

LESBIAN EXPERIENCE IN ABYA YALA

Kenia Pelaez

I would like to begin by telling you where I come from, the place that gives body to my words and ideas. I am a radical lesbian feminist of indigenous descent born in the lands of Abya Yala. It is no coincidence that I do not use the word Latin America to describe my place of origin, as this name detracts from the fabric of my context. Abya Yala is the name in the Kuna language (a people that inhabits part of Panama as well as Colombia), to signify what the Spanish colonisers called America and is defined as 'land of lifeblood'. In this way, I am a lesbian from the south, from peoples who have lived and live a constant genocide and exploitation. I say this not trying to appeal to hierarchies of oppression, as I am aware that there is south in the north as there is north in the south, so describing my place of origin is not related to measuring oppression or thinking of it in a linear and cumulative way, as many academics or supposedly feminist activists do and have done concretely to condemn my ideas under this hierarchical notion of oppression.

Now, in this presentation I would like to detail my experience as a radical lesbian from Abya Yala living particularly in Mexico, and expose here some of the main challenges I encounter in this context, not without first mentioning that this is not a singular experience, but contains the experiences of many radical lesbians who inhabit this context. I would also like to say that I am a woman who lived 26 years of the 34 years of her life thinking that she was heterosexual, I fell in love with men, I had deep relationships with some, so I experienced putting in my origin and centre the masculine, that is, conceiving men as creators of life, of bodies, of ideas, of art, of intelligence, among others. Because that is what heterosexuality is, to give meaning to women's experience through male mediation. Patriarchy imposes such mediation on us, as Adrienne Rich lucidly puts it, through coercive institutions that direct our love and devotion towards men.

It was radical feminism, the ancestral lucidity (clearness of thought) of women, that endowed me with a boundlessness I had never experienced before. I was not the only one, a number of young women in my country began to discover our genealogy, which oriented us towards a radical impulse, one that Mary Daly described. It is essential, because radical feminism is not a diagnosis, a measurement, a quantitative analysis of what men's violence looks like, but there is also an emphasis on discovering the way out, a movement, a moving away.

However, this knowledge, so important for women's freedom, in Mexico, within activism, academia, state institutions, is constantly defined by means of epistemological (the theory of knowledge) prejudices, mistaken associations and misrepresentations. As a result, radical lesbians in Mexico are currently confronted with erroneous assumptions about our political positions. For example, when we elaborate ideas about prostitution, transsexuality, surrogacy, heterosexuality, we are defined as 'privileged', 'white', 'conservative', 'Terfs', 'racist', and even 'colonising' women. This makes any kind of dialogue or conversation impossible for those who supposedly defend the plurality of ideas, such as postmodern hegemonic feminism. Consequently, lesbians in Mexico are constantly experiencing epistemic violence. (That is violence relating to knowledge or validation of knowledge). This places us in a frame of reference where we are not seen as subjects of knowledge, we are absolutely denied the authority of our feelings, our knowledge, our points of view and our starting points.

It acts simultaneously to dehumanise us., Miranda Fricker says that when we are not seen as creators of knowledge, our human dignity is taken away from us. In this way, reducing our ideas and

experiences to social labels such as 'privileged', 'white', 'conservative', 'racist', etc., exercises a reading of us with contempt, and this is an aggression.

Recently, the Mexican feminist Marcela Lagarde, who has done crucial work recognising and creating institutional and legal advances against femicide in our country, was censored by trans activists during a talk on the history of feminism and violence against women at the Faculty of Political Science at the Complutense University in Spain. The censorship was for questioning some of the aspects of queer theory, a necessary task for deep reflection on any theory or point of view. This type of aggression is experienced by many women, mostly lesbians in Mexico and around the world. In this way, our knowledge is painted as mistaken and totalising, which leads many lesbians to suffer a loss of intellectual confidence, generating a disabling context for our epistemic courage (our courage to think and theorise), so necessary for our freedom. As Mary Daly said: 'courage calls to courage', and these aggressions deny this transcendence, such is their impact that many lesbians decide not to enter into our political genealogy for fear of being categorised in this stereotypical way, or worse, censored, fired, impoverished.

