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Feminist Futures in Latin American Geography

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Introduction

...Ni una menos
las promesas incumplidas
palabras que lleva el viento
desbojando de sus sueños
ser feliz y ser amada,
que no haya ni una menos
que se quede en el recuerdo
de un día negro en la historia

Fragment of poem “ni una menos” by María Marta Liébana (Liébana, 2015).

The excerpt of María Marta Liébana’s poem referenced above was part of a special poetry collaboration in *Poesía a Mano Alzada* centered on gender-based violence and the #NiUnaMenos movement. The poem and others in the collaboration expressed lived experiences of violence, fear, grief, and sadness by women throughout the Americas. The poems also shared voices of hope, unity, and solidarity amongst survivors of gender-based violence and their allies. The excerpt of Liébana’s poem further alludes to issues of social power – to unfulfilled promises, to meaningless words that don’t change anything, and to the refusal to let one more woman’s voice be silenced into dark and distant memory.

Violence and inequality linked to territories, geopolitics, land-use, knowledge, and bodies are topics that permeate Latin American geography. Scholars of Latin America are well aware that the violence associated with colonialism and patriarchy is not purely epistemic; it is toxic and deadly. In 2018, international news sources highlighted Latin America as the most dangerous region in the world for women and for environmental activists to live (Mendieta Menina, 2019; Asmann, 2018). But these are just two of the multitude of instances of violent injustice connected to centuries of pervasive patterns of consumption, territorialization, and state repression in defense of colonialism and patriarchy.

In thinking about the future of Latin American geography, the above poem by Marta Liébana inspires me to ask: at what moment do scholars say *never again* to relying on colonial, masculinist, and patriarchal theories and methods to frame the discipline? At what moment do we *write against* these tendencies (Mollett, 2017) and decide to embody the changes we want to see in the discipline?

Feminist pasts and futures

To be sure, I am not the first nor last person who asks these questions or makes these calls to scholarly action. With the recent “critical turn” in the direction of JLAG, several scholars have made efforts to reexamine the complex entanglements of Latin

American geography with colonialism, and to reflect on the ways our own scholarship perpetuates colonial, racist, and patriarchal modes of thinking and doing geography (Finn & Hanson, 2017; see JLAG issue 18[3]). The newly expanded and diversified editorial board has also promoted a plurality of scholarly ideas within the journal. At this point in time, all critical geographers with self-reflective practices should recognize that Latin American geography was built on scholarly traditions that are colonial, masculinist, and patriarchal. These connections have been noted time and again by feminist scholars, development scholars, political ecologists, migration scholars, and many others (Curiel, 2007; Finn & Hanson, 2017; Lander, 2006; Maldonado-Torres, 2008; Moraña, Dussel, & Jáuregui, 2008; Sluyter, 2001; Sundberg, 2003). In particular, feminist critiques have clearly outlined past connections of Latin American geography to overtly objectivist science that privileges men's work and voices over those of women, and in which Latin American places and peoples were/are observed as objects of study for Northern theory making (Pearson & Crane, 2017; Rose, 1997; Sundberg, 2003).

Tracing this scholarly history is important, but it has never been enough, and will never be enough, to simply recognize the connections of scholarly work to patriarchy and colonialism (Paredes, 2010). Paying lip service to critical scholarship means little to the discipline if not accompanied with significant changes to one's own practices, and feminist scholars have been among the most persistent in reminding critical geographers of this reality (Collins, 2000; Mollett & Faria, 2013). While critical geographers do not claim to be neutral or impartial, few of us do much better than to frame violence against women, migrants, or indigenous groups as more than regional problems to be understood within Western and/or liberal theories of justice, development, geopolitics, feminism, or geography (Zaragocin, Moreano, & Álvarez Velasco, 2018; Álvarez & Collasaet, 2018). As a result, many scholars unintentionally or deliberately position ourselves outside the problem, adopting once again a colonial, impersonal gaze (Castro-Gómez, 2005; Sundberg, 2005).

