than showing us the presence of black women, the intersection of the categories woman and black shows us their absence. The move to intersect these categories is to show what they exclude. What becomes visible is not the presence of women of color but their absence, since these categories depend on their exclusion. The intersection as an index of invisibility and violence, which seeks to counter the disembodiment of women of color, is lost in flattening accounts that view the intersection as a frictionless space where women collaborate to secure their human rights.² It is only within this inclusionary framework that Hillary and Berta can be acknowledged as women leaders engaged in the same feminist cause.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Hillary was everywhere and Berta was hardly anywhere at the march. The imperial histories and geographies that connect these two women tell us something deeper about why they could not be honored in the same list. Hillary and Berta speak different feminisms and worlds into existence. The world that Hillary defended couldn’t accommodate the alternative worlds that Berta sought to realize. More literally, Hillary’s world could not accommodate Berta’s life. Against the historical amnesia that characterizes contemporary calls for intersectionality, a banner pulled out by a protester at a Hillary rally foregrounded a specific history of subordination and declared: “Hillary’s regime change murdered Berta Cáceres” (Pestano 2016).

Decoding Relational Geographies

Berta vehemently opposed the Honduran military coup that ousted democratically elected president Manuel Zelaya in 2009. She singled out Hillary Clinton for legitimizing a coup that halted progressive initiatives for those most marginalized in favor of a highly repressive government that is now waging an intense counterinsurgency campaign on behalf of transnational capital. In her memoir, *Hard Choices*, Hillary Clinton (2014) writes about her actions in Honduras as an example of her clear-eyed pragmatic foreign policy approach. If every other country in the world unambiguously demanded Zelaya’s restitution, Hillary relegated this to a secondary concern and insisted on an election settlement. The significance of returning Zelaya to office for the post-coup movements of resistance was not about some abstract return

² For a critique of this inclusionary framework and its role in the historical construction of white feminist moral identity see Davis 2008.

to democracy but about the indispensable need to continue with the important changes that Zelaya's administration had inaugurated.

Despite Zelaya's conservative background as a wealthy rural patriarch, he was surprisingly supportive of a set of initiatives that deeply upset the Honduran and transnational capitalist, military and religious elites. These included: the legalization of the morning-after pill, support for gay and transgender rights, the increase of the minimum wage, the possible dismantlement of a US military base, support for rural peasant and indigenous movements in their land struggles, and a non-binding referendum on whether the 1982 constitution written during the US-backed military dictatorship should be replaced. These were the policies that Hillary's routinization of the coup regime erased in the interest of "order." Neither women rights nor human rights were relevant enough to encourage a reconsideration of her "hard choice" in Honduras. Following the coup, a flurry of laws violating fundamental human, women and labor rights were passed overnight, such as the absolute ban of the contraception pill; water and mining concessions in indigenous and peasant territories that had been stalled under Zelaya were approved. The militarization of the countryside accelerated as well.

Unfortunately, Berta is only one among thousands of peasant leaders, indigenous and human rights activists, trade unionists, LGBTQ members, and journalists that have been murdered in post-coup Honduras. During a Witness for Peace delegation to Honduras in December 2016, Bertha Oliva, founder of the Committee for the Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) shared with us how Berta Cáceres' death was an eerie reminder of the murder of opposition activists in the early 1980s by counterinsurgency death squads. Unlike transition theses that affirm a radical break between dictatorial and democratic periods, she showed us how the structures of terror were never dismantled in Honduras, since, in her words, "those who tortured us in the past are now preaching on national security." A reader of codes, Oliva observed how Berta died on 3-16. Battalion 3-16 was the name of a notorious Honduran army unit trained by the CIA in the 80s and responsible for the murder and torture of political opponents—a death squad that Berta Cáceres boldly denounced. According to Oliva, identifying perverse connections inscribed in hidden fragments is a skill that human rights activists in the country are compelled to learn.

