Reconstructing Women's Contemporary Political Struggles across the Central American Region

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Introduction

This essay aims at giving more visibility to Central America as a region in this collection of texts on different experiences and perspectives of feminist struggles in the Americas. We voice these reflections from our embodied positionalities as Nicaraguans, Central Americans, migrants, and feminists; positions which also situate us among the silences, tensions, and contradictions of the unresolved political processes in the region. At the same time, we understand the global context in which this region is usually viewed, either as a tourist destination or as territories marked by migration and violence in its multiple expressions.

With this in mind, we reconstruct two emblematic cases, which do not do justice to the complexity of the region, but can, in an exemplary manner, shed light on the contemporary struggles of Central American women and their interconnections as collective bodies in resistance. These cases are (1) the struggles and legacy of the Lenca indigenous leader Berta Cáceres in Honduras, and (2) the work by the Asociación Madres de Abril (April Mothers' Association, AMA) in Nicaragua[1]. Based on these two cases, we ask how the respective actors enunciate their struggles, what positions they assume, and what possible worlds they construct through their political actions and resistances – both individually and collectively[2]. We are also concerned with how these struggles are

1 In both cases, we carried out documentary research. Additionally, in the case of Nicaragua, we conducted an interview with two members of AMA on 11 November 2021.

2 Regarding positionality, keep in mind that not all women's struggles in the region self-proclaim as feminist, nor is that particularly important to them. However, from their collective actions, they construct political strategies that subvert the traditional gen-

articulated within the respective communities and in relation to other social movements and political struggles in the region.

Our concerns are connected to Diana Taylor's question: "What can we do when apparently nothing can be done, and doing nothing is not an option?" (2020: 2) While there are no easy answers to this question, we center our attention on the contexts, experiences, and *Situated Knowledges* (Haraway 1988) of the region to show some of the political, cultural, or artistic action that is possible in these situations. Fundamentally, we can only approach and understand these questions from the context and the bodies – ergo, the lives – that are directly affected.

"The River Told Me", the Political Struggle of Berta and the COPINH in Honduras

The name of Berta Cáceres, leader of the indigenous Lenca people, resonates in the hearts of many in Central America and other parts of the world. Sadly, her cultural and political significance has become particularly meaningful since her murder in 2016, at the hands of hitmen hired by David Castillo, an official of Honduran Company Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (COPINH 2022). A slogan (*consigna* in Spanish) better expresses how her seed of struggle and resistance has spread after the fact: "Berta did not die, she multiplied".

Besides raising her voice in defiance of injustices perpetrated against indigenous people in Honduras, Berta actively participated in the struggle for environmental protection through her work as co-founder and coordinator of COPINH (short for the Spanish acronym of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras)[3]. When speaking about Berta, it is impor-

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der order, along with new visions of citizenship, justice – especially political and environmental – , and radical democracy. Moreover, our interest is not to label in which category of feminism we can fit the work of AMA and COPINH, but to explore how they build collective projects from their voices, identities, and actions, which confront the different systems of oppression and exploitation (capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy) within their communities and beyond.

3 COPINH is a Lenca association founded in 1993. Through its articulations with other indigenous and popular groups inside and outside Honduran borders, it has a strong national impact in Honduras, although the territories of the Lenca communities are located in the southwestern part of the country. See: https://copinh.org/category/english-es/.

tant to underline the efforts that marked her and her family's lives, as an indigenous woman disconnected from the institutionalized political powers and academic circles in Honduras, but deeply involved in political and community organization through COPINH.

Through this organization, which describes itself as "indigenous and popular, anti-patriarchal, anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberal", (COPINH: n.d.)[4] Berta helped coordinate immense participation and mobilization of indigenous communities in Honduras, in direct response to the political and economic system that – still today – means the death of the traditions and ancestral ecosystems of the region. The first major achievement was the ratification of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (no. 169) by the Honduran government in 1994, brought about by the pressure exerted by COPINH. This convention binds the governments to guarantee systematic action in order to respect the aspirations of indigenous peoples "to exercise control over their own institutions, ways of life, and economic development and to maintain and develop their identities, languages, and religions, within the framework of the states in which they live" (ILO: n.d.). On their part, COPINH combines constant reporting and complaints, popular education, and practical efforts as part of their permanent criticism of the ideas of democracy and development imposed by the Honduran state.

