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## Dissident Epistemologies: Dialogues around an Affective Research Experience

By Mar Fournier Pereira<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article presents a series of situated reflections on the production of knowledge in social research and the relationships that emerge with communities and participants in the field, in dialog with the contributions of Trans\* Epistemologies, decolonial feminisms, and epistemologies of the South that urge to break with the coloniality of knowledge and epistemic violence. Grounded on the process of an affective research experience and developed with a community of transgender women in the city of San José, Costa Rica, I address questions on the role of affectivity in knowledge production and present our collective reflections on a possible alternative path through which we can develop dissident epistemologies that aim to be more respectful and dialogical.

*Keywords:* Ecology of knowledges, Affectivity, Trans\* epistemology, Trans women

### Introduction

In the year 2014, I became involved with a community of trans women<sup>2</sup> in an intense research experience that has deeply affected our lives and our work. I use the metaphor of *involvement* following Martinez's invitation to stop thinking of our role in social processes as a vertical intervention and to start getting involved in horizontal approaches, in which we can engage with communities and accompany their struggles while conducting research with them.

Beyond a descriptive perspective, my approach to this community was inspired by the principles of Militant Research and Participatory-Action-Research<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, I wanted to get to know their realities, their thoughts, and the conditions of oppression that they face, but with the explicit objective of collectively generating tools to improve their living conditions. In this vein, the research questions and methodologies were defined collectively with the community.

Considering that the majority of trans women in this community live in conditions of extreme poverty (Ministerio de Salud 2018), and that the oppressions they face daily are simultaneous and interwoven, in this project I sought to analyze how the imbrication of gender and class configures their realities. We explored their notions of gender and the ways in which their collectivity enables the production and circulation of knowledge about gender. Additionally, we explored the role of affectivity and the community in their strategies for resistance and agency. Finally, these questions led us to the collective reconstruction of the history of this community, which was absent from the official discourses on the history of the LGBTIQ movements in Costa Rica. These questions were developed in my thesis for a master's in Communication and Development at the University of Costa Rica, and the thesis that I am currently writing for a PhD in Philosophy at the University of Lille, as well as various other collective products. In this article I will focus on the collective processes of knowledge production on gender within this community and the process we developed together.

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<sup>2</sup> In this article I use the nouns "women", "trans women", or "girls" to name the participants, respecting their self-determination to be named that way. Likewise, I use "community" to name their collectivity, as it is the noun that they have designated to name it.

<sup>3</sup> For a further explanation on Participatory-Action-Research see Orlando Fals-Borda and Muhammad Anisur. On Militant Research see Natalie Bookchin, et al.

This study is framed within the field of Trans\*<sup>4</sup> Studies, which is characterized by the active role of trans\* people in knowledge production, in an attempt to break with a long history of epistemic objectification that research developed by cis scholars have reproduced (Radi 2009; Espineira & Thomas 2019). Shifting away from the extractivist model that sees trans\* people as a source of raw data that needs to be processed in the universities, in this study I understand the participants as co-researchers, experts in the field of their own realities.

Decolonial theory, particularly decolonial feminisms and epistemologies of the South, provided the theoretical basis for this study in the quest for a pluriversality<sup>5</sup>. The research was conducted through techniques such as participant observation and informal interviews, that provided the inputs for the reflections presented below.

This article has four parts. It begins with a brief presentation of the methodology and theoretical framework. Although this article is not intended to delve into the study's results, the second section offers some points on the findings collectively constructed with this community. The third part presents some reflections on the contributions of epistemologies of the South (Santos) to this research process. Finally, I reflect on the possibilities of affective research for decolonial Trans\* Studies and for the production of knowledge on gender in the Global South.