In addition to reading Berta's assassination as indicative of the resurgence of death squads in the country, Oliva insisted that it also drew attention to a sustained state effort to silence the voices of women leaders. Berta knew this. In response to a question about the persecution that she experienced in her work, she said:

I also know I have been persecuted not just for political leadership but also for being a woman, for being Lenca. In this country it's not the same being a male leader and being a female leader. And that comes with a very heavy weight. I think it may be easier to confront the transnationals and the army than it is to confront the

patriarchy, because that we encounter everywhere. Within our own organizations as well. There won't be justice or democracy, nor will we humanize this society if the patriarchy exists, and even worse if we don't discuss it in our organizations." (Lewis 2016)

Berta fomented important discussions on the patriarchal order in COPINH, the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, an organization that she co-founded for the purpose of defending the territorial, cultural, and spiritual rights of the Lenca people (<http://copinhenglish.blogspot.com/>). COPINH's critique of gender inequality, its sexual diversity and women's leadership programs, and its tribunals on domestic violence against women in the communities are emblematic of how indigenous feminisms critically scrutinize the internal oppression against women within their communities as well as in dominant society (Hunhdorf and Suzack 2010, 3).

Intricately linked to counterinsurgency death squads and the skyrocketing femicide rates in post-coup Honduras, Berta's death is also part of a larger trend of violence against environmental activists. Gustavo Castro, the director of the Mexican environmental organization Other Worlds, who was wounded in the attack against Berta, situates her death within the aggressive persecution of those who oppose a world full of dam construction. Castro's context of systematic repression contrasts starkly with the way that World Bank Group President, Jim Yong Kim, characterizes Berta's death as an "incident" in a keynote address, *The Principle of Mercy*, given at Union Theological Seminary in New York on April 6, 2016. When asked about the impacts of large dam projects as illustrated by the murder of Berta, Dr. Kim replied that, among other things, "you cannot do the work we're trying to do and not have some of these 'incidents' happen." Castro does not talk about isolated incidents but about systematic repression. He tells us that dams are increasingly being built, particularly in Latin America, due to the expanding energy demands of capitalist projects and the green economy idea that dams make clean energy. The factories, industrial parks, infrastructure, and mines, which free trade agreements have allowed transnational corporations to open, consume enormous amounts of electricity and water. Most of the water powering industrial corridors is coming from the ancestral rivers and wells of peasant and indigenous communities (Mackey 2016). If rivers are seen as exploitable sources of energy in the eyes of the capitalist-development complex, rivers evince a different imagination for the communities whose livelihoods and worldviews are intimately tied with them. Massive hydroelectric projects result in the violent displacement of peoples from their sources of material well-being, but also seek to cut off the lifeblood that nurtures indigenous cosmovisions.

Lenca No-wave Feminism

The worlds that the rights of indigenous peoples to their territories secure were first made visible to me through a scene of destruction. October 12, the national anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas, was always that day in which the discriminatory saying *mejorar la raza*, "improve the race," and the common use of the word *indio*, "indian" to describe all that is "backwards" and "uneducated," made frightening sense in my early attachments to Honduran nationalism. We celebrated Columbus Day at school with our national hymn and readings of Don Quixote. The state's concerted effort of anaesthetizing me to the cruel violations of conquest through formal schooling was ubiquitous in spaces where Hondurans experienced their national community. Indigenous and black peoples were stripped of their memories, languages and humanity. On my drive home from school, the statue of an upright and triumphant Columbus, erected over a globe, daily re-enacted this erasure. One afternoon I was shocked to see a headless and armless Columbus sprayed with blood. COPINH, Berta's organization, had chosen October 12 as a symbolic day to protest against the government's indifferent eye to the murders of indigenous and black leaders.

The sight of this shattered tribute was disquieting. I was unable to articulate my discomfort within a bilingual education allergic to critical inquiry, which privileged the memorization of details of US wars. In an act of defiance against the patrimonies that Honduras holds sacred, COPINH registered the colonial wound that has not yet healed but instead deepened through the forced assimilation and dispossession of indigenous and black populations in the country. The re-enactment of this colonial wound not only made the Lenca's current plight visible but also shifted my attention to the singular worldviews that the unfinished colonial project is intent on destroying.

