

Decolonial Feminism and Global Politics: Border Thinking and Vulnerability as a Knowing Otherwise*

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Introduction

FOR MORE THAN two decades,¹ the vast production of post-structuralist/post-positivist feminist critique and post-colonial feminism thinking within the field of International Relations and more recently on global politics have pushed forward critical investigations on their modern and colonial foundations (see Gruffyd Jones 2006; Pappart and Marchand 1995; Shilliam 2010; Sylvester 1993). In doing so, different epistemological positions have been deployed in their attempt to destabilise narratives that produce and reproduce dominant ideas about ‘the international’ and ‘global politics’ (GP). Today, these contributions constitute a fruitful background for the current wave of academic interest focused on critically understanding the epistemic foundations of IR and GP as disciplines responsible for thinking how power operates in the international and global spheres.²

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¹ In my chapter title I use the term *otherwise* following Arturo Escobar’s (2007) seminal article ‘Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise’, in which he speaks of the modernity/coloniality programme 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, an other way of thinking, *un paradigma otro*, the very possibility of talking about “worlds and knowledges otherwise”’ (Escobar 2007: 179).

² International Relations (IR) is understood in this text as a discipline mainly concerned about the operations of power between nation-states, and the nature of this power (i.e. as domination, relational, etc.), of nation-states (i.e. unified rational actor, sovereign entities, etc.) and of the system or environment in which these latter operate (e.g. anarchical, cooperative, complex interdependent, etc.). Meanwhile, global politics (GP) 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 globalisation.

Decolonial thinking has recently been partaking in this critical endeavour (see Icaza 2010; 2015; Icaza and Vázquez 2013; Taylor 2012). Belonging to a different geo-genealogy³ to that of post-colonial studies, decolonial thinking departs from acknowledging that there is ‘*no modernity without coloniality*’ (see Lugones 2010a; 2010b; Mignolo 2003; 2013; Quijano 2000; Vázquez 2009; 2011; 2014; Walsh 2007; 2010; 2011; 2012;). For the purposes of this chapter, 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 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.⁴

Furthermore, from the perspective of this option, ‘western modernity’ constitutes a dominant project of civilisation that claimed universality for itself at the moment of the violent encounter with ‘*the Other*’ and the subsequent concealment of this violence. This seminal encounter goes back to 1492 with the conquest of *Abya Yala* (the Americas) by Europeans and the subsequent genocide of millions of indigenous peoples, with their knowledges and ways of being in the world (see Mignolo 2003; Quijano 2000).

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, politics), knowledge and subjectivities, and gender and sexuality (see Mignolo 2013; Quijano 2000). From this perspective the ‘coloniality of power’ explains that ‘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 (see Lugones 2010a: 371). This analysis ‘has displayed the heterogeneous and transversal character of the modern/colonial system’ (Vázquez 2014: 176), counterpoising racial domination to Eurocentric Marxist theories of class exploitation.

More recently, it has been argued that modernity/coloniality as the binomial around which gravitates decolonial thinking has as a departure point the acknowledgement of the limits and exteriority of modernity (see Vázquez 2014: 173). This is to mark a contrast with the thinking centred in the western philosophical tradition, in which modernity in its different facets (i.e. unfinished modernity, plural and hybrid modernities, postmodernities, globalisation, capitalisms, and so on) is assumed as the totality of reality. ‘For decolonial thinking modernity (with its

³ Vázquez explains the relevance for decolonial critique of **geo-genealogies** to stress the site of enunciation. In his view, a **geo-genealogy** is a genealogy that acknowledges its situated origin, indicating a relationship to a geographically situated origin (Vázquez 2014: 178).

⁴ Argentinian cultural historian Zulma Palermo connects the relevance of understanding decolonial thinking as an ‘option’ to a border epistemology (see Palermo 2008).

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' (Vázquez 2014: 173).

From this perspective, to be conscious about modernity's underside (coloniality) grants a decolonial perspective to one's own perspective which becomes a thinking and sensing situated in the exteriority of 'modernity' (see Dussel 2001; Vázquez 2014: 173).