### *The Road We Built Together*

This project started with a certain restlessness, a recurrent question that struck me while I participated in middle class, self-styled LGBT organizations. As a Central American trans\* activist and scholar, concerned about the intersectionalities of gender, sexuality, class, and race (Crenshaw), I copiously asked gay and lesbian activists about the trans women's movement in Costa Rica, and their answer was always the same: *there is no trans\* movement; their living conditions are so adverse that they don't have the means to get organized.*

This answer reinforced my questions. It sounded suspiciously simplistic, but at that time trans\* organizations were not visible in our country, and the literature on the subject was scarce and written from an external and victimizing perspective so the question remained unanswered. I understood that if wanted to learn about the trans\* movement in Costa Rica, I had to get out of the commodities of my class privileges. Therefore, I left the library and the equal marriage meetings, searching for the bodies and voices that were absent. We met in the streets, a vibrant and diverse community of trans women who work, live, or hangout in downtown San José. I was impressed by their powerful voices and their political clarity. They were courageous and organized. As I will develop later, this was the first *sociological absence* that I encountered, following Santos' (2009) proposal to reveal how something that "does not exist" is actively produced as non-existent.

## **Methodology**

### *Sources*

Given that there are very few studies on the reality of trans women in Costa Rica, this article is mainly based on primary sources. The reflections presented here are the direct result of informal interviews and participant observation exercises.

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<sup>4</sup> The word 'trans\*' is an umbrella term posited in the field of Trans\* Studies to name the diversity of people whose gender does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. The asterisk next to the term trans is an intervention strategy that operates on a visual, semantic, and political level. It comes from programming languages and works as a wildcard: anything can be placed after the asterisk (Radi 2020). For example, trans\* can refer to trans women / men / knowledge / scholars / children / or even nothing, just trans.

<sup>5</sup> Eduardo Restrepo and Axel Rojas (2010) define pluriversality in opposition to the global and totalitarian designs in the name of universality. Pluriversality constitutes a commitment to make visible and viable the multiplicity of knowledge, ways of being, and aspirations about the world (21).

Interviews and observations were carried out in the daily activities of the grassroots organization Transvida, as well as in sex work areas in the city. We recorded our conversations in the context of the organization's activities, with the authorization of the participants, and this material was later transcribed and analyzed using Atlas-ti software. In the case of sex work areas, we decided not to record to protect the participants and to avoid disrupting their activities. Therefore, the data were registered as field notes.

Throughout this article, references to the reflections of the participants are presented respecting their chosen names or their request to remain anonymous. These references are translations or paraphrases of the dialogues recorded during the interviews and observation in the fieldwork<sup>6</sup>.

### *Participants*

A total of 37 trans women who currently inhabit the city of San José participated in this study. They range from 18 to 64 years old, and several of them are migrants, both internal and international.

### *On the Research Method and Problem*

This proposal entails a complex task, since approaching the knowledge produced by these women that have historically been excluded from the centers of knowledge production implies a series of considerations to avoid reproducing forms of epistemic violence like objectification and extractivism. I follow the methodological approach that Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2018) call *bricolage*, “a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (45). The qualitative researcher, as a *bricoleur*, assembles different tools, interpretative paradigms, strategies, methods, and empirical materials to form a “quilt-like bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage; a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations. This interpretive structure is like a quilt, a performance text, or a sequence of representations connecting the parts to the whole” (45).

In this approach, the choice of investigative practices depends on the questions that are asked, and the questions in turn depend on the context. In this article, I explore the question on how collective processes of knowledge production about gender are developed in this community of trans women. And in relation to this, how can we approach this knowledge in respectful ways that break with epistemic violence? In this sense, the material with which the *bricolage* is formed is made up of the reflections of the participants and the contributions of the perspectives of decolonial feminisms, epistemologies of the South, and affective research.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Trans\* Epistemologies*

This study lies within the field of Trans\* Studies, specifically in domain of Trans\* Epistemologies, as an effort to articulate the embodied knowledge produced by trans\* people. Argentinian trans\* philosopher Blas Radi (2009) affirms that “several trans\* researchers have questioned the fact that the inclusion of trans\* people in the process of knowledge production does not acknowledge them as bearers of relevant understandings, but only as objects and instruments of analysis” (48). Consequently, many of the categories that have been used to describe and explain the realities of trans\* people seem unfamiliar, inadequate, or even violent for them.

“The academy is still strikingly unwelcoming for trans\* perspectives and scholars” (Radi 2009, 44) and trans\* bodies today continue to be largely excluded from the centers of knowledge production where the theories that attempt to explain their realities are written

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<sup>6</sup> For the original dialogs in Spanish see Fournier.

