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“A world in which many worlds can fit:” On Knowledge Production and Multiplicity

Rosalba Icaza Garza, interviewed by Sara Salem

Rosalba Icaza Garza is a Professor of Global Politics, Feminisms and Decoloniality whose work has explored questions of knowledge and power, feminism, resistance, and decoloniality in Latin America and beyond. In her recent inaugural lecture,[1] she spoke to the question of climate catastrophe and decolonial feminism, asking what it would mean to live an ethical life in the wake of colonialism and capitalist destruction. In this interview, we discussed how to think about gender and sexuality from the South, pluriversality and multiplicity in movements and knowledge production, decolonial and feminist ways of knowing, and the politics of decoloniality within academic knowledge production.

Sara Salem: **This special issue is aimed at revisiting and reimagining the location of gender and sexual politics in anticolonial revolutionary struggles. What are some of the most pressing questions that emerge from such a focus on anticolonial revolution when we see it through the lens of gender and sexuality?**

Rosalba Icaza: This is a really difficult question because the problem is that I don't think through gender anymore, or I try not to. Of course I welcome this interest and very systematic powerful drive to recover all of these unspoken [feminist and anticolonial] stories, and I support them. But a pressing issue for me is how the people doing this work can radicalise their feminism and go beyond a gender lens. How they – those engaging in this work – can challenge dominant interpretations and historiographies of anticolonial struggles without necessarily going through a gender lens.

Why? Because for me, if the task is just recovering these stories, re-actualising these stories in the present and learning from them, then how will we see the limits of what we are doing? Many of the acts of resistance within revolutions wouldn't be read as revolutionary but are nonetheless forms of resistance, what María Lugones calls *resistant intentionalities*.[2] My concern is that we are not really able to make sense of these intentionalities because we have particular lenses – of gender and revolutionary politics – that we are not able to go beyond. I support this work, but invite us to interrogate critically the category of gender as deeply colonial and therefore as limiting the potential of many struggles that we are trying to revisit and include in our teaching materials. At times, a focus on gender might reproduce logics of domination by not questioning the colonial origins of the category of gender.

SS: **This reminds me a lot of Julietta Singh's work on unthinking mastery,[3] where she shows how a lot of anticolonial thought has this idea of mastery embedded within it, whether it's about mastering the future, or earth, or the self. These colonial ideas seep into anticolonial thinking, and we also have to interrogate them.**

RI: Yes, and for me that is gender. I'm using more and more in my teaching and writing the notion of "gendered," instead of "gender," to point at what Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí's calls the Invention of Women.[4]

[1] Icaza, 2022.
[2] Lugones, 2003.
[3] Singh, 2017.
[4] Oyěwùmí, 1997.

But it's not a solution. I don't want to think through gender anymore. It's not allowing me to see its coloniality.

SS: **Do you feel the same about the term feminism? Perhaps we are reading history back through the notion of feminist revolutionary struggle, whereas many of these figures did not call themselves feminists.**

RI: Of course, many didn't. Even today, in Latin America, not all of the women who are struggling want to be called feminists, and they may also not refer to themselves as women. They might instead refer to themselves as "people from a particular place or Nation" or "we Maya people."

SS: **You mention that your work and teaching focuses on what is "non-existent." Would you be able to expand on this, and how this "non-existence" is produced and reproduced? We have thought about this a lot through this issue, in relation to the erasure of women from histories and writing of anticolonial struggle.**

RI: This connects to the idea of people who resist and refuse colonialism, even though they may not label what they are doing as revolutionary. Often these resistant intentionalities or acts can be erased also from histories that are now being recovered.

I speak about the non-existent as always in relation to the hegemonic world or what we call "common sense." I mean non-existent for this common sense, for the dominant world of intelligibility. In my work, I focus on events and ways of resisting that in the dominant world of intelligibility – or common sense of academia – are irrelevant or non-existent. I'm interested in what is produced as non-existent. When I began to explore the work of María Lugones and María Ortega, I began to think of the non-existent in a different way, where what is invisible is also produced as unintelligible. Invisibility and unintelligibility go together, for me. When I started to read and talk to María Lugones more, I realised this is a central point of departure, because through all the institutions that socialise us, we are socialized into accepting the dominant intelligibility or common sense – that is, one in which the idea of multiplicity and the overlapping worlds of sense are simply disregarded or labelled as irrational.