As I sat next to Pascuala Vásquez on a bus heading to Berta's grave site in La Esperanza, I asked about the decolonizing struggles of the Lenca peoples. Doña Pascualita, as she is affectionately known, is the spiritual leader of COPINH. A member of the council of elders, Doña Pascualita keeps the movement robust and the earth whole by teaching others about Lenca culture and spirituality. Although the Lenca people, the most populous indigenous group at the time of colonial invasion, lost its spoken language to a process of forced assimilation into Spanish, various dimensions of its rich culture persist. Their relationship to nature, their stories about the origin and protection of lands and rivers, their spiritual ceremonies, their medicinal and cultivation methods, are among the ancestral practices that Doña Pascualita collectively recovers to re-build bonds and catalyze political action. Until recently, she said, ceremonies and offerings to the spirits who care for the earth were practiced in hiding, as Christian religious leaders condemned them. The work that COPINH has done to valorize ancestral practices has not come without criticism from leftist parties and socialist movements.

According to Melissa Cardozo, a Honduran writer and one of Berta's closest friends, many activists see "backwardness" and lack of "progressive vision" in the fact that COPINH roots its defense of territories in a Lenca worldview. Her April-May 2017 US tour with Karla Lara honored this Lenca cosmovision through a co-performance of stories about the lives of women who joined the resistance to the 2009 coup d'état. Native American activists preceded their presentation in Minneapolis with a powwow dance dedicated to the many Bertas who fight to protect the world's rivers. Their performances also blended powerfully with stories told by a Dakota elder about the origin of the sacred Minnesota lakes and with a Maori woman's celebration of the recent legal personhood granted to the Whanganui river in New Zealand. If the conviviality between political action and spiritual practices has not echoed with leftist groups in Honduras, I have witnessed how it has intensely resonated with aboriginal and indigenous resistance movements abroad. Not only do they share indigenous identities, but many share similar conditions of enclosure and extraction over which they form bonds of unity.

In early November 2016 images of Berta started turning up at the Sacred Stone Camp, the main site where hundreds of people gathered to oppose the Dakota Access pipeline. The echoes between the Lenca opposition to the damming of the sacred Gualcarque River and the Sioux struggle against an oil pipeline being laid under their ancestral Missouri River are many, including the severe repression that they both have faced. These are not just struggles for the defense of sources of drinking water but efforts to make room for the worldviews nurtured by these rivers and their peoples. In her 2015 Goldman Prize speech, Berta brought attention to the broader cosmovision in which the Gualcarque River is deeply embedded:

In our world views, we are beings who come from the Earth, from the water, and from the corn. The Lenca people are ancestral guardians of the river, in turn protected by the spirits of young girls, who teach us that giving our lives in various ways for the protection of the rivers is giving our lives for the well-being of humanity and this planet.

Lenca no-wave feminism conveys an image of young girls as water protectors. However, this invocation of young girls as guardians is more than an empowered version of girls. This is not empowerment for the sustenance of the imperial and capitalist order for which Hillary Clinton had to make "hard choices." These are spirits of young girls that stimulate the forging of new global designs where subaltern peoples do not have to shed their identities and lose their territories for the sake of national unity or the accumulation of someone else's capital. Berta's desire to change systems and construct a new world found inspiration in them.