(Martínez-Guzmán & Montenegro 2010; Berkins 2013; Radi 2009). Trans\* Studies seek to shift from doing research *of* trans\* people to doing studies *with* trans\* people.

Despite the often-precarious conditions in which this field thrives, Trans\* Epistemologies seek to position trans\* people as active subjects in the production of knowledge, with empirical and embodied knowledge that makes them experts (on gender and on other issues), capable of creating their own concepts and theorizations of their reality (Espineira & Thomas 2019; Radi 2009; Stryker 2014). It is a situated epistemology (Haraway 1988), “that does not renounce theoretical precision or a practical commitment to improving the life conditions of trans\* people” (Radi 2009, 44).

Authors such as Stone (1992), Radi (2009), and Espineira & Thomas (2019) suggest that the forms of epistemic violence that trans\* people suffer are grounded in the colonial discursive practices of the modern/colonial university. To face this, trans\* scholars and communities have cultivated fertile dialogues with other critical epistemologies, such as “indigenous knowledge, feminist theory, transfeminism, postcolonial studies, epistemologies of the South, and critical race theory” (Radi 2009, 58). In this vein, decolonial feminisms and epistemologies of the South resulted particularly important for the development of this study.

### *Coloniality of Power and Gender*

I take decolonial theory<sup>7</sup>, and especially Latin American decolonial feminisms, as a starting point, not to explain the production of knowledge about gender in this community from pre-existing categories, but as a position that allows us to learn about these women’s own forms of knowledge production, understanding that their epistemologies are as valid as the ones we produce in Western universities.

Making a very brief synthesis, we would say that coloniality of power establishes race as a border that divides those who are considered human in the “zone of being” from those who are dispossessed of their humanity in the “zone of non-being” (Grosfoguel 2011). Decolonial theorists sustain that the colonial invasion of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, and the exploitation processes based on extractivism created the material and subjective conditions for modernity and capitalism (Quijano 2007). However, coloniality should not be confused with colonialism. Maya-Kaqchikel researcher Aura Cumes (2018) affirms that there was no decolonization process in Latin America, and although most nations achieved independence a couple of centuries ago, coloniality of power still determines the power relations in our societies.

From a decolonial feminist perspective, María Lugones (2008) calls attention on the bias of decolonial male theorists like Quijano, who place gender oppression as a subproduct of racial oppression. Lugones questions the fragmented understanding of race and gender. In dialog with Nigerian feminist Oryuronke Oyewùmi, Lugones signals that, as a system of oppression, gender is a colonial imposition as well. Race is neither separable nor secondary to gender oppression, but rather co-constitutive<sup>8</sup>.

### *Coloniality of Knowledge*

One of the domains where coloniality is deeply rooted is the centers of knowledge production, especially Western universities that reproduce the hierarchies of modern rationality (Castro-Gómez 2000). Knowledge produced in the “zone of not-being” is considered archaic, raw, and inferior, while the knowledge produced in the “zone of being” is considered superior

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that although postcolonial and decolonial theories share a common root (the anticolonial critique), they should not be used as synonyms. For a further explanation on the differences between them, see Breny Mendoza’s magistral essay: “Coloniality of Gender and Power: From Postcoloniality to Decoloniality”.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note the critique of indigenous and communitarian feminists on the limitations of Lugones’ conception of coloniality of gender. For instance, see Cabnal’s elaborations on entrenched patriarchy.

and universally valid (Grosfoguel 2011). In this vein, the knowledge produced by trans\* people is often disregarded or minorized (Radi 2009).

Argentinian feminist philosopher Moira Pérez (2019) defines epistemic violence as “the different ways in which violence is exercised in relation to the production, circulation and recognition of knowledge: the denial of epistemic agency for certain subjects, the unacknowledged exploitation of their epistemic resources, their objectification, among many others” (1). Trans\* Epistemologies struggle against diverse forms of epistemic violence like de-qualifying and disapproving trans\* epistemic subjectivity, objectifying, canceling epistemic authority, subordinating division of intellectual labor, instrumentalization, academic extractivism, misreading, and colonial appropriation (Radi 2009).