Recognising the non-existent as unintelligible for the dominant intelligibility or common sense shows us how this defines and appropriates us (including through gender). It's important to see that this dominant common sense doesn't exhaust the plurality of what is happening around us, it doesn't exhaust who we are, or what resistance means.

SS: **I think that connects very well to pluriversality, which is a theme in so much of your important work. What are the stakes of thinking through pluriversality, and how do you understand it? Related to pluriversality, what would this mean for the ways in which we produce knowledge? This special issue has moved away from centring journal articles, instead inviting all forms of knowledge production including the visual, the sonic, and so on. What are your thoughts on the**

centrality of writing and the textual, and what does that mean for feminist and anticolonial knowledge production?

RI: Let me first answer you with an example. In a conference panel a few years ago, some critical IR scholars were trying to define what the pluriverse or pluriversality is. There was an Aymara indigenous person there, from Bolivia; I was sitting behind them and I could see they were shaking their head and probably thinking "oh my god, what are these people saying?" He stood up and said, "Sorry, but I'm frustrated. You cannot speak about what the pluriverse is. If you want to define it, you are in the wrong position here. The pluriverse is praxis, it escapes definition." For me, it was refreshing that they said it was frustrating. The whole conference was in English, as the *lingua franca,* and he was struggling, as I'm struggling right now, to explain in English that the pluriverse escapes definition because it's a praxis of life.

The way I've been experiencing and relating to the pluriverse is in relation to my work as a committed scholar with indigenous struggles back home. When people ask me what the pluriverse is, I say that the way that I have learned about and sensed it is through the Zapatista's revolution and their politics. I know that the pluriverse as a term has been appropriated but the way I learned it first was from them, from the Zapatistas, through the way they speak about their political horizon: a world in which many worlds can fit. Yes, I know this definition has been depoliticised, co-opted, and used as a synonym of diversity; this is terrible; but I think that the way I relate to it is as praxis of a world in which many worlds can fit. This is a world in which multiplicity, co-contemporaneity, and the overlapping of our worlds is possible. In this world, and following the work of María Lugones, especially on coalition, our multiple selves are allowed to exist. To me, a pluriverse is creating the conditions for coalitional work that engenders multiplicity, co-contemporaneity, and the overlapping of multiple worlds of sense. That is my academic response.

My more grounded response comes back to the Zapatistas. When I went to the "Intergalactic Encounters" at the Unitierra in San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, I was hosted as a mestiza woman, a white mestiza because I'm not dark-skinned or Afro-descendant. In that way I represent the norm in Mexico, and I always say this to everybody when I speak about my positionality: I am the norm in Mexico. I represent everything that oppresses and erases indigenous struggles, therefore the pluriverse, and nonetheless I was welcomed.[5] I was able to participate in the conversations and workshops, and for me this was the closest to what I can experience of the pluriverse.

I wrote a paper with a Maya re-sister-friend-comadre Valiana Aguilar,[6] and among the many themes we talked about was the First International Gathering of Women hosted by the Zapatistas in 2018. In that paper, we talked about how some trans women arrived at the event and they were asked "how do you sense yourself?" They replied "I sense myself as a woman" and they were able to go in. I'm sharing this because at the same time of this encounter, here in Europe discussions by TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) mobilize a feminism in which the pluriverse cannot really exist. Yet at the same time you do have these example where the pluriverse becomes a praxis among women who struggle, such as this event by the Zapatistas. We need to look into how it is practiced and enacted. Of course, we can

[5] Icaza Garza, 2021.
[6] Icaza Garza & Aguilar, 2021.

say it's problematic, I don't want to romanticize. I just want to bring in concrete examples of where we see a world where many worlds can exist, and [for me] it has been through Zapatista politics.