In a speech after her electoral defeat Hillary said: "To all the little girls watching this, never doubt that you are powerful and valuable and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world" (Reilly 2016). A relevant response to the perverse gender attacks deployed by her

opponent, this message leaves unanswered the question of what kind of worlds these little girls should protect once they realize their worth and power. Directed at US little girls, this is not necessarily an innocent, uplifting remark. The entitlement to every chance and opportunity to exploit and dominate the world has been reserved for the United States. Inviting little girls to consolidate a world where military and economic powers see subaltern peoples, their territories and bodies, as dispensable, obscures how gender intersects with multiple forms of domination. For Berta, gender oppression could not be isolated:

We compañeras from COPINH have not accepted the notion that we first had to fight against transnationals, and later against racism, and lastly against violence against women. We all experience multiple forms of domination—women being the most affected—so the fight must also be multiple and diverse, recognizing these multiple forms of domination. (Women Human Rights Defenders 2016)

In Berta's view intersectionality was not a light metaphor for inclusion. It conjured a space of violent reduction and of agency. Recommitting to a frame of intersectionality that acknowledges the relational histories and geographies of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism that unite and separate women might be necessary for imagining more just and bearable worlds. But is the intersectional way of thinking, one that has become axiomatic in feminist theorizing and institutionalized in human rights frameworks (Carastathis 2016, 3), a sufficient analytic for letting existing and alternative worlds breathe?

Incommensurable Worlds

Although intersectional thinking shows us what homogenous categories of identity obscure, this frame produces its own occlusions. In response to the mainstreaming of the concept of the intersection, feminist scholars have called for reclaiming power dynamics as the starting point of inquiry. This focus on power as domination privileges a reading of the intersection as a site of oppression. The initial interest in the early intersectionality literature to see social power as not only the power of domination but also the source of social empowerment and reconstruction has disappeared from sight in the more recent literature.³ The multiple and simultaneous forms of agency that Berta reads into the intersection are lost in this conceptual move to foreground power as domination. To the coloniality of power Berta juxtaposes the Lenca power of endurance:

³ For an overview of this shift from identity towards a critique of power in the intersectionality literature see Singh 2015.

Do you know for how long we, indigenous peoples, have been fighting for? 520 years since the Spanish invasion, the invasion that gave power to those big countries from the North. This power was based on the exploitation of our peoples. 70 million indigenous peoples were killed in this continent ... That colonialism is still here with us. This is why this struggle is so difficult for Indigenous peoples, especially because there is a state apparatus upholding this power. *But we also have power, companeros y companeras. This is why we still exist.* (Ocote films 2016, my translation and emphasis)

Here the intersection not only shows the oppressed aspects of the self, which are constituted by the colonality of power, but indexes a space of values, ethical horizons, and political projects that nurture decolonial elsewhere.⁴ The critique of power emerges from a situated solidarity and not merely from a universal anti-oppression disposition.⁵ The fact that Lenca peoples continue to survive in spite of the myriad attacks against them is, for Berta, a clear testament to the strength of their relations. The world that nurtures the power of Lenca peoples is disavowed when intersectional thinking presumes an autonomous liberatory subject.

A liberal conception of freedom undergirds the call for a critique of power in the recent feminist literature on intersectionality.⁶ Within this conception freedom is primarily bound up with the subjectivity of an autonomous being equal among those that can “exercise and submit to a rational measure” (Skaria 2016, 7).⁷ The social terrain where modern liberal agency plays out is one that assumes that rationality and intentionality reside uniquely in the human realm. In this sense the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman lives that multiple indigenous cosmologies bring to light cannot be grasped by a sociality that assumes only human intentionality. Who and what constitutes the social in these cosmologies does not necessarily map onto the rigid hierarchy between the human and nonhuman that is the central dichotomy

⁴ I draw the phrase “decolonial elsewhere” from Tuck and Yang’s (2012) discussion of decolonization as an approach that changes the terms of the conversation and points to other horizons: “Decolonization offers a different perspective to human and civil rights based approaches to justice, an unsettling one, rather than a complementary one. Decolonization is not an ‘and.’ It is an elsewhere” (36). For instance, although the Lenca struggle for self-determination works within the state and international framework of rights, it does not take for granted the principle of nation-state territorial sovereignty. Along with other global indigenous movements, it demands a rethinking of sovereignty from the perspective of territorial plurality.

⁵ Singh 2015 notes that many scholars are currently building their theories of intersectionality upon a negatively defined commitment to anti-oppression, which neglects forms of difference that would exist even in the absence of oppressive structure of powers.