One of the fruits of a process of deep self-criticism within this organization is the recognition of the fundamental role of indigenous women, who actively participate with "massive presence in the streets and on many fronts of this struggle: in leadership, in political commissions, in international relations, in communication, in security aspects, in the self-defense of the neighborhoods" (Cáceres quoted by Korol 2018: 91). Undoubtedly, recognizing the anti-patriarchal struggle as one of the pillars of COPINH starts with community reflections in which indigenous women participate while putting their communities at the center. Berta said the following about this struggle:

> Patriarchy is not exclusive to the capitalist system, nor to one culture or another. I believe that we have to guarantee that in this process – which is a process to re-found [reinvent] even our very mindsets –, we begin to

4 All translations from Spanish into English are our own. All the quotes from COPINH n.d.; Korol 2018; Cáceres 2015a; Pita 2001; AMA 2018, 2022; Rodríguez Aguilera 2018; De Volo 2001; Hilgert/List 2018 and unpublished interviews were originally conducted in Spanish.

> dismantle this idea that others have to decide over our bodies; and guarantee that we are the owners and have the right to the autonomy of our bodies. It is a political action, a political proposal (ibid: 105).

Berta's words are not only inspiring, but they always remain critical of patriarchal ways of thinking. This criticism translates, as she puts it, into a political proposal that questions patriarchy even beyond the colonial capitalist system. The work starts in our own bodies and in our communities, a fact that COPNIH put into action by organizing their collective resistance and articulating with other political struggles in the region. The formulation of policies based on the body as territory, on gender, and on the non-human as constitutive of their political commitment is another result of internal community reflections. Likewise, these policies are characteristic of other indigenous struggles in the Americas, albeit in different contexts[5]. Examples are the Zapatista organization in Mexico, the K'iche's peoples in Guatemala, the Aymara between Peru, Bolivia and Chile, or the Mesoamerican Women Territorial Leaders Coordinator (Coordinadora de Mujeres Líderes Territoriales de Mesoamérica, in Spanish). The active participation of women in indigenous organizations seems to respond to Berta's call: "Let's wake up! Let's wake up Humankind! There is no more time. Our consciences will be shaken by the fact that we are only contemplating self-destruction based on capitalist, racist, and patriarchal predation" (Cáceres 2015a)[6].

In the case of Honduras, after the *coup d'état* in 2009 that placed Juan Orlando Hernández in executive power, the government granted multiple concessions for large projects such as industrial sawmills and hydroelectric plants. State officials also began a campaign of criminalizing human rights defenders and environmental activists who opposed these concessions, which were

5 Understandably, the way these social movements see themselves in relation to their bodies – individually and collectively – and to their territories and natural surroundings does not follow Western colonial traditions that see the human and non-human as different, even opposed entities. While this fundamental difference in paradigms is a topic that exceeds the scope of this article, we would like to underline that these challenges and criticisms are alive in the political struggles articulated in these movements.

6 The entire acceptance speech with English subtitles can be found in: Cáceres, Berta (2015b): "Berta Caceres acceptance speech, 2015 Goldman Prize ceremony." 26 June 2022 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR1kwx8b0ms).

issued without consulting the communities that were going to be directly affected (Goldman Environmental Prize n.d.; Reyes/Yaya/Thissen 2015). In this context, the Lenca community achieved a significant victory by preventing the construction of the Agua Zarca dam on the Gualcarque River. As expressed by Berta, this waterway has great spiritual and symbolic value for this community: "We, the Lenca people, are ancestral custodians of the rivers, protected by the spirits of the young girls who teach us that giving our lives in multiple ways to defend the rivers is to give our lives for the good of humanity and this planet" (Cáceres 2015a).

The organized work of COPINH – and the specific struggle of Berta Cáceres – is situated in this context of abuses of institutionalized power in the Honduran state. The persecution of indigenous environmental activists through Honduran military forces and judicial institutions has been recorded in multiple reports by human rights organizations (Global Witness 2017), as it resulted in the assassination of several community leaders, including Berta Cáceres in March 2016. The reactions to Berta's murder have exposed a network of impunity, complicity, and corruption within the Honduran government (Lakhani 2020). Complaints by COPINH and other sister organizations resulted in the sentencing of David Castillo in June 2022 as the mastermind of Berta's murder, although legal efforts to dismantle the criminal network behind the case continue (COPINH 2022). Nonetheless, the lessons of hope and resistance in the face of a system of death, lessons that Berta Cáceres taught by the example of the life she led, are the seeds that continue to germinate in the region.