Furthermore, the binomial modernity/coloniality as an epistemic position seems to question categorical separation in two main ways: of specific categories (men–women, civilised–primitive), but also of separation as a heuristic operation to represent, hence appropriate, reality. For some thinkers, this later operation constitutes a key characteristic of Eurocentrism (see Lugones 1990; Vázquez 2014). But what seems more relevant for the purposes of this chapter is that modernity/coloniality expresses a *duality*, which is not to be conflated to a binary⁵ or a dialectic.⁶

In a nutshell, 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 ethnocentrism. 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 (see 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 locus of enunciation: the historical movement of modernity as from which hegemony and privilege has named reality, for example, the name given to *Abya Yala* as Latin America and its peoples as 'Indians' and more recently 'indigenous' or 'minorities'. Meanwhile, the historical movement of coloniality is a moment in which the negation of realities and worlds otherwise that exceed the dominant modern geo-genealogy of modernity takes place, for example, when normative systems outside or in the margins of the nation-state are denied validity (see Icaza 2015; Vázquez 2014).

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

⁵ One of the key contributions of feminist anti-essentialist approaches has been that of revealing 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? Precisely, Gloria Anzaldúa and Maria Lugones' thought is crucial for an understanding of duality *otherwise*. In the same way, the work of Mexican ethno-historian feminist Sylvia Marcos (2006) on Mesoamerican civilisations' eroticism and spirituality reveals an exteriority to western feminist anti-essentialism.

⁶ When thinking duality not just as a dialectic, I have in mind Enrique Dussel's proposal for transmodernity (see Dussel 2001).

knowledges and cosmovisions that have been actively produced⁷ as backward or ‘subaltern’ by hegemonic forms of understanding ‘the international’ and ‘global politics’ become politically visible (see de Sousa Santos *et al.* 2007). This has been explored in relation to *sumak kawsay* (‘the good living’) and global trade politics in South America by Walsh (2011) and in relation to customary law, the monocultural perception of ‘human’ rights, and global social dissent by Icaza (2015).

Decolonial thinking has precisely introduced *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 (see Icaza and Vázquez 2016).⁸ 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 what disdains all other perspectives and forms of knowing (see Mignolo 2010; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006). As such, border thinking is seen as a ‘fracture of the epistemology of the zero point’ and as a possibility for a critical rethinking of the geo- and body politics of knowledge, the modern/colonial foundations of political economy analysis and of gender (see Grosfoguel 2007; Lugones 2010a; 2010b; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006: 206).

However, it is Argentinian feminist philosopher Maria Lugones’ (1992) interpretation of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* (1987) that allows us to fully consider the epistemic contribution of a border thinking as an *embodied consciousness* in which dualities and vulnerability are central for a decolonisation of how we think about the geo- and body politics of knowledge, political economy, and of course, gender in IR and GP. This will be the focus of my chapter.

In what follows, I am particularly interested in addressing 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 *et al.* 2016: 150). 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’.⁹ In so doing, I introduce auto-ethnographic reflection in a *diological* format as developed by Mexican anthropologist Xochitl Leyva Solano (2013) who defines it as ‘a kind of praxis of research of *co-labor* (collaborative research) in which the written text is a dialogue with the spoken and written word, with visuality, with past

⁷ I am using ‘produced’ in an active sense, hence not as an accident or natural circumstance, following de Sousa Santos, who speaks about 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 existing knowledges (de Sousa Santos *et al.* 2007).

⁸ Inspired by Maria Lugones’ decolonial feminism, I am thinking here of the colonial wound not only as a cultural expression, but also as from the physicality of the enslavement, racialisation, rape, and dehumanisation of some bodies, but not all bodies.

⁹ This was the invitation originally formulated by Marc Woons and Sebastian Weier, editors of *Developing a Critical Epistemology of Global Politics* (Woons and Weier 2017).

and present experiences and with the imagined horizon of autonomy' (see Barbosa da Costa *et al.* 2015; Icaza 2015; Leyva Solano 2013).

This 'method' is offered as an option to think the 'self-ascribed' *epistemic* privileges of interpretation and representation of the world but also the state of vulnerability that carries to un-learn them, to refuse 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 Maria Lugones' powerful interpretative analysis of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* (1987). As such this chapter is divided into the following sections. The first introduces central elements in Lugones' interpretative analysis of *Borderlands*: border subjectivity, duality, and vulnerability. The following section presents three vignettes of different extension and format 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' that interprets and represents reality. The final section offers some initial reflections about the questions that are opened through this text.