I recently read a comment on the social network X that I will quote to give an account of this context: the text says: 'a lot of activists, collectives and TERF organisations have already learned not to publicly state their positions because it has meant the closure of spaces and not being given money', and then goes on to draw up a list of 'suspicious actions' to identify these organisations, especially lesbian organisations, and thus make it impossible for us to access economic resources that are vital for life itself. Paradoxically, and this point is crucial for me in this reflection, it is the people who promote these actions who have the symbolic and material resources, such as money from the state, international funding, important positions within institutions and universities, scholarships, prizes, publications, resources that are obtained thanks to promoting patriarchal and capitalist thinking, which does promote single thinking and dogmatism. These actions are quite conservative.

That is why these definitions to sanction lesbian existence are a stratagem that nullifies our epistemic elaborations and transformations, that is to say, this violence makes it impossible for us to speak and therefore do our symbolic work; they deny our voice, our starting point, our viewpoint, our humanity.

The notions that exist in Mexico about radical lesbians range from the notion that we are women without political awareness, that we have been brainwashed, that we are mistaken in our levels of analysis or that we have copied white thought. Of course we read our sisters from other contexts, sisters who give us light to look at oppression, however, those who point at us from a moral superiority by referring to our genealogy, what are they talking about? When their theoretical bases are white paedophile men like Michel Foucault or privileged women like Judith Butler. As a woman of indigenous descent, I find it a total aggression to be categorised in this way, because I come from a peripheral context, from a popular social class, which has faced the precariousness, racism and sexism of this neoliberal and patriarchal world.

All of this affects the lesbian experience in Mexico, as it distances women from the possibility of loving other women and from this way of experiencing life through physical pleasure. It is important to say that historically lesbian existence has been a symbol of rebellion, a sign of affinity and creative potential for women. Lesbianism is, without a doubt, an exercise in thinking autonomously in the face of patriarchal civilisation. Lesbians live and travel to the most unusual places. The potential of lesbianism lies in generating a different point of view, a vision from the limit, as Harriet Desmoines, co-founder of the magazine *Sinister Wisdom*, says, it is the way in which a woman draws a circle around her psyche, she says 'this is my own room', thus tracing lesbian consciousness. Or as the

Colombian poet Tatiana de la tierra would put it, 'the lesbian form is the missing piece of the puzzle - it is the piece that never finds its place. as she is the master of her figure, the lesbian does not figure in the landscape with the rest of the pieces'.

Many times when I have been willing to discuss and reflect on any idea that is considered 'radical', I am quashed, I am accused of not having my own thoughts, even of being violent and of course a white woman, I repeat, what are they talking about? It is their epistemic frameworks that are grounded in global processes, they appeal to individualism and capitalism with a concrete claim to universalise by relativising through the supposed recognition of the pluralisation of subjects, a recognition that does not embrace lesbian epistemologies (our lesbian knowledge). Postmodern feminism supposedly breaks with the subject of history, supposedly starting from multiplicity, the point is that radical feminism has always been plural, it has never denied the oppressions of race, of class, I repeat, what are they talking about? Postmodern feminism is a tool of manipulation by the patriarchy that is exercised through epistemic violence, they promote an epistemic superiority, where the ideas, the reflections, the analyses of radical lesbians are seen as inferior, bad, hateful. Furthermore, lesbians from the South are not brainless, we have our own elaborations, we are subjects of knowledge.