One of these seeds is the work of Berta Cáceres's own daughter, Laura Zúñiga Cáceres, who started coordinating COPINH after her mother's assassination, as well as the quest for justice she pursues together with her sister Berta, her brother Salvador, and the support of comrades. Berta's legacy is both intergenerational and intersectional, building collective resistance in the Americas as the clamor for justice unifies many sectors and movements: environmental, indigenous, feminists – especially decolonial (Curiel 2020). Her murder is one of many examples of the danger faced by people who defend their territory in Latin America, which, according to reports by the NGO Global Witness (2021), is the region with the most critical conditions for this activity in the world. Finally, Berta's multiple struggles and legacies are also reflected in art, murals, and music that honor her individual and collective memory. In these displays of love and solidarity, among multiple resistances, germinates the seed of shared struggles that bet on "societies capable of coexisting in a just and dignified manner and for life" (Cáceres 2015a).

Mothers of April: Constructing Memories and Politicizing Motherhood

In the contexts of military dictatorships, authoritarian states and their characteristic necropolitics, and forced migrations throughout the continent, it is possible to trace the struggles of different organizations of mothers, grandmothers, and relatives of murdered or disappeared persons. Possibly the best-known organizations in the Americas are the Associations of Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, both created in 1977 during the period of Jorge Rafael Videla's military dictatorship in Argentina. Here, we approach the contemporary stories of Central American mothers, who represent a turning point in our region on how we understand the political dimension of motherhood, via political and embodied exercises of civil disobedience. In other words, through their struggles, they have reframed how mobilizing notions of "motherhood becomes the key to their entrance into the public sphere" (Pita 2001: 141) and, therefore, to the political struggle.

We will particularly focus on the case of AMA (April Mothers' Association) in Nicaragua, an organization that brings together the mothers and relatives – up to the 3rd degree of kinship – of people who were killed through repressions by the Nicaraguan state, in the course of massive, decentralized protests that began in Nicaragua in April 2018. The circumstantial demands that unleashed the protests, such as the lack of efficient government's response to a forest fire in the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve[7], or reforms to the national social security scheme, grew into larger demands, such as justice, democracy, and the creation of an economic and political model beyond extractivist practices (see Osorio Mercado/Cortez/Sánchez 2018). The intensification of the demands and the massive waves of protests were accompanied by waves of repression by police and paramilitary forces. The result was massive arrests, more than 355 people killed, thousands of reports of people injured, tortured, or sexually abused,

7 On April 9, the Nicaraguan government denied aid from the Costa Rican government under the pretext that it was able to manage the crisis with its own resources (see Astorga 2018). Nevertheless, the forest fire continued in the following days without sufficient equipment to control it. The reserve has also suffered the effects of extensive cattle ranching, land invasion and agribusiness, which is promoted or facilitated by the current government and directly affects indigenous communities in that region.

and more than 100,000 people forcibly migrating in the months directly following (Acción Penal et al 2021)[8]. As of February 2023, the state is holding 35 political prisoners (Presas y Presos Políticos Nicaragua 2023)[9].

As Emilia Y. and Tamara M. (both members of AMA) told us in an interview on 17 November 2021, faced with this situation, the mothers of the city of Estelí began to organize in April 2018 to denounce the murders of their children and family members in the media and in judicial spaces. Then, in May, they organized other types of protests: weekly sit-ins in one of the central public roads of the capital, in the Metrocentro roundabout. Even under constant police siege, the mothers congregated there for several weeks and little by little, the organization became stronger. Another germinal moment for this association occurred on Mother's Day that same year (30 May in Nicaragua), when the mothers called for what became known as "the mother of all marches." They called on people to join them in a massive demonstration of mourning for the children and family members killed so far by the state. The popular response was overwhelming. The state's response was also overwhelming, as the central demonstration in Managua culminated in a massacre, with hundreds of people injured and at least 19 killed (Acción Penal et al 2021).

