

# A philosophical conversation with Lorena Cabnal from Guatemala

Diana Milena Patiño Niño<sup>1</sup>  0000-0002-1408-6170

<sup>1</sup>Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia. 111711. [filosofia@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:filosofia@uniandes.edu.co)



**Abstract:** In this paper I want to focus on the feminist Lorena Cabnal from Guatemala. I want to do so through her words in various spaces: videos, conferences, conversations with her, and her writings. My final goal is to engage with Cabnal's ideas/actions not only as feminist thought, but as philosophical formulations, even though they are not presented as they are usually presented in traditional academia, and they are not formulations involving universal categories. I want to talk with/from the concepts she develops in/with her experience in the same way as we usually engage with concepts formulated by an intellectual recognized as such by academia. My conversation with Cabnal will be grounded in my particular experience as a mestiza woman philosopher from Colombia (Diana Milena PATIÑO 2021).

**Keywords:** Feminism; Lorena Cabnal; Philosophy; Territorial Community Feminism; Network of Healers of Iximulew-Guatemala.

## **Uma conversa filosófica com Lorena Cabnal da Guatemala**

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, quero focar na feminista Lorena Cabnal, da Guatemala. Quero fazer isso através de suas palavras em diferentes espaços: vídeos, conferências, conversas com ela e seus escritos. Meu objetivo final é tomar as ideias/ações de Cabnal não apenas como pensamento feminista, mas como certas elaborações filosóficas, ainda que não de forma tradicional visto que não é uma elaboração de categorias universais. Quero falar com/a partir dos conceitos que ela elabora em/com sua experiência como costumamos tomar os conceitos elaborados por um intelectual reconhecido como tal pela academia. Um certo tipo de conversa dada minha experiência particular como filósofa mestiça da Colômbia (PATIÑO 2021).

**Palavras-chave:** feminismo; Lorena Cabnal; filosofia; feminismo de comunidade territorial; red de sanadoras de Iximulew-Guatemala.

## **Una conversación filosófica con Lorena Cabnal de Guatemala**

**Resumen:** En este escrito quiero centrarme en la feminista Lorena Cabnal de Guatemala. Quiero hacerlo a través de sus palabras que han circulado en diferentes espacios: videos, conferencias, conversaciones con ella, además, sus escritos. Mi objetivo final es tomar las ideas/acciones de Cabnal no sólo como pensamiento feminista sino como ciertas elaboraciones filosóficas, aunque ellas no sean elaboraciones filosóficas en el sentido tradicional de la academia filosófica occidental, toda vez que no son elaboraciones de categorías universales. Quiero hablar con/desde los conceptos que elabora en/con su experiencia, tal y como solemos tomar los conceptos elaborados por un intelectual reconocido como tal por la academia. Un tipo de conversación particular dada mi peculiar experiencia como filósofa mestiza de Colombia (Diana PATIÑO 2021).

**Palabras clave:** feminismo; Lorena Cabnal; filosofía; feminismo comunitario territorial; red de sanadoras de Iximulew-Guatemala.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The first thing I must point out is that Lorena is part of Community Territorial Feminism from Guatemala. This feminism, as “a process of epistemic construction, is woven from the territory; from the body and its relationship with the land” (Francesca GARGALLO, 2012, p. 177). That is, the territorial community feminism of mountain women – Cabnal names them as such because they are not just rural women but are from a specific mountain, Xalapán, which also has a special meaning for its indigenous inhabitants – is not the result of theoretical, intellectual, or academic abstractions, but rather is (continues to be, because it is not static) a way of living life which is deeply linked to the defense of the body/land territory (I will explain this below).

Indeed, this feminism is a political proposal which does not arise from interpretations or discourses exogenous to the community from which it emerges; it arises from the lives of these Mayan and Xinka women of the mountain, although using some categories and learning from theoretical western feminism. And it is a political proposal (cosmic/political in Cabnal's terms) that arises from specific bodies: indignant bodies; bodies of indigenous woman from Xalapán impoverished by the capitalist, racist, and hetero-patriarchal system. In that sense, it emerges from the experience, often painful and other times powerful, of being in the communities they inhabit.