⁶ Singh 2015 also points to how the anti-oppression consensus relies on particular conceptions of freedom that cannot account for the agency of religious women.

⁷ According to Skaria—this calculus, which hinges on the possession of reason—has historically excluded certain forms of beings, particularly nonhumans and the colonized.

of colonial modernity (Lugones 2010, 745). The intentionality that Berta attributes to the Gualcarque River is difficult to apprehend within an intersectional frame that assumes a world defined by this human-nonhuman dichotomy.

Insofar as the subjectivity privileged by intersectional thinking is tethered to the rigid hierarchy between the human and the nonhuman, such thinking remains wedded to the colonality of power. In her analysis of the modern/colonial gender system, Lugones views colonality as the denial of the existence of worlds with different ontological presuppositions. The colonality of power denies the validity and coevalness of worlds through a gender system that disintegrates communal relations, ritual thinking, collective authority mechanisms, etc. Decolonizing the narratives of freedom that surround intersectionality becomes essential for translating those worlds for which subaltern peoples sacrifice their lives. Lugones remarks that feminist alliance work that seeks to engage these worlds, “impels us to know each other as selves that are thick, in relation, in alternative socialities, and grounded in tense, creative inhabitations of the colonial difference” (748).⁸ This kind of solidarity requires an ethics of incommensurability⁹ where we accept that our Western ways of measuring truth in the world are not superior to forms of assessment grounded in different epistemologies.

The image of the intersection as a place of convergence is only problematic when thick incommensurability is disavowed. What might it look like to work through incommensurability and intermingle our stories of truth? What might it mean to find echoes of ourselves in other worlds without letting our echoes colonize unfamiliar rhythms? As Richa Nagar carefully notes, ethical encounters require an intimate telling and provincialization of our life-worlds:

If the politics of alliance making are about making oneself radically vulnerable through trust and critical reflexivity, if they require us to open ourselves to being interrogated and assessed by those to whom we must be accountable, then such politics are also about acknowledging, recognizing, and sharing our most tender and fragile moments, our memories and mistakes in moments of translation, in moments of love. (2014, 23)

⁸ A distinctive form of feminist theory and activism, which brings the colonial difference to bear on intersectional approaches, has been emerging from Latin America in recent decades. Building and moving beyond Lugones’ analysis of the colonality of gender, this decolonial feminist group foregrounds the unintended negative political consequences of transnational solidarity, as subaltern women tend to be silenced in the process. For them, alliance work must confront the fact that relations of power that separate women not only play out between Northern and Third World feminisms but within the latter as well. Moreover, they problematize the strong dependency of Latin American feminisms on Northern academic production and call for grounded theoretical explorations that think subalternity out of the economic and socio-political specificities of the region (Espinoza 2009 and Mendoza 2010).

⁹ See Tuck and Yang 2012 on the possibility for “solidarity ... in what is incommensurable rather than what is common (28).”

I share such a moment to show my difficulties at resisting my enchantment with oppositional modes of action.

Swimming as Political Action?

With the hopes of weaving struggles across borders, a group of scholars, community organizers and social justice activists from the United States and Belize travelled to Honduras on a Witness for Peace delegation in December 2016. After spending some time in the coastal paradise where Garífuna villages resist displacement by mega-tourism projects, we travelled inland through lush, cloud-topped mountains to the COPINH headquarters in La Esperanza. The *copines*, as members of COPINH self-identify and are usually referred to, received us in a room whose walls were decorated with murals of indigenous female warriors and scenes recreating the colonial conquest. Haunted by the specters of colonial invasion, I sat in this room and listened to the *copines* invoke the spirit of Berta as they narrated the tremendous repression being waged against them.