The decolonial option invites us to think of alternative, dissident research approaches that can help us create paths towards a profound transformation. For instance, Mignolo (2009) encourages the engagement in “epistemic disobedience”, to de-link (epistemically and politically) from the web of imperial knowledge. Latin American decolonial feminists, on their part, reclaim the recognition of the knowledge produced by subaltern subjects by the means of experience as a valid epistemic field (Curiel 2015).

Epistemic violence sustains the idea “that certain people or types of people are not capable of producing adequate knowledge or will not be able to evaluate or understand it...” (Pérez, 4). I intend to prove the opposite, that trans women, though impoverished and excluded from our universities, have a rich production of knowledge about gender.

## **Transplaining their World: A Brief Discussion of the Results**

### *On the Communitarian Pedagogy of Gender*

This research process allowed the *emergence* of a series of themes, questions, and categories that flooded the *absences* until that moment so present in Costa Rican narratives about trans\* existence. One of the main results is the importance of the community for the artisanal construction of gender. In this sense, rather than investigating the personal process by which each one affirms her gender, we focused on the collective process of production and circulation of knowledge on gender.

To be a woman, what does that mean for them? Even when most of them affirm that they have known themselves to be women all their lives, they say they “had to learn how to be women” (Alondra). They needed to unlearn years of masculine indoctrination and find the way through their own gender. This process is not entirely individual; it is a dialectical epistemology, a form of knowledge that this community has been cultivating for some generations in the streets and in the intimacy of the few safe spaces they have.

In the street, they all have a mother. The daughters of the same mother consider themselves sisters. There may be rivalry between some families, but above all, they find sorority within the family. Their mother is someone who adopts them in the street and shows them how to survive. Mothers take care of their daughters, they teach them how to deal with the cops, the aggressors, the clients, and, most importantly, they teach them everything they know about being a woman.

Déhora: ...Ah, I met them in the streets. I met Antonella when she was coming from Panama, and there we became close friends. That’s when she adopted me as her daughter.

Mar: That’s interesting! When you say: she is her daughter, or she is her mother... Could you explain that to me?

Déhora: It's that we feel close, let's say, with the other person, we get along so well that she, I don't know... It's like a charisma, you know, it's like she is a daughter. As if she were my daughter.

Mar: So, it's like someone who helps you?

Déhora: Yes, that's it, exactly!

(...)

Mar: When you say that someone is the daughter of someone, is the mother of someone ... How does that work?

Karen: Each and every one of us has a mother.

Mar: Aha...

Gloria: But she is not a real mother.

Karen: Is a training.

Fabiola: It's like a kinship of... on the subject of...

Karen: It's like an education.<sup>9</sup>

Mothers give their daughters advice about makeup, they teach them how to move and walk, how to modulate their voices so that they sound more feminine. What may appear as oppressive from some cis feminist points of view (because mandatory femininity is oppressive for women, trans or not trans), for them was rather “an act of resistance and self-care, a liberating practice” (Antonella), one more step in the construction of their gender. Through self-management and collective knowledge, they snatch back the femininity that hetero and cis-normativities forbid them. “Passing” for the trans women of this community is not only the performative expression of their gender identity. In the 70s and 80s, they discovered that they could avoid police abuse when the officers did not realize that the women that they were observing in the street were trans; “Passing is a survival strategy” (Kassandra).

They share their knowledge from generation to generation, using their own codes and language. The girls often say that it is not possible to survive the streets without drugs. I would say that it is not possible to survive without a mother either. Affirming oneself as a woman, being “the woman I want to be”, Dayana says it “is never only what one wants as an individual determination”. Identity is made of a connecting fiber. Mothers and daughters affirm themselves as women in the tessellation of a chosen family.

### *On the Intersections of Gender and Class*

The pronoun “*nosotras*”<sup>10</sup> defines for them a safe space, a tessellation of bonds of friendship and sisterhood. When they pronounce “*nosotras*” they are naming the community and they are naming themselves as part of it. Feeling like they are part of their community marks their lives, because it allows them to learn, to share knowledge, and to affirm their gender.