It is therefore a historicized feminism, emerging from a particular time and space, but knowing that it is part of a “continuum of resistance, transgression, and epistemology of women in spaces and times, for the abolition of patriarchy” (Lorena CABNAL, 2010, p.12). Because it is a feminism that was also born out of reclaiming the struggles, resistance, and wisdom of the ancestors, creating and recreating, walking and retracing the “past,” reclaiming the ancestral indigenous cosmogony, with the intention of illuminating the present.

However, it is not merely a reclaiming of the ancestors' experiences, of community practices and the cosmogony of native peoples. It is also about revisiting those experiences so that they contribute to the *network of life*<sup>2</sup> or Tzk'at, while evaluating and modifying those practices that do not contribute. To that extent, it constitutes a critical perception of those historical forms of oppression by native peoples of the body/land territory.

For this reason, while it emerges from particular materialities, it also emerges as a cosmogonic proposal (which I will explain below) that seeks to generate and increase curiosity, inquiry, and criticism of the world that we inhabit and of the existential relationships that are woven into it (personal conversation with author, 2020). A cosmogony that begins by asking questions, but which also ties and weaves new ways of answering them in the body/land territory.

For all of the above reasons, this feminism does not have a specific theoretical or conceptual objective; it does not seek to be a theoretical corpus. And not only because it conceives of its categories and concepts in constant movement and construction (also de-construction), but also because its main objective is “to suggest discussions [...] within community organizational spaces, of indigenous women, women's movements, and feminists” (CABNAL, 2010, p.12). Its objective is to issue a call for life, to weave for life, and in that sense, then, it is an existential proposal of deep consciousness (cosmogony).

Nevertheless, although this feminism doesn't have a theoretical *corpus*, it has a rich conceptualization that can enrich our work as academics, specifically as philosophers and feminists. These conceptualizations do not come in the form in which we usually find them, but in action. And Cabnal's words are our gateway to them.

In the following pages, with Lorena Cabnal's written words and speeches to which I have access – a small piece of that feminism, because as Cabnal said to me, those words are “almost nothing compared to what walks” (personal conversation with author, 2020), while that feminism is made by walking – I will attempt to weave her words with my threads. Since I am a mestiza feminist, academic, and philosopher from Colombia, I will *talk* with Cabnal in my own language.

This is, then, a conversation, which involves working with Cabnal's words, speaking with her, rather than speaking for her. I am not seeking to replace Cabnal's voice, among other reasons because she has a strong voice that has already made itself heard in a range of places.

For that reason, I should say that this will not be a traditional academic exercise. With respect for Cabnal and her generous conversations and feedback for the first version of this text<sup>3</sup>, I will attempt to open a different space for her voice to reach. This is also my particular way of

<sup>1</sup> This paper was funded by The Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation of Colombia and Los Andes University, Colombia.

<sup>2</sup> In a personal conversation, Cabnal emphasized the importance of the *network of life*. This is not simply an affirmation, but rather a cosmogonic principle, which is named Tzk'at in Mayan, but which is shared by many indigenous peoples. The network of life, says Cabnal, is one of the interpretive dimensions of life, which assumes that everything is related to life. For example, corn: for corn to become corn, you need air, fire, the warmth of the hand, the bee, the sun, the water, as well as the galaxies, bodies, the ancestors, spiritualities, etc. It is a relational principle that provides vital energy of existence to all the plural manifestations of life (personal conversation with author, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> That first version was written for a talk with Lorena at an event for my doctoral studies at the Universidad de los Andes. It can be found in Spanish at this link: [https://www.academia.edu/43358711/APUNTES\\_SOBRE\\_UN\\_FEMINISMO\\_](https://www.academia.edu/43358711/APUNTES_SOBRE_UN_FEMINISMO_)

bringing decolonizing practices to academia, not only because I view Cabnal as a philosopher, but because this paper will fall outside of conventional social science methodologies. Indeed, my main sources are Cabnal's conferences and interviews posted on YouTube rather than papers and books; I also include my conversations with Lorena Cabnal during the pandemic.