Like the calls for a critical turn in JLAG, the decolonial turn in Latin American geography has reframed Northern theoretical understandings of current geopolitics and contemporary systems of knowledge and control, by demonstrating how these were/are produced through specific Latin American colonial relationships. Decolonial scholars have made critical changes to social science understandings of the racialized power relations that shape economic, political, territorial, and socio-cultural relations in the past and present (Grosfoguel, 2007; Lao-Montes, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2008). They emphasize how power derives from institutions built on racial difference that dehumanize and destroy people and nature (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano et al., 2012; Moraña, Dussel et al. 2008). Decolonial scholars also demonstrate that theory is always bound to place, and new theory-making should de-center the colonial practices that relegate non-Western theory to empirical understandings of place (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2018; Escobar, 2010; Radcliffe, 2017; Ramirez Velasquez, 2012).

These advances to critical theory have impacted Latin American geography in recent decades, as more critical scholars are using decolonial conceptual frames in their work. And yet, most (but not all) decolonial theory is still patriarchal. Feminist scholars bring attention to the noticeable absence of a gender focus in general (and therefore any diverse understanding of gender or intersectional identities) in most decoloniality scholarship (Lugones, 2010; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010; Schiwy, 2007). Feminists have noted that a large focus of this work has been on decolonizing men's spaces and practices of power, including the systems of power and control where women were historically excluded, absent, or voiceless (i.e. politics, science, or geographical theory-making) (Harding, 2017a, 2017b). As a result, gender and feminist theory was almost totally neglected in decolonial scholarship until the last few years, and even now, it is often only present in studies specific to women's issues. Importantly, this lack of focus on gender has meant that there is a limit to critical understandings about patriarchy's role in the regulation of bodies and space (Zaragocin 2019), and the diversity of embodied experiences of territory. Furthermore, the assumption that a gender focus is unnecessary demonstrates how patriarchy runs broader and deeper than colony and capital; heteronormative patriarchy permeates political economic systems, intimate relationships, gendered/racialized bodies and minds, and everyday life (Arellano, 2015; Paredes, 2010).

Decolonial, *comunitaria*, and collective feminisms

Latin American feminist scholars have been among the most effective and persistent in destabilizing these normalized colonial-patriarchal relationships present in much geographical theory-making. There are rich and diverse feminist intellectual and activist traditions throughout the Americas, and their methods are provocative in combining collaborative action and performative and applied critical scholarship with decolonial, anti-racist, and collective activism (Ibarra García & Escamilla Herrera, 2016; Mollett & Faria, 2013). For decades, feminist scholars and activists from distinct latitudes have also demonstrated how even the most radical critical theories or leftist political actions are often entrenched in patriarchy, with biases that generalize experiences of men and specialize the experiences of all others (Arellano, 2015; López Sandoval, Robertsdotter, & Paredes, 2017; Paredes, 2001). Latin American feminist activism, including the *#NiUnaMenos* movement, has expanded globally and pushes women's rights in public spaces, and yet feminist scholars remind us that it is still necessary to protest the static representation of gender as a theme, a sector, or as a special interest group in academic and government sponsored projects (de Silva Iddings, 2014; Ergas & York, 2012; Hanson, 2017; Resurrección, 2013). This is in part, because the most dangerous places for women are in their home and amongst intimate partners and relatives (UNODC, 2018), but also because scholarly, nationalist, and cultural traditions continue to essentialize gender, racial, and indigeneous identities in order to diversify cultural politics in public spaces (Arellano 2015).

Relatedly, feminist scholars clearly outline the networks of uneven and scalar relationships between everyday lived experiences and practices to power structures that shape and are shaped by the everyday (Bidaseca & Vasquez Laba, 2010; Hanson & Buechler, 2015; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996; Zaragocin, et al., 2018). In particular, decolonial feminist scholars link *territorio y cuerpo* in rich and creative ways. This work articulately describes the violence of territory in relation to lands, resources, and water bodies, but more importantly, as experienced in and through gendered and racialized bodies and embodied social-territorial practices (Ulloa, 2016; Zaragocin Carvajal et al., 2018).