However, they clearly state that “not all trans women are part of this community” (Antonella). In this sense, knotted with gender, class emerged as an important category to understand their reality. They point out their differences with other trans women, and they deplore the discourses that propose the “trans\* community” as a homogeneous group (Dayana). It is not that they do not want to form alliances with other, more privileged, trans\* people. They often do it, but this does not erase the differences because it is precisely the intersection of their class condition and their gender that has brought them together to form a community in the streets.

As trans women, they recognize they face various forms of gender oppression that are common to cisgender women, such as sexual harassment and misogynistic violence (Natalia).

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<sup>9</sup> Free translation of a dialogue recorded during participant observation in Transvida on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017. For the original dialog in Spanish see (Fournier 180-181).

<sup>10</sup> In Spanish, plural first-person pronouns are gendered. *Nosotras* is the feminine form of the English pronouns *we* and *us*.

However, in other forms of violence anchored in class and race, such as police abuse, vulnerability on the street, lack of housing and access to health services, they recognize the abysses that separate them from other women who have more privileges.

Their existence is shaped by the entanglement of the oppressions of gender and class, and for many of them also by their racialized condition. The clarity that gender, class, and race are co-constitutive influences the way they experience gender, but also the bonds that sustain their community. It is clear for them that what unites them is not only being trans women, but what this has implied in their material conditions. Repression, but also resistance; exclusion, but also survival. To cite Dayana's words: "everything we've been through, that's what unites us". From an intersectional perspective, gender for them cannot be dissociated from class and race.

#### *On the Politics of Affectivity and Community*

Their forms of communality have a political dimension that revolts against the hegemonic forms in which politics are understood in our colonial societies. Affections have proved to be a powerful resource for them. The indignation, the collectivization of anger, their sensibility to be moved by the pain of the other and to build forms of solidarity, and the love that they share strengthens their struggles.

This affective way of doing politics has emerged in a context that seems unthinkable for the mainstream discourses that produces them as *absence*. In the collective imaginaries, the streets of San José are a hostile and dangerous place, especially at night (Acuña 2010). However, these women offer other narratives. Although the public space in all patriarchal societies constitutes various risks for women, they have managed to build their own "security fences" (Fabiola) based on collectivity and affection. It is the politics of bonding, a transgression of the logic that decrees the political sphere as exclusively public and rational, while depoliticizing the relational, intimate sphere.

To face the modern/colonial intrusion that produced the effect of depoliticization of affections, the community, and the domestic space, decolonial feminist Rita Laura Segato (2016) invites us to reinvent the ways of living, rebuilding communitarian bonds as a form of everyday politics. Community bonds, she affirms, allowed our peoples to survive throughout five hundred years of continuous conquest (106). Likewise, we could say that their community created the conditions for these trans women to survive, despite the intense forms of violence, torture, and criminalization that they faced (Kassandra).

#### *On Trans\* Epistemology: The Community as an Autonomous University*

Throughout this process I met dozens of trans women, all of them with embodied reflections on gender, class, race, politics, sexuality, and intersectionality. After some months I started calling them teachers, life teachers, with whom I learned intensely about life and reality. I like to call it *transplaining*, in response to the usual mansplaining and cisplaining voices that write trans\* history. The girls explained to me things that I could not find in books, because their knowledge emerges in the streets, in their bodies, in the imbrication of the oppressions and the forms of resistance they invent.

The accumulation of resistance strategies, of creative ways of squatting their bodies, of tactics to inhabit the city in safer ways, and the collectivization of all these forms of street knowledge, constitutes for them an autonomous school, a university of embodied epistemologies. As Dayana reflects on the forms of epistemic violence they face in state institutions, such as othering and canceling of their epistemic authority, she affirms: "every time I think that I have a university, a school, a college called the street, their degrees can't do anything on par with my experience". Despite its precarious conditions, this community has developed a powerful Trans\* Epistemology, that for them, is much more important than the

theories developed in modern/colonial universities, in the sense that their forms of knowledge sustain their lives.