During Q&A time, one of the Minneapolis-based activists asked about the tactics COPINH employs to confront DESA, the energy company that has led the construction of the Agua Zarca dam in the Gualcarque River basin. I quickly anticipated the response to include road blocks, occupations and sit-ins at government buildings, public protests in the capital city, and alliances with international organizations to pressure international donors. These are all tactics that COPINH used to pressure Sinohydro, the giant Chinese dam developer, and the World Bank to drop out of the construction of four massive dams in the Gualcarque River in 2013. But the *copin* who replied made no mention of these evidently political tactics. The response: “Swimming in the Gualcarque River.” This was certainly not the answer I anticipated, as I looked forward to a discussion of oppositional tactics defined by an adaptation to the strategies of the powerful. For instance, blocking the dirt entrance to the Agua Zarca project prevents the circulation of machinery and labor. Although the roadblocks I have seen are also places for spiritual ceremonies, singing, making jokes and telling stories, when discussed as tactics, the attention shifts to their immediate effects. Roadblocks stop the powerful from carrying out their intended projects. It is much more difficult to measure the effects of swimming, since it does not manifestly appear as a conscious and oppositional mode of action. DESA or no DESA, World Bank or no World Bank, the Lenca peoples of Río Blanco have been swimming in the Gualcarque River from time immemorial. The agency of swimming is not one primarily defined in terms of the realization of objective interests. It involves an ethical formation that surrenders to the call of rivers.

Unsettling Ontologies

Like Río Blanco, the Agalta valley, where my grandparents lived, is blessed with myriad rivers

that flow robustly from a dense mountain range down to the valley. Here I learned that the river was not just the snake-like movement of water through the landscape. It was an artery of life. El Rosario taught me about growth, colors, sounds and sirens. Wading through the water and feeling my feet become one with the mud, I learned that the tiny black fish gathered at the shore were tadpoles waiting to become frogs. By lying in the river as do water lilies, I learned that bright green was the color of the screeching parrots flying overhead and that dark green painted the leaves of the guapinol tree under whose shade we bathed. Closing my eyes and feeling the cold water wash away my fears and worries, I learned that the river offered calm and purification. But pushed violently by its current, I learned that the river was not always peaceful and that it had the power to shape the earth. I was not surprised when my grandmother Monchita told us that sirens, maybe the young girls that also protect the Gualcarque River, swim in the rivers of Agalta. A scare device to prevent my siblings and I from insisting on going to El Rosario during Holy Week, her tale actually comforted me. It meant that I was not the only one who knew that the river was enchanted.

Without being an insider to the Lenca world of meanings, in which swimming as a tactic is self-evident, I wonder if dwelling in moments of resonance that unsettle our ontological presuppositions might help us open up slowly to an ethical encounter with the thick imaginary of subaltern groups. As I have grown older and entranced by the language of Western theory, I have slowly neglected what the river taught me and have come to participate in what Elizabeth Povinelli calls the “cultural organization of Western disbelief” (1995, 506). Foregrounding the Belyuen Aboriginal community’s view of all materiality as a potential source of intention, Povinelli observes how liberal political-economic theory and the environmentalism that derives from it are characterized by profound disbelief that nonhuman beings such as water holes can listen in anything but a metaphorical sense. This disbelief has blinded me to forms of agency that are not always registered in public and do not conform to a liberatory oppositional subjectivity. The restorative force that I experienced in the relaxing and agitated rhythms of El Rosario eludes the grasp of this disbelief. Swimming as agency perhaps reveals the deeper worlds from which actions such as road-blocking and protesting sprout from. It is the affirmation of an ethical and vital relation between a sentient environment and humans that is at stake in swimming. As she described the successful campaign she led to stop Sinohydro from building the Agua Zarca Dam, Berta emphasized her relation to a sentient river:

When we started the fight for Río Blanco, I would go into the river, I would talk to the river and I could feel what the river was telling me. I knew it was going to be difficult. But I also knew we were going to triumph, because *the river told me so*.
(Frente Juvenil 2016, my translation and emphasis)

What would it mean to take the intimate communication between Berta and the river as truth

and not just as a particular Lenca belief in the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans? In what ways would it challenge our modes of assessing needs and harms in the world?