At the risk of sounding repetitive: I do not intend to give voice to Cabnal or to be the scientist who records that community feminist thought from Guatemala. Cabnal's own voice has made itself heard in many places and she does not need anyone to speak for her. Rather, we need her ideas in academia to enrich the possibilities of thinking about/with feminist *praxis*. I will try, then, with all my limitations, to *listen to speaking*, rather than *making speak*, as Gladys Tzul Tzul says. That is, to "learn with respect from a woman's knowledge" instead of "exploiting her knowledge" (Gladys TZUL TZUL Apud GARGALLO 2012, p. 58).

This text will be divided into two sections. In the first one, I would like to share some aspects of the gestation process of **Territorial Community Feminism from Guatemala**. This will be a way of perceiving the materiality that is intrinsic to it and the singularity of this proposal, but also a way of opening space for other forms of conceptualizing based not on categories but on a singular experiential description. In the second section, I want to attempt a kind of philosophical exercise, working with the concept of *Healers* through Cabnal's voice. To that end, I will try to weave with both her words and mine.

This second section will be divided in two: In the first place, I want to take those actions and words of Cabnal that can give us insight into concepts with a different notion of politics, philosophically speaking. Secondly, I want to take those actions and words of Cabnal that make those of us who have spent years in the conventional philosophical academy question our philosophical practice; those words/actions that could lead us to open ourselves up to other ways of thinking and to accept thought that emerges from coordinates other than those that we are used to accepting.

Thus, I do not intend to explore Xinka thought or Community feminism, which is a far-reaching movement in Abya Yala (Latin America). Research on those subjects would be very useful to expand knowledge, but my goal is another one.

To close this long introduction, I want to express my respect, gratitude, and deep admiration toward Lorena Cabnal and her generosity with me, at the same time as I offer an apology for any mistakes I might make in perceiving the novelty that has appeared to me with her life and her struggles. I recognize that in the place and body that I inhabit, I may not be able to do justice to the multiple nuances of the rich, complex, and elaborate *fabric* in construction that is this particular feminism.

## **Brief words about the birth of territorial community feminism from Lorena Cabnal's voice**

Gargallo, in her book *Feminismos desde Abya Yala (Feminisms from Abya Yala)*, reproduces the Xinka<sup>4</sup> Women's Political Declaration entitled "They violate our rights when they decide on our women's bodies, on our sexuality, and on our land" (GARGALLO, 2012, p. 165). I would like to mention three items in the declaration, which assert that community feminism arises:

- In resistance and in a permanent struggle against all of the effects of both ancestral and western patriarchal violence, which seek to manifest themselves against our first territory, which is the body, and against our land territory.<sup>5</sup>
- In constant struggle and action against all manifestations of the neoliberal model of patriarchal development that threatens our land territory.
- In constant action and awareness of Community Feminists, in recovery and defense of our first territory that is the body. Those bodies have been and continue to be historically violated and expropriated by both ancestral patriarchal power and western patriarchal power (GARGALLO, 2012, p. 166).

This clear statement was the product of several years of work. And, although is a joint statement that arose from several Xinka women, and although it is a very important statement for Community Territorial Feminist from Guatemala, in the following pages I want to refer only to Cabnal's experience, since her words are more accessible to us.

Cabnal started the path to become a feminist many years before the feminist movement in the mountain was born. It started with her own experience of sexual violence. Cabnal was a victim of sexual violence when she was a child. The aggressor: her own father (CABNAL, 2019; 2019b). Years later, in 2003, her desire to prevent sexual violence in children led her to study Social

COMUNITARIO\_Desde\_la\_experiencia\_de\_Lorena\_Cabnal. In addition, this link shows the public conversation that Cabnal and I had with that text as an excuse: <https://fb.watch/jlgRDrwag/>

<sup>4</sup> The Xinka people are an indigenous people from the region known as Mesoamerica.

<sup>5</sup> From this declaration we can think that body-land territory could be understood separately (body territory in one hand and land territory in other hand). But as I pointed out before, in Cabnal's point of view it does not mean that.

Psychology and then to find a collective named the *Colectivo de Protagonismo Infanto Juvenil* (Child and Youth Leadership Collective), supported by the National Coordinating Committee Against Child Abuse and Sexual Abuse (CABNAL, 2019b). With this group, she started working on the mountain of Santa María Xalapán.