### Analysis of Epistemology of Emergences

“In order to dismantle the mechanisms of epistemic violence, it is fundamental to learn how to see them” (Pérez 2019, 10). Boaventura de Sousa Santos introduces the notion of *sociology of absences* to point out the silences that modern epistemology produces around particular experiences, subjectivities, and forms of knowledge. By silencing some forms of knowledge and being, modern science erases diversity and possibilities of other ways of thinking, creating, and existing. The coloniality of knowledge not only displays a one-sided view of the world that serves for domination and oppression, but it actively creates it and imposes it by presenting it as the only possible one.

These *absences* produce the subjects that Fanon (2004) has named “the wretched of the Earth”: the ignorant, the residual, the inferior, the local, the unproductive. Discourses that operate on this rationality crystallize the trans women of this community in each of those categories, stripping their voices of any valuable knowledge.

When the gay and lesbian activists told me that there was no trans\* movement in Costa Rica, they were erasing the history and the possibilities of trans\* people to be the protagonists of their own struggles. It is not true that there was no trans\* movement in Costa Rica, but it was produced as a *sociological absence* by diminishing their own forms of organization.

As a response to the univocal rationality that produces *sociological absences*, Santos uses the metaphor of *ecology* to explain the need to look for alternative approaches to knowledge production. Hegemonic rationality causes a devastating effect on epistemologies, like that of large monocultures on biodiversity. To face this, he proposes to create *epistemological ecologies*. Some of these *ecologies* became fundamental for the development of this study:

1. In resistance to the *monoculture of knowledge* and the rigor of knowledge, he proposes a plural *ecology of knowledges*. In our process, I avoided the posture of an expert. On the contrary, I tried to learn with them. This may sound simple, but it has not been easy. My privileges kept rising and building fences that I urged to take down. My own colonized knowledge kept sabotaging me. The theories, the concepts, and my favorite authors came over and over like voices in my head, and even when I intended to establish a horizontal dialogue with the words of these extraordinary women, sometimes it was hard to turn off the compulsory explanations inside my head. Horizontality is a complex aspiration, and neither my activist background nor my academic training provided me with answers on how to do it right. We had to build our own road, searching for plural dialogs in a diverse ecosystem where their own narratives could emerge as valid knowledge.

2. In resistance to the *monoculture of linear time*, Santos proposes the *ecology of temporalities*: linear time conception is only one of many ways in which communities understand time. From the beginning of this process, I learned the need to adapt my schedules and plans to adjust to the community’s time scale. After our initial contact, I asked them to think of something that I could be useful for because I wanted to work *with* them. Dayana, one of this community’s leaders, invited me to join them in one of their organization’s activities. We met in the central park, and she explained that we were going to cruise around the streets to hand out information, condoms, and, especially, to talk with the girls.

Before we started, Dayana told me she had thought of something I could do for them. They wanted to organize a sit-in in front of the Civil Registry office, to demand the right to change their names on their IDs. They wanted me to help them organize the protest. She told me they were planning to do it on Thursday (this was Monday night). Speaking from my perspective determined and limited by my academic background and my activist experience in

middle-class organizations, I told her it was too soon. I proposed to push it a little, to give us time to get everything ready. She smiled and said: “let's go for a ride, you'll meet some of the girls, and at the end you'll tell me what you think”.

We hit the streets. I met more than 20 girls that night. My heart ached and vibrated with their stories. At the end, Dayana looked at me smiling again and said: “So, you understand now? For these girls, two weeks do not exist. That's just like saying a month, a year, or nothing. They live for today. If you invite them to something that will take place in 15 days, it is like not inviting them at all”. I understood the need for an *ecology of time scale* to become aware that class privileges also weigh in the way we experience time, creating hierarchies that exclude those who do not live on a schedule.