Dominant modes of evaluating the impacts of development projects rely on a humanist evaluative apparatus that rejects the existence of a sentient environment in its calculation of need. With regards to the impacts caused by large dams, World Bank President Kim noted in his *Principle of Mercy* address that the people relocated due to these projects could end up in a situation that is “as good as or better than the situation they were in” (2016). The metrics of improvement with which President Kim assesses the situation of relocated peoples across the world hinges on a view that reduces the power of rivers to their potential in generating electricity for the world’s poorest. For Berta and the Lenca people of Río Blanco, the power of the river lies in the way it sustains their spiritual and political visions. Berta describes the bonds for which she surrendered her life as follows:

This mountain region has a strong relationship with the Lenca people, the forests are alive, the mountains are alive. This is a live river that is threatened by the construction of six hydroelectric dams ... From the Lenca cosmovision, water is a fundamental element, just like land is part of balance and creation, the spirits live in the water. That is why it is crucial to respect and care for the water as a being just like us. This explains why a community has so much strength to defend a river.
(Friends of the Earth 2017)

The strength that the Lenca peoples derive from their vital relation to rivers is made invisible in the economic modes of assessment of a world that rejects the equality of all beings.

Listening to the Rivers

In recent years we have witnessed a booming movement under the banner of feminism. Global protests against violence toward women and in defense of women and LGBTQ rights, have brought questions about gender and its intersections to center stage. This is certainly exciting, but we might need to urgently pause and explore those feminist movements that are not always registered in public because they live at the margins of the more visible liberal world. What are the worlds beyond the confines of a liberal imaginary that can provide the basis for feminist solidarities? The question of what worlds are being sustained and occluded by this momentum around feminism is crucial if we want to build coalitions that are hospitable to subaltern memories and relations.

As noted above, the sign I made for the Women's March was a very selective one, a direct quote from Berta: “Let us wake up, humankind! We’re out of time. We must shake our conscience free of the rapacious capitalism, racism and patriarchy that will only assure our own self-destruction.” In reaction to the flattening of the critical impetus of intersectional thinking, I

chose to foreground the matrix of domination of which Berta never lost sight. But what about the rivers that she summoned in the next line of that speech (Cáceres 2015)? “The Gualcarque River has called upon us, as have other gravely threatened rivers. We must answer their call” (2015). Her urgent provocation to confront our attachments to the capitalist, racist and patriarchal orders was not a freestanding critique of power. This provocation emerged from a set of bonds that cannot be captured by modern liberal conceptions of freedom and subjectivity. Cultivating a disposition to listening to the rivers and not just acknowledging that the rivers constitute semiotic agents for indigenous peoples requires unlearning many of our cherished assumptions about what constitutes agency and collectivity.

Intersectionality, as a way of thinking about intermeshed oppressions and the alliances that arise out of them, is not sufficient for making sense of the incommensurable memories and relations of subaltern groups. Kimberlé Crenshaw (2015) admits as much: “Intersectionality alone cannot bring invisible bodies into view.” It is crucial that we take intersectionality as a provisional and provincial point of departure and not as feminism's theoretical completion. In doing so, we can begin the process of decolonizing concepts and narratives that systematically erase the sentient rivers for which the Bertas of this world surrender their life. So long as we do not unsettle our inherited colonial frameworks of assessing truth, we will continue to erase ways of being and knowing that might hold a promise for a more just future.



Figure 1. Berta Cáceres sitting on an altar built in her honor at Utopía, COPINH's headquarters in La Esperanza, Honduras. The altar is covered with burning copal incense and decorated with zapalote maize, a ceremonial wooden mask and local medicinal herbs, all important components of Lenca life. This photo was taken on March 31, 2016, during the visit of the Caravan for Life, Peace and Justice that crossed Mesoamerica and the United States to bring attention to the negative impacts of the War on Drugs. Berta was set to join our international caravan but was assassinated a couple of weeks before we arrived at Utopía (Photo Credit: María José Méndez).

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