About the journal and the language and the types of academic knowledge production…well. The conversation on decoloniality has been captured by the Anglo-sphere, particularly the question of knowledge production and decolonial initiatives and anticolonial debates, and we still need to think about how this conversation is located within the confines and limitations of academia. If we are conscious that many of the conversations we are having are relevant for a Global North audience able to follow debates in English and that these limitations are clear and spelt out – that these debates may not make sense in other places, other academias, other languages – then I think we have done part of the work, because we understand the limits of the work we are doing. Because so many things can't be understood or appreciated through a journal or in academic debates.

Now, my problem with textuality and writing is that this is still happening in colonial languages. And my concern is with this: we are producing knowledge in colonial languages (and bear in mind, I only speak colonial languages and it's one of my limitations). By focusing on textuality and writing in colonial languages, there is still a logic of domination that we need to be transparent about. I am trying to think more carefully about how, through the journals written in colonial languages for the consumption of Global North academia, we are still reproducing the dominant rationalities of the institution, its vocabularies, its practices, and to what extent textuality and colonial languages are part of this.

For example, I am thinking about how the logic of academic writing and publishing keeps us perpetuating the idea of oppressions as interlocking, and not as intermeshing. The idea of oppressions as interlocking still centres around what is absent, and this is connected to colonial languages. Intermeshing, as María Lugones proposes, is different. It speaks back to multiplicity. It's a way of making space for multiplicity instead of reifying and reinstating multiple but fragmented systems of oppression as interlocking. With intermeshing, we invite ourselves to think *through* multiplicity, rather than through compartmentalising oppressive systems.

And I don't know to what extent colonial languages allow us to speak about intermeshings. There are notions of feminist struggles back home that have been translated into Spanish but that have roots in non-colonial cosmovisions and ways of sensing, that name and speak about intermeshings. For example, the notion of *territorio-cuerpo-tierra* (territory-body-land) of feminista comunitaria Maya xinca from Guatemala, Lorena Cabanal speaks about struggles for territory as inseparable from struggles to heal the violence exerted over women bodies and the Earth.[7] Furthermore, the terms don't refer only to the individual body or put a body in relation with multiple collectivities. In Spanish the term helps us name ways of intelligibility and understanding that intermesh human existence with land and memory (territory has a dimension of memory and remembrance). For the sake of speaking to us who only speak Spanish, feministas comunitarias such as Lorena Cabnal devised *territorio-cuerpo-tierra* as a way of naming that intermeshing. I understand that *territorio-cuerpo-tierra* doesn't only refer to usual intersections of difference, but brings Earth, land, the sacred world, the world of the ancestors together. So that's why I think that through colonial languages it's difficult if not impossible to name and hence make sense of

[7] Lorena Cabanal, 2016.

these intermeshing multiplicities. In Spanish you do it by using these terms together – *territorio-cuerpo-tierra*.

SS: **You discuss María Lugones's phrase, "*tantear en la oscuridad*" as a description of "feeling one's way in the dark."[8] How do you conceptualize knowing more broadly? This special issue is also about anticolonial feminist ways of knowing, which move beyond scientific understandings of evidence and proof, and which also suggest that sometimes we don't know, and other times we cannot know. For instance, you quote a conversation with a Zapatista woman, who makes a comment about how indigenous people are always relegated to the past, reproducing linear time.[9] How do you think about this idea of knowing and recording time in particular ways as a form of coloniality?**

RI: *Tantear en la oscuridad* – feeling one's way in the dark – I used it a long time ago for two reasons. I was really, really lost, and sensing myself lost, within the disciplinary boundaries of International Relations. What made sense to me were the worlds I was sensing through indigenous women's struggles back home, they were teaching me so many things. But the way I was trained in the UK didn't allow me to translate this to my colleagues (and this was before decoloniality was fashionable!). So, I felt totally and absolutely lost.