3. In resistance to the *monoculture of the naturalization of differences* that conceals hierarchies, Santos proposes an *ecology of recognition* that enables a decolonial turn to distinguish which differences have been instrumentalized to impose hierarchies. This became a powerful tool to collectively reflect on the gender, class, and race oppressions they suffer. For example, one afternoon I brought to the discussion one of the few books that exist about trans women in Costa Rica. As I pronounced the author's name, fury took over the room. The older ones spoke of the context in which that book was written, denouncing that the author, a gay activist and scholar, had exploited and humiliated them back in the 90's. They recounted that he received a grant from international cooperation to do research *on* trans women. Some of them collaborated giving interviews, with little or no compensation, despite it being a well-funded project. After some months, the book was published, and a fancy presentation was held with representatives of international cooperation. He invited a couple of them and asked them to dress nicely. They said they felt as though they were part of the decoration, since they were not allowed to speak at the presentation (Anonymous participant #1<sup>11</sup>). However, they could listen to his affirmations, and some of them could also read his book. They say “its pages are filled with lies” (Anonymous participant #3), and they resent him treating them with contempt, neglecting their requests about pronouns and names, psychologizing their oppressions, and not even recognizing them as women.

Without using those words, they were speaking with great clarity about forms of epistemic violence such as extractivism, silencing, instrumentalization, objectifying, othering, and exoticization. This led them to reflect on class oppression and to denaturalize the causes that produce the precarious material conditions in which they live, while others earn their living by writing books about their misery.

One of the most common forms of epistemic violence in Latin America is epistemic extractivism, understood as the processes of looting, dispossession, theft, and appropriation of resources and knowledge from the Global South for the benefit of some demographic minorities of the planet considered racially superior, who make up the Global North and constitute the capitalist elites of the world-system (Grosfoguel 2016, 128). Decontextualized from their embodied origins, these knowledges are processed in Western universities to remove all potential radicalism from them, therefore making them more suitable for the market.

This also led us to important reflections on the need to “retribuir”<sup>12</sup>, translated here as *compensation*. Extracting without giving back is the principle of the destruction of life (Grosfoguel 2016). I do not know if it is possible to do research completely free of all forms of epistemic violence, but I believe that compensation is an important form of justice that we should implement.

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<sup>11</sup> Participants asked to remain completely anonymous to avoid persecution on the part of the author they denounce.

<sup>12</sup> “Retribuir” has no exact translation in English. I use “compensation” to name the act of giving something back to the communities. This should not be understood as a payment since it inscribes in the logic of sharing and reciprocity.

As Radi (2009) points out, we must guarantee that “the knowledge obtained will be of use to the communities under study and... determining its usefulness is not in the hands of anyone outside the community” (53). Compensation should not be reduced to providing a final report in a format that is not accessible to the communities. On the contrary, the forms of compensation must be defined by the people who are sharing their time and knowledge with us. Our compensation will never be enough, reciprocity will always be mined by capitalism, but it is the least we can do for the communities that nourish the papers for which we receive wages and grants.

Furthermore, these discussions demonstrated the importance of constructing their own stories and building embodied narratives to contest the attempts of extractivism and silencing that they continue to encounter. The effort to rescue their memories of resistance is more than the systematization of a history of struggle. It is a collective practice of knowledge construction, a recognition of the importance of the community in the path they have travelled, and a dialectical reflection on what may come. Against the *sociology of absences*, a collective trans\* history emerged.

### Considerations for an Affective Epistemology

Just as bonds and affections proved to be fundamental for the construction of gender in this community, they also shaped the ways of doing research in our study. Letting myself get affected in this project allowed me to get *involved* in a way that strived to break with the external position of the researcher and the vertical subject-object dynamics. However, this led me to questions about the effects of affectivity and bonds that we develop in social research.

Drawing on the contributions of psychoanalysis on the concept of *transference*<sup>13</sup> I would argue that, more than love, what can become problematic in social research is power and the way it configures our relationships. Allowing oneself to develop emotional ties in a research process does not automatically solve the problem of power relations. As anthropology, sociology, and social psychology have problematized, when approaching a community, no matter how hard we try to avoid it, we always carry the mark of scholars, with all the tensions, stereotypes, and expectations that it entails. Therefore, an affective approach that breaks with epistemic violence, requires the constant review of the relationships we sustain, as well as the active work of acknowledging and questioning our privileges to prevent them from crystallizing power relations and reproducing forms of domination.