Feminist decolonial methods labor against the uneven, gendered and racialized politics present in most geographical research and writing practices. Feminist methods often include practices meant to de-center colonial and patriarchal modes of collecting, analyzing, and presenting data as objectively neutral. Self-reflexivity is important, but Latin American feminist scholars especially note the importance of understanding one's own participation in socially constructed realities, and the importance of centering this understanding throughout their work, from the sites of fieldwork to the metanarratives of globalization. Methods often include attempts to understand and untangle complex webs of connection between everyday gendered experiences and colonial-patriarchal systems of injustice. Effective methods include individual and group storytelling, collective and participatory workshops, and oral histories of everyday life in everyday spaces (Curiel, 2007; Funder, 2005; Richard, 1996; Sundberg, 2003; Ulloa, 2016). Collective research and action research are also central to Latin American decolonial feminist geography. Of the most provocative, collective and community-based mapmaking, or *cartografía social*, combined with feminist approaches to scale and intersectionality, help produce insightful ways to think and act beyond fixed conceptions of territory as abstracted from embodied space (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2018).

Latin American feminist activism also makes key moves that should broadly inspire critical geographers. Feminist networking in Latin America takes differences as fundamental – not incidental or problematic - to the search for creating more just futures. It has therefore had dramatic impacts worldwide since the 1980s, starting with the global women's human rights movement (Friedman, 2015), and continuing to today with the *#NiUnaMenos* and related movements fighting against state-sponsored and gender-based violence (Arellano, 2015; UNODC, 2018). From local instances of uncompromised commitment to justice, health, and environmental protection to cross-border feminism, these networks have inspired movements that, rather than try to simplify themes to fit into existing thought systems, build from the divergence in its participants' identities and political beliefs to constantly, critically, and productively, redefine themselves and work toward shared goals (Friedman, 2015; Hanson, 2017; Jenkins, 2008).

While some of the methods and frames mentioned above are adopted by critical geographers with a broad range of interests, it is startling how often the ideas of women and feminists are excluded from broader dialogues until they are rephrased by men or “non-feminists.” The ideas of black, indigenous, or Latin American feminist scholars are rarely cited widely or generalized as foundational to the discipline. Feminist theories are often considered niche theories specific to gender scholars. Therefore, when feminist theory is called upon to help describe the geographical conditions of men and women in Latin America, oftentimes the work cited is still colonial, privileging Eurocentric voices and research practices over regional feminist ideas (Bidaseca & Vasquez Laba; Curiel, 2007; Trinh, 1989). Why are regional feminist ideas not believed in, cited sufficiently, or used as the central framing to critical scholarship? This is a broad problem, because even within circles of critical feminist geographers, there are tendencies of citation politics, with pressure to cite European or Northern theories to justify place-based feminism or to entice a wider readership (Gargallo, 2006; Ramírez, 2004). Conversations among Anglo and Latin American feminist scholars are increasing and moving in exciting directions, but these conversations have not (yet) permeated critical Latin American geography more broadly.

Conclusions: Junt@s imparables

If a goal of critical scholarship is to imagine and create new geographies that do not perpetuate unjust paradigms, disciplinary knowledges need to be decolonized, (Mignolo, 2010), but they also need to be gendered and queered (Asher, 2013). Teaching about and incorporating the works of Latin American feminist scholars is key for decolonizing geographical knowledge in general, because its focus is on bridging different scholarly critics of coloniality and patriarchy, and promoting a plurality of epistemologies and embodied understandings of land, territories, and bodies (Zaragocin, 2017). After all, if women are only talking to other women; if feminist scholars only discuss their ideas amongst themselves; if gender remains an irrelevant theoretical category for the majority of geographers; if regional feminist geography is not actively taught to new students as a pillar of critical theory; or if scholars throughout the discipline (feminist or not) do not actively write against colonial, masculinist, and patriarchal tendencies by purposefully engaging in theorymaking with diverse voices, nothing will change.

In looking to the future of Latin American geography, we as scholars need to take the risk to not simply write about risks through the frames that perpetuate them; we are trained to recognize the damaging power dynamics that generate oppression, violence, and that fuel neoliberal geopolitics, yet our academic practice often models the same colonial and patriarchal dynamics we critique. To create influential, critical changes for future geographies in Latin America, feminist theory and methods should be foundational to new directions in the discipline. Similarly, masculinist and colonial theories and methods must be labeled as such, and scholars should use much care to

avoid tendencies to normalize and universalize ungendered theories through our teaching, scholarship, and practice. I look forward to seeing more papers to JLAG that challenge these tendencies! Latin American feminist scholarship is integral to the circle of relevant literature of all geographers, and will be central to future world-making.

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