An example in Abya Yala, in which this relativising universalisation that depoliticises feminism and which emerges from postmodernism is manifested, is what some authors have done to study femicide, a very important issue in Mexico where approximately 11 women are murdered by men every day. Now they tell us that this category, so important for the struggle of women, is no longer relevant in the current context. Rita Laura Segato, in this case, proposes to use the category 'femi-genocide' to name the action of systematic and impersonal crimes that seek the destruction of women and adds 'feminised men' in Latin America. She affirms that there is a change in the traditional scene of femicide in this region, as there is a drop in the murders of women committed by men with whom they had some kind of relationship, femicides caused by heterosexuality, reaffirming that there is no direct relationship between murderers and victims. In this way, she argues that femicide and feminicide are no longer useful categories in the legal sphere, given that they only encompass cases that occur in the intimate setting, in other words, supposedly a 'privatisation of gender violence'. This is an erroneous notion because this category also covers cases of murders of women who had no concrete link to the murderer. This category only focuses on the experience of women.

However, while it is true that there is a variety of motivations in cases of femicide and that it operates contextually, the claim that most femicides in Abya Yana are impersonal is false, as the highest rate of these cases are those committed by people close to the victims, as shown in the data presented in the Global Study on Homicide (2013), and in the report *La Violencia Femicida en México. Aproximaciones y Tendencias 1985-2016* (2016), so it cannot be said that there is such a decrease, on the contrary, these cases remain at the forefront.

I think that by expanding the category of femicide to include 'feminised men', people are modifying the figures, increasing impersonal cases, as most murders of men are impersonal, and these are committed by other men, thus omitting the socio-historical reality of a group that is exploited and appropriated: women. It is necessary to be precise and not to confuse, not to universalise by relativising, because although men are oppressed, their causes are due to other systems of oppression such as racism, classism and colonialism; femicide itself is a category that seeks to analyse and make visible the murder of women. To say this, in some spaces, is a terrible act of hatred, but if we cannot look for commonalities, how can we articulate ourselves, how can we make common power, women share experience and this is not universalising, we cannot extend the

category of femicide to feminised men because it depoliticises our struggles and as the Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues:

if you have lived in the world as a man with the privileges that the world grants to men, it is difficult for me to accept that we can then equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning as a woman and who has not received the privileges that men have.

I would like to end by pointing out that lesbians in Abya Yala are developing valuable epistemic proposals, for example Yan María Castro, a Mexican lesbian feminist, who has the most extensive archive of lesbian existence in Mexico. Or for example the LesVoz publishing house that continuously publishes lesbian women, they have even just published a book translated into Spanish by Sheila Jeffrey. Or Dorotea Gómez Grijalva, a Mayan lesbian, who reflects on being a lesbian in an indigenous context and the adversities that this represents, for example, she says:

I decided to live as a feminist lesbian, because for me, being a lesbian took on a special meaning in my political and spiritual option, to bet on the patriarchal decolonisation from my body and my sexuality.

And in this way, I intend to continue respecting the particularity of the rhythmic and vibrant style of this body with which I touch life.

There are also a number of lesbian collectives that constantly create important reflections on women's freedom, such as Feministas Lúcidas in Chile, Resistencia Lésbica in Mexico, Hiladas, a lesbian group formed by Uma Conti from Uruguay, among others. Lesbian feminists in Abya Yala are subjects of knowledge, we create, we discuss, we generate epistemic proposals and we are also aware of our political positions, although this means that we are repeatedly confronted with epistemic violence.

And I would like to say that epistemic violence is not only an issue that is important in universities, because it touches the whole social fabric, we see it repeatedly in culture and it is a way in which lesbian impossibility is exercised. It is a strategy that patriarchy has used to control our being, it is one of the most atrocious weapons against women, which has various ways of manifesting itself, sometimes it is only silence, non-reference, the burning of archives, the pointing out of aggressions and stereotypes, the erasure of our genealogy, and, of course, there are its most sadistic expressions such as rape or femicide. We lesbians, in the words of Margarita Pisano, have important knowledge that 'places us outside the existing symbolic order, not outside the world. Because we are interested in the world and we are interested in those who inhabit it'.