Borderlands and Vulnerability in International Relations

Elsewhere, I have argued that the work of Maria Lugones constitutes a powerful perspective for a critical rethinking of the global politics of resistance to neoliberalism (Icaza 2010). In particular, Lugones' feminist decolonial thinking contributes to a critical rethinking 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 form 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 Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (1987) and Maria Lugones' *border dwelling* approach to knowledge, Sylvester tells us about '*the need to see and theorize the domestic shadow lands around us*' (1993: 270).

But what Sylvester doesn't 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, not just a discursive strategy to destabilise dominant narratives over 'the international'*.

Ann Fausto-Sterling's work on the construction of the body offers some elements 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 Maria Lugones' decolonial feminism, grounded on feminisms of African-Americans, Chicanas, and women of colour, that, by understanding *border thinking* as an *embodied consciousness* of dualities and vulnerability, brings to the fore the racialised body as a 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 a nutshell, Lugones, thinking from an embodied experience of enslavement and racialisation, invites us 'to think from the ground up, from the body, [and] therefore averts the generalisations that are common to abstract modern/colonial thought', including dominant epistemologies in IR and GP (Icaza and Vázquez 2016: 62). 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 destabilisation and resistance' (Icaza 2016; Icaza and Vázquez 2016: 62–63). This is what I intend to develop in what follows.

The Self-in-Between, Border Subjectivities, and Embodied Dualities

Lugones' (1992: 32) interpretative analysis of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* (1987) departs from a critical observation regarding oppression theories as those focused on depicting the effects of oppression and 'without intention ... rul[ing] out resistance', which appears unintelligible in the 'logical framework of oppression theories'. For Lugones (1992: 32), Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* 'captures both an everyday history of oppression and an everyday history of resistance ... Her culture, though oppressive, also grounds her resistance.' This expresses, for Lugones, 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 to rethink 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 IPE (see Icaza 2010).

Following Anzaldúa's notion of mestizo consciousness, Lugones (1992: 32) 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.

Lugones' analysis of Anzaldúa's also tells us about Coatlicue, an early Mesoamerican creator goddess who embodies both a dark aspect (*Coatlicue*) and a lighter side (*Tonantsi*). Through this, Lugones not only brings to the forefront

duality to think the social (or in our case the international and the global), but through this *embodied duality* she invites us to transcend abstraction so akin to masculinist dominant thinking.

In speaking of how, in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, Coatlatlopeuh becomes the chaste and desexed character of the Virgin of Guadalupe of the Spanish colonisers and the Catholic Church, Lugones focuses on an important aspect of Anzaldúa's ideas on borders and border subjectivities: Chicanos/Mexicanos as people who cross cultures are tolerant to ambiguity *out of necessity*. Lugones (1992: 34) characterises these subjectivities by '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'.

Border subjectivities as rooted in a tolerance to ambiguity *out of 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 (Lugones 1992: 35). This means an emphasis on a knowing that sits in bodies and territories and their local histories, in contrast to disembodied, abstract, universalist knowledge that generates global designs (see Mignolo 2009; 2010). Recognising that knowledge is situated implies being able to 'see the world from specific locations, embodied and particular, and never innocent' (Rose 1997: 308).

On Vulnerability, (Epistemic) Privileges, and Coalitions

Lugones (1992: 35) 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'. In this listening, Lugones (1992: 35) 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*'.

From this perspective, a border thinking born *out of the necessity* of people crossing oppressive/dehumanising cultures as a form of knowing otherwise is an embodied sensual experience of epistemic vulnerability, in which the safety of what is known is relinquished. Here I try to emphasise relinquishing safety as an act of resistance to oppressions. In that sense, it is a liberatory act of those plural selves that delink from the confines of intelligibility, of what they are told or allowed to think/sense.

Can this liberatory act of 'oppressed/colonized' selves carry with it a potential to create coalitions with those questioning their self-ascribed epistemological privileges such as their abstract universals, detached and disembodied ways of knowing, assumptions of objectivity to generate 'right' science, and so on?