In September of the same year, the April Mothers' Association (AMA) was formally founded, whose acronym in Spanish can also be read as the action form of the verb "love" (Yang Rappaccioli 2022). Starting from the name of the Association, AMA highlights a different circuit of affective and collective action in a hostile political context. In addition, being an association led by family members and mothers enables "the recognition [of their] power, to empower

8 Due to the context of political violence and state persecution in the country, there are major difficulties in accessing verifiable information from public state institutions, which in turn deny all these accusations. We take the figures mentioned in this essay from the report presented in 2021 by fifteen Nicaraguan human rights organizations, which systematically condensed the reports documented by national (ANPDH, CENIDH) and international organizations (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the IACHR of the OAS through MESENI and the GIEI – which also took on the independent Ayotzinapa case investigations in Mexico –, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch).

9 Up until February 9th, the number exceeded 245, on which date 222 of those political prisoners were exiled and stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship through a law reform passed on the same date that classified them as "traitors to the homeland" (Confidencial 2023). See also the monthly report of political prisoners: https://presasypresospoliticosnicaragua.org/lista-mensual-de-personas-presas-politicos/

themselves through the pain, to empower in having an organization in the pursuit of justice and their participation as women" (Tamara M., Personal Communication, 11 November 2021).

It is important to stress that different uses or notions of motherhood were also mobilized within the Nicaraguan political conjuncture. As Hilgert/List (2018) explains, on the one hand, there are strategies to maternalize the political (maternalizar lo político) and strategies to politicize motherhood (politización de la maternidad). The first strategy is used by Vice President Rosario Murillo, as she constructs a discourse in which the state is framed as a family-nation, with Daniel Ortega as the father-president, Murillo as the mother-mediator, and the citizens as the children. In this perspective, any dissident citizenship threatens the peace of the family-nation. Thus, the strategy to maternalize the political is essential "to discredit the opposing political positions, to denigrate the social movements that denounce the current status of this family-nation" (17). Moreover, from this image of the mother-mediator, "peace and reconciliation are pursued, but without considering the issue of social justice" (ibid: 16).

Regarding the second strategy, AMA's activism produces "a political consciousness that enables motherhood to serve as an articulating axis, thus allowing it to enter into the game of hegemony" (ibid: 17). Moreover, this political consciousness manages to articulate the relationship between social movements, justice, and the ethics of love (see hooks 2001: xix) through different strategies. First, by mothers making themselves present and mourning in the public space, where they assert the absence and loss of lives that go unrecognized (see Butler 2016) by the Nicaraguan state. In this way, they challenge the discourse of the family-nation, thus producing a possible emancipatory potential. And second, they make their affective and political practices visible also in their discourses, like in their first public manifesto, where they declare the four pillars of their organization as being: "truth, justice, integral reparation, and the construction of memory" (AMA 2018).

Let us think for a moment about the last pillar, since other mothers' organizations such as the "Committee of Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs" already existed in Nicaragua in the 1980s. However, memory exercises in the country have not only been scarce, but also mostly co-opted and institutionalized by the state. This has created counterproductive effects, as it leads to processes of marginalization of others who do not participate in line with the state's intentions, creating "multiply wounded societies" (Cabrera n.d.: 8). In the case of the 1980s Committee mentioned before, the memories of their relatives were con-

structed following the images of "heroes and martyrs" of the 1979 Sandinista revolution[10]. This resulted in frames of memories and devices of the gaze in which the only way to remember, name, and mourn lost lives is through heroic death, which in turn is reinforced by the party structures of the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) and its slogan "Patria libre o morir" (roughly translated to "Free Homeland or Death").

To counterbalance these discourses and the re-victimization operated from the State, the project: "AMA y no olvida: Museo contra la Impunidad" (LOVE and do not forget: Museum against Impunity) was created. This museum follows a participatory, communitarian and transmedia approach, where several actors converge: the members of AMA as central subjects of the process, the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH), the Academy of Sciences of Nicaragua (ACN), and other people who are independently committed to the struggle of AMA[11]. As project members Tamara and Emilia told us, the museum has sought to provide multiple spaces: a) one of recognition among family members and their stories; b) one of collective mourning, which was denied by the Nicaraguan state by prohibiting masses and demonstrations, disrupting funerals and burials, etc.; and c) one of healing and creation of memories, avoiding discourses of sacrifice and martyrdom to replace them with others that appeal to integral justice for the murder of their relatives.