Bearing in mind this critical perspective, authors in Latin America have incorporated the concept of *sentipensar* in discussions on research approaches and epistemology. Patricia Botero (2019) tracks the origins of this notion in Afro-descendant peoples in Colombia: “Sentipensar means acting with the heart using the head’. Sentipensar constitutes an affective lexicon of these pueblos (peoples) who, by linking together experience and language, create a revolutionary promise, a grammar for the future” (302).

Along this process, I have sought to shake off my own internal colonial rationality and the mandate that emotions have no place in research. More than researching affects, I wanted to do an affective research, a *sentipensante* approach that seemed closer to the forms of knowledge production in this community. Anthropology provides important elements in this sense, based on its long reflective trajectory on intersubjectivity and the place of affects in social research (Rockwell 1987). However, as Curiel (2013) points out in *La Nación Heterosexual*, even when critical anthropologists in Latin America and the Global South have made important efforts to overcome Eurocentrism, today mainstream currents in anthropology

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<sup>13</sup> Transference refers to the shifting of representations and affections from one place to another within one’s psyche and the intersubjectivity produced in the relationship of the analysand and the analyst (Vega), a form of relationship where affectivity is a vehicle used to travel somewhere else.

are still based on the logic of othering. To a large extent, anthropology continues to reproduce the fragmented understanding of rationality and affectivity, and although it points out the close relationship that exists between them and the way in which they nurture each other, it understands them as two different spheres, complete in themselves. In this sense, as a colonial science, it carries the inheritance of modernity's dichotomic thought. The exercise of *sentipensar* tries to break with this fragmentation.

This concept condenses two verbs ('sentir' –to feel, and 'pensar' –to think) that merge in a simultaneous approach to reality in our cultures; "Sentipensar is a radical vision and practice of the world, insofar as it questions the sharp separation that capitalist modernity establishes between mind and body, reason and emotion, humans and nature, secular and sacred, life and death" (Botero 2019, 302). In this attempt to listen and recognize each other in the field of *ecology of knowledges*, *sentipensar* provides a form of communication and intersubjective tessellation that helps to problematize the hierarchies between us. We do not intend to erase the materiality of inequalities but rooted in an *ecology of recognition* we seek to question them, and, above all, to generate contextualized tools to dismantle them. Affections as a vehicle, as a form of epistemology in the midst of this garden of knowledge, allow us to delve into places where a positivist, aseptic research approach cannot reach. Furthermore, they provide some tools to problematize the epistemic violence that power relations may provoke. Affectivity in social research is a bridge, yes, but a bridge that is a journey, a path, and a destination.

The narrative products of this study have also sought to navigate in the vehicle of affections. Some of the results have been presented in the form of articles, papers, and conferences in academic and feminist spheres. Likewise, the results of this study have served as an empirical basis for training and awareness-raising processes aimed at public institutions, a project that has generated a source of employment for some of the women in this community. The diffusion of this collectively constructed knowledge has made visible the narratives that germinate in the *absences* that official history has imposed. We have tried to tell these stories in an affective way, calling for collective action to transform the conditions of oppression that women in this community face. Affective narratives allowed us to contest the dehumanizing discourse that coloniality imposes on them.

In the midst of the multiple and diverse paths that lead towards the decolonization of power, I believe that affectivity and communality constitute prolific lands to cultivate knowledge, as they have always had the capacity to unhinge and dismantle coloniality (Alvarado). Aiming towards pluriversality, I do not pretend to say that this is the only way, or even the best one. However, I want to defend that it is a valid path to approach the processes of knowledge production and circulation *with* communities.

For many communities in the Global South, among them women and trans\* communities, bonds and the affections have nurtured epistemologies of their own (Segato 2016) that have allowed them to survive a long history of oppression, looting and silencing. It is a lesson that we researchers should learn with humility and respect. I believe that we must persist in the attempt of changing the rigid frontiers of our own universities. I like to think of it as a form of dissident epistemology<sup>14</sup> that criticizes academia with the intention of transforming it.

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<sup>14</sup> I speak of "dissident" because even when I try to avoid epistemic violence, I recognize that I was trained in the Western university, and this inevitably marks my approach to the production of knowledge.

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