Lugones' (1992: 36) interest in the possibility of coalitional forms of resistance notes that Anzaldúa's interest in 'describing states in the psychology of oppression and liberation' leads her to emphasise crossing-over as '*a solitary act*, an act of solitary rebellion ... [hence] she does not reveal *the sociality of resistance*'.

The sociality of resistance is central to Lugones' view in her interpretation of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and in her latest work (see Lugones 2003; 2010a; 2010b), to the extent that she emphasises in relation to a plural self that resists and germinates in the borderlands the following: 'unless resistance is a social activity, the resister is doomed to failure in the creation of a new universe of meaning, a new identity ...' (Lugones 1992: 36).

In this way, Lugones (1992: 36) offers coalitions and coalitional selves as a necessary step out of that state of isolated (epistemic) 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 disorganized, process of resistance.' The survival of the Spanish language among Chicanos/mexicanos is an example that Lugones brings from Anzaldúa to emphasise the sociality of resistance. The more than 500 years of struggle of original peoples in the Americas would be another example of this sociality.

This sociality of resistance is central in Lugones (1992: 36) 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.' To the isolation of border thinking as a form of embodied consciousness in which resistance sits, Lugones (1992: 37) counterpoises coalitions in 'breaking down our isolation against the odds prescribed by "the confines of the normal"'.¹⁰

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 organised to help immigrants, mostly from Central America, crossing their town during their travel to the USA. The story of these women, who today are called 'Las Patronas' (female patrons), began in February 1995 when two sisters, Bernarda and Rosa Romero, were standing with their groceries at a train crossing in the village, waiting for a train to pass. Migrants on the first railway carriage began shouting, 'Madre, I'm hungry' (Sorrentino 2012). Since that day, the Romero sisters, joined by a dozen other volunteers, both women and children, from this and other towns and countries, have cooked hundreds of portions of food daily, packing them in plastic bags and adding refilled water bottles, which are handed to the immigrants while the train is in motion.¹⁰

¹⁰ For more information on a short film about this story, see www.eltrendelasmoscas.com/.

In international media outlets and academic analyses, the actions of Las Patronas have been framed as a form of ‘motherly’ solidarity¹¹ and as an example of an ethics of care (Buzonne 2012). What is common in this sort of analysis is the emphasis on understanding correctly what Las Patronas are or represent in the geopolitics of migration and diaspora. It seems to be about how ‘a knowing subject’ – the academic, the activist, the media correspondent – explains *them*.

Cassandra Price describes her physical state in her encounter with Las Patronas as follows:

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 heart beats. As I move about my days, slight motion sickness disturbs the remnants of nausea that I felt in ~~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)

In her text, which is featured in the ‘Global Perspective’ section of Loyola University’s *Women and Gender Studies Journal*, Price tell us of the high risks that migrants from Central America face on their way to the USA: from accidents while riding *La Bestia* (or the ‘Death Train’), to human traffickers and corrupt authorities. However, her account about migrants’ vulnerability turns into a reflection on her own physical vulnerability when confronted with the work of delivering food to migrants hanging from the fast train in movement, as Las Patronas do:

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.

(Price 2013: 15)

The words of feminist Cassandra Price provide an opportunity to grasp what might happen to a ‘knowing subject’ once the experience of encountering Las Patronas becomes the starting point from where privileges are questioned: ‘I would likely never have to make such a journey.’ I also understand Price’s narrative, which goes from the vulnerability of migrants to her own physical vulnerability, as an invitation to consider that in the social construction of our bodies, as Fausto-Sterling (2000: 20) maintains, we incorporate ‘experience in our own flesh’: ‘I could not

¹¹ See, for example, the report by the BBC’s Mexico correspondent Willy Grant on Las Patronas: www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-28193230.

eat ... from the moment the train passed by, I felt my whole body begin to boil.' Finally, Price's narrative helps us to consider the limits of bodiless/disembodied approaches in mainstream IR and the GP with which women like Las Patronas are repeatedly 'studied'.

Fieldwork Diary Notes on the Going Glocal Programme

August 7 2013, Visit to the Migrant Shelter 'Hermanos del Camino'

Today, we visited the 'Hermanos del Camino' (*Brothers in the Road*) shelter for migrants in the city of Ixtepec in the state of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico.¹² We had arrived the night before in Juchitan where we spent the night.

As our visit to the shelter had been previously arranged, 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 Solandide Guerra, appeared to welcome us. He told us that the shelter was founded in 2007 and explained that it provides temporary humanitarian aid, which includes food, shelter, and medical, psychological, and legal help to migrants from Central America.¹³ We were told that the residents of the shelter stay an average of three days. A female volunteer indicated that in 2012 they had received a total of 11,000 persons, and already in the first six months of 2013 they had supported a total of 7,100, of whom 90 per cent were men from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

Solalinde continued to explain to us 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 10 to 12 hours they arrive in Ixtepec, Oaxaca; 700 kilometres later they will arrive in Lecheria in Mexico City. From there they have to travel around 2,800 kilometres hanging on the train to reach Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez or Matamoros which are the main entry points to the USA on the border with Mexico.

I perceived a deep silence after Solalinde finished his explanation. Few seconds later, the silence was broken by the 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 on their way to the USA too. The mother told me that she had to stop in the shelter because her daughter became ill. While I translated this to the students on the visit, I noted that some of them were holding hands. Is this an act of physical comfort to each other? I was wondering that when Solalinde invited us to sit down and hold a conversation with the residents of the shelter.

¹² The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs financed the Going Glocal Programme discussed in this section through the SBOS grant. See www.goingglocal.nl.

¹³ See www.hermanosenelcamino.org/english.html.

All the residents were called and we formed a circle. Each of them told his/her 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 USA; I think that I will want to go to the Netherlands.' Everybody laughed 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; she drank some and started to talk to me about her family and friends back home in the Netherlands. She couldn't stop talking to me. I simply listened and thought on how important it seemed to her to tell me about her loved ones and how important they are to her. She fell sleep. I thought that everything was now OK and that she had simply 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 myself, and it is only when I came here that I realised how much I needed to ask them.'¹⁴

While listening to this, I could not stop asking myself what we had just witnessed? Is the realisation of one's own privileges a form of knowing *otherwise*?

The above-shared words are the notes gathered during my participation as one of the coordinators of the Dutch programme of education on global citizenship in higher education 'Going Glocal'. In Mexico, this programme included a field trip that brought students 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 (see Vázquez 2015: 92).

In reporting about the experience, the main coordinator of the programme in Mexico reflects that 'the geographical trip did not guarantee that the participants

¹⁴ Final Session: San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, 15 August 2013.

would be able to travel beyond their world of meaning, beyond their position of consumers of the world, or beyond the “selfie tourist” position’ (see Vázquez 2015: 95). Therefore, the trip was designed and implemented as an intercultural encounter of university students with the concrete struggles of the Oaxaca and Chiapas indigenous communities and of Central American migrants on their way to the USA.

At its core, the programme was grounded on a decolonial framework and the deployment of pedagogies of positionality and world travelling. The former was understood as promoting critical self-reflection in the students as members of the consumer society regarding their privileges (socio-economic and epistemic) as built upon the destitution of ‘others’. The latter was understood as providing students with (1) a critical awareness of their own location as a historically situated site of enunciation, but also with (2) 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 (see Vázquez 2015).

Eurocaravana 43: Thinking through the Vulnerability of a Sick Body

On 26 September 2014, the town of Ayotzinapa in the state of Guerrero, Mexico made it to world news 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 known as Guerreros Unidos.

Within a few hours of these tragic events, the hashtag *#todosomoyotzinapa* (‘We are all Ayotzinapa’) and *#ayotzinapaaccionglobal* (‘Ayotzinapa Global Action’) began trending on Twitter in Mexico. A few days later, massive street demonstrations, performances, and flash mobs were organised in different Mexican cities and across the USA, Europe, and Asia. Meanwhile, in Europe, local human rights organisations started to organise social media campaigns to raise awareness of the events (see Icaza 2016). Between 17 April and 19 May 2015, the Eurocaravana 43, an international awareness-raising tour by Ayotzinapa students’ representatives and their families, visited 18 cities and 14 European countries.¹⁵

During the organising process of the Eurocaravana 43, young Mexican activists resident in the Netherlands expressed to me their concerns about 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 or their institutions. We don’t want the relatives or their terrible and painful experience to be taken by academics as something to be analysed, as an object of study.’¹⁶ Like other conversations held with activists, these words expressed 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 theorises and

¹⁵ See www.facebook.com/Caravana43 and [#Eurocaravana43](https://twitter.com/Eurocaravana43).