These exercises of collective memories and actions transcend the museum project itself, which is only one of several activities within the context of the AMA project. Although the main activities are carried out by the mothers, the same dialogue spaces have allowed fathers and young people (especially young

10 Although this essay does not conduct an extensive analysis of maternal activism in Nicaragua, it is important to understand the historical and structural context faced by AMA. Thus, as Yang Rappaccioli (2022: 88) explains, quoting De Volo (2001: xvii), the Committee of Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs of Matagalpa in the 1980s functioned as auxiliaries of the Sandinista women's organization, which meant that they had little autonomy to construct their agendas and collective identity. For further analysis, one could ask what other maternal activism and/or notions of motherhood have been historically mobilized in Nicaragua and what possible (dis)connections exist between them. For example, we think of the Committee of Mothers during and after the revolution, as well as mothers of members of the counterrevolution or anti-Sandinistas, and more recently, mothers of political prisoners and mothers and relatives who seek justice without necessarily being formally collectivized, among others.

11 The online museum can be found in the following link: https://www.museodelamemorianicaragua.org/en/home/.

men) to open up about their emotions. In doing so, they are questioning their own masculinities or gender roles, through writing workshops, embroidery, exchanges between family members, or the production of the podcast "Barricadas de la memoria" ("Barricades of Memory")[12]. AMA has also been able to forge ties with other organizations at the regional level, such as, among others, the Mesoamerican women defenders, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the Parents of Ayotzinapa Students, the Casa de la Memoria in Guatemala[13].

Five years after the murders of their loved ones, AMA's struggle continued both through activism from exile and within the country. In the manifesto of 2022, they called for that day to be remembered as a day of national mourning, not a celebration, keeping up their claim: "Ni perdón, ni olvido, ni silencio" [Neither forgiveness, nor forgetting, nor silence] (AMA 2022)[14]. Referring to the organization's strategic use and narratives of motherhood, the final words of the manifesto stand out, highlighting the political action that has been conducted over the years: "Mothers do not give up, they demand justice" (ibid.).

Final Reflections

As we have seen, the described participants in the struggles of women, communities, and bodies-territories do not always declare themselves as feminists. However, they do state their positions as political subjects that seek to articulate resistance to different systems of oppression and exploitation that mark their realities. These systems are sustained by the institutions of the states and their necropolitics, neo-extractivism, and patriarchal practices which has caused the death of many Nicaraguans and indigenous women leaders such as Berta Cáceres. In this sense, Rodríguez Aguilera points out that, although there are feminisms that are communitarian, indigenous, Black, and popular, among others, "it is also important to name those women's struggles in Abya Yala[15], women who from daily and life experience have resisted and

12 The Podcast "Barricadas de la memoria" can be found in following link: https://open.spotify.com/show/4Mzova7xlYRxUf76SfyzRg.

13 See website of Casa de la Memoria: https://casadelamemoria.org.gt/.

14 The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo used the phrase "Ni olvido, ni perdón" [Neither forgetting, nor forgiveness]. In the case of AMA, they adapted it.

15 Abya Yala is a word of the Kuna/Guna people and refers to one of the ancestral names of the continent, i.e. it emerged in the pre-colonization period. It has been recovered as part of the indigenous struggles for autonomy and self-determination, so it also

continue to resist various forms of violence, without necessarily calling themselves feminists, but simply women who have fought and are still fighting for a dignified life" (2008: 90). Thus, we suggest the struggles presented in this essay should be analyzed in the light of their different intersections, senses of belonging, experiences, bodies, and the voices that they construct daily and collectively.

Mara Viveros Vigoya (2023, in this volume), taking up Angela Davis and bell hooks, speaks of the re-politicization of intersectionality, not only as common identities or oppressions, but also as the articulation of the different struggles, thus building new forms of solidarity. We claim that the described Central American struggles manage to simultaneously articulate both the intersectionality of identities, where collective bodies (of indigenous women, feminists, anti-patriarchal activists, mothers, territorial and affective communities, etc.) converge, and second, the building of alliances with other political struggles, such as the different Central American feminist movements, the EZLN in Chiapas (Mexico), the Mesoamerican Defenders, the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, the Parents of Ayotzinapa Students, La Casa Memoria in Guatemala, among others.

Finally, we come back to the question posed by Diana Taylor, on what to do when it *seems* that nothing is possible. We answer it in the same way as Yang Rappaccioli, who asked: "What can we do with this pain? We can collectivize the pain, the love, the hope, and the longing for justice" (2019). This collectivization is what we have seen in the work and political practices of AMA and COPINH, the two exemplary cases reconstructed in this essay.

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works as a way to make visible an anti-colonial political position (See Gallardo 2015: 23; Woons 2014: 15).

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