There, she started to work with some of the women from the mountain, prompted by the words of one woman from there, María Andrés (CABNAL, 2015). María Andrés asked Cabnal about the rights of women, since Cabnal was working for children's rights. With this question, they started working together to seek help for women from the mountain (CABNAL, 2015).

They wanted support to improve the material conditions of those women in the mountain, because many of them were impoverished (CABNAL, 2019b). They went to Guatemala City and there they found help from Women's Sector, a national coalition of women's organizations and social organizations. Nevertheless, Women's Sector could not support them in the productive projects planned by the mountain women; rather, the organization offered them "political education for women" (CABNAL *apud* GARGALLO, 2012, p. 175).

Very soon, the women from the mountain started to anonymously denounce violence against the women (CABNAL, 2019b). They started denouncing sexual violence committed through "abductions of 11, 12, 13, and 14-year-old girls to start an involuntary marital life" (CABNAL *apud* GARGALLO, 2012, p. 176).

At the same time, they began publicly denouncing forced removals from territories that the community was trying to recover (CABNAL, 2019b). In Cabnal's words: at the end of 2005 "we made the first international public complaint against the land expropriation and forced removals that landowners are carrying out in the mountains" (CABNAL *apud* GARGALLO, 2012, p. 174). And while assuming those struggles, they also started talking about the "defense of my body as my first territory" (CABNAL 2019c). Cabnal said:

So we started to say: well, just like we defend the land territory, we should also defend our bodies, because our bodies are like a territory. From that time on, this relationship of interpreting our bodies as a territory to be defended was born, and [then] we started talking about *my body, my first territory* (CABNAL 2017).

But in 2007, with the participation of young women in the movement and the struggle against mining, they assumed their struggle in a different way, which changed them profoundly (CABNAL *apud* GARGALLO, 2012). Cabnal said:

Just as we defend the body territory, we also defend the earth territory, and we are not going to postpone it. We began to say *Liki tuyahaki na altepet kwerpo-narú*, which means the recovery and defense of the body/land territory. That emerged as a slogan, and we painted it on blankets and painted it in many places. And we took part in the major struggle and resistance against mining in the mountains, and we did it because we suddenly began to realize that the increased activities for territorial defense was moving us aside us and attempting to postpone our fight for the defense of the body territory. And we began to tell the grandparents and the men from the indigenous government and the communities: it is politically inconsistent and cosmogonically inconsistent to defend the [...] land territory [...] and not defend the bodies of girls and women who live in this territory that we are defending. It is politically and cosmogonically inconsistent to not also be indignant today, right now, in the face of the multiple forms of violence that women experience in the world (CABNAL, 2017).

At that time, the political declaration of the body/land territory was born. But not as a category of analysis, because it was born due to particular circumstances and the organizing carried out by mountain women (personal conversation with author, 2020). And, according to Cabnal, the political slogan emerging from that declaration, "*Liki tuyahaki na altepet kwerpo-narú*," / "defense and recovery of the body/land territory," does not refer to an analytical category either, given that the body/land territory has cosmogonic and political force as long as it is conceived of as a single unit. That is to say, it is not conceived of separately, with the body territory on the one hand and the land territory on the other, but in unity (personal conversation with author, 2020).

At that time, they started to receive more death threats that would eventually lead to Cabnal's forced displacement (CABNAL, 2019b). Nevertheless, at the same time, they continued with their political education. Four women from the mountain decided to enter the first National Feminist School held in Guatemala (personal conversation with author, 2020).

There, they made alliances with feminist women and held meetings that showed them the existence of multiple feminisms in the world and the debates around them. However, despite what was gained, this new knowledge brought deep discomfort and outrage to the mountain women, because the history of feminism that they read included no writings by indigenous women or about the deeds of indigenous women. They found with amazement that, despite the diversity of feminisms, the overarching approaches under which these various feminisms are woven—such as the waves—had been created by white women, often establishing a universal way of being a

woman, without contemplating the particularities of the we of diverse feminist struggles (personal conversation with author, 2020).

From that moment on, the women of the