¹⁶ Interview with representatives of Eurocaravana 43.

re-learns about the world (see Barbosa da Costa *et al.* 2015; Icaza 2015); Icaza and Vázquez 2013). But then, how can one actually do that un-learning and re-learning?

In the Netherlands, the Eurocaravana 43 visited the city of Leiden on 16 May and Amsterdam the day after. As a feminist IR academic of Mexican background, I was invited to participate in the different academic–activist events organised to raise awareness in the Netherlands of the tragic events of September 2014 in Ayotzinapa. Owing to an unexpected complication of cancer treatment, I had to follow from my bed the events on Twitter and Facebook and the academic conferences through livestream.¹⁷ Like feminist Yoanna Hedva, who develops her ‘sick women theory’ to reflect 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’ (Hevda 2015).

But in contrast to Hevda (2015), for me the sense of vulnerability that sickness brought with it was an opportunity to rethink and further question the always-capable-healthy-fit-mobile body of an academic in contemporary academia doing research on social resistance (see Icaza 2015). In other words, not being 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 (see Adichie 2009); Escobar and Harcourt 2005; Haraway 1988; Lugones 2003). 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, DC, Brussels, Paris) and of certain events and memories (Charlie Hebdo killings) are universalised and reproduced as ‘common’ sense from which ‘we’ think in the ‘International’ and ‘the global’ (Icaza 2015).

Three Vignettes, Some Common Questions

The vignettes above were introduced as a possible way to present moments of epistemic vulnerability of differently positioned ‘knowing subjects’ and to grasp possibilities of a knowing *otherwise* in germination. But which are the elements of that knowing? In which ways does border thinking as an *embodied consciousness* and *not just a discursive strategy to destabilise dominant narratives over ‘the international’* become central for a critical rethinking of how we think/sense about the international and the global? In this final section, I present some initial elements to address these two questions.

First of all, it is vital to understand that one of the crucial limitations of the dominant epistemology in IR and GP is grounded on a one-dimensional self: the

¹⁷ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9kRtzTe9fA.

one able to observe, scrutinise, analysed the international, including other selves and their places and communities who are there to be observed, scrutinised, and analysed.

Second, a plural self in germination as introduced by Lugones (1992) is an invitation to rethink not only that supposedly ‘unitary observant self’, but also his 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/homogeneous selves observing ‘the international’ reality. In this chapter, 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 rethinking of IR and GP dominant epistemologies not just as a discursive source to destabilise binary thinking, but as embodied epistemic sites of enunciation in its own right. By this latter I mean that in this embodied episteme, duality is an invitation to think selves and the reality of ‘the international’ these multiple selves inhabit, not only in the dialectical binaries so present in IR and GP analyses or as if these were abstract intellectual constructions. Moreover, it is an invitation to seriously think about one’s own implications in the global dynamics of migration, diaspora, and disappearance as interconnected to the exploitation of resources and people’s lives.

As such, the vignettes aim to transmit vulnerability, even physical vulnerability, as one’s way of thinking/sensing ‘reality’ to counter placeless, abstract, bodiless IR and GP dominant epistemologies’ foundations. This is the kind of gnosis that I aim to stress in each vignette, in which the self-ascribed ‘knowing subject’ as a detached, objective observer is placed in a relationship with plural selves that **is** marked by coloniality: she who crosses cultures that dehumanise and oppress her, she who germinates in the borderlands, she who tolerates contradiction and ambiguity, she who cannot be tamed by rigid conceptual boundaries making herself ‘vulnerable to foreign ways of thinking’ (see Lugones 1992: 35).

I would like to finish by going back to the central idea of this chapter: in the context of IR and GP, to think ‘the international’ *otherwise* from positions of epistemic and other forms of privilege would require more than border thinking as a discursive strategy to destabilise binary thinking. Border thinking as an embodied consciousness points at what Snyman (2015: 269) calls a *hermeneutic of vulnerability*, ‘of the self as a perpetrating agent and of those who still bear the brunt of the aftermath of coloniality’.

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