That was the moment I met María [Lugones] in Mexico, and at that time she had already developed long ago her ideas of resistant intentionalities. In that moment she had recently written the article *Towards a Decolonial Feminism* but her work on resistance was already there. I remember that when I met her she was presenting this paper and she was speaking about how resistance always starts with a question and a questioning. And then she started to explain how these questions don't seek to be intelligible to power, but they nonetheless exist. When I talked to her, she told me about her book, *Testimony of a Pilgrimage.* Its first chapter speaks about how she realised that theorising coalition in the way she wanted to wouldn't make sense to the dominant intelligibility or common sense, and that she was willing to take that risk. This is when she uses this phrase, *tantear en la oscuridad;* moving through the risk of being non-intelligible.

This phrase stayed with me because this is what I was experiencing in that moment: my language, my theoretical concepts, were not really giving me the possibility of making sense within IR, and so I decided to take the same risk María took. I decided to close my eyes to the concepts I was learning from IR and really trust my other senses: listening to poetry and songs, going back to dancing (because there is no revolution without a party, as the Zapatista women say). Understanding doesn't occur without the heart or the full senses. I learned from anthropologist friends in Mexico, some indigenous and some mestizas like me, that from some Maya cosmovisions, we learn through the heart and through feelings. Feelings and reason are not two fragmented systems but work together and are located in the centre of the body. You learn the world through connecting to the senses. So *tantear en la oscuridad* allows me to decentre

[8] Icaza, 2022.
[9] Ibid.

what we call "rationality" and through that I can then travel with others and learn from other ways of understanding how it is that we know.

Moving with others and the work of others is also important. *Tantear* is about movement. It's not just about knowing cosmologies or other ways of living, but it's about the physicality of moving with others physically, emotionally, and not just intellectually. That physicality is central to me. This is central for decolonial feminism too. When you are sensing with your body the limitations of your capacity to know, you are being vulnerable. For example, when you start dancing and don't know if it'll end up being disastrous, you are putting yourself in a vulnerable position. Or when you cook with others, or learn how to harvest with others when you have been socialised as an urban feminist being, you are in a vulnerable position. This vulnerability creates the possibility of learning through the senses and learning through the body with others.

SS: **Your work and your recent inaugural lecture both center the intersecting climate and epistemic catastrophes, and their connections to coloniality. How do you see these crises as connected?**

RI: I connect climate catastrophe and coloniality through the following question: Can we respond to the possibility of an ethical life that is not structurally implicated with the suffering and the consumption of the life of earth and others? Remember, every resistance starts with a questioning! But I am also a teacher, and this question allows me to address the connection in a pedagogical way that opens possibilities instead of closing them. My perspective is that as long as we are willing to ask this question and act upon the answers we are honestly giving, then there is hope. The next step is perhaps the hardest one and starts with another question: what are we willing to let go to be accountable to Earth? Do the research we do, the courses we teach, the feminist struggles we are part of affirm life? Whose life?

SS: **You write: "Decoloniality is not a field of study – it is a liberating praxis emerged from First Nations communities and Afro-descendant peoples in Abya Yala (the Americas) and their struggles for political autonomy and land restitution."[10] Can you speak more about what decoloniality means to you? And how do we think about "decoloniality" given the tension between its appropriation by the Western academy and its intent/function as a liberatory praxis?**

RI: This definition of decoloniality as a liberatory praxis points at an ethics of relational accountability. And in that sense, decolonial scholarship is not and has not been just an academic approach. It is positioned towards social and epistemic justice, is anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-capitalist, and is accountable to struggles for land by indigenous communities and Afro-descendant peoples in Abya Yala. Decoloniality is liberatory in the sense that it seeks to undo coloniality, in every layer of our multiple existence, including in our teaching at universities, but it is not only about undoing coloniality of the institutions either. Decoloniality is a praxis of refusal, in particular the logics of domination of institutions such as those that erase alternative multiple worlds of sense and that fragment these instead of displaying

[10] Ibid.

its overlapping multiplicity. For me decoloniality creates potentials for coalition and for learning each other (as M. Jacqui Alexander invites us to do[11]) across colonial divides.

[11] Alexander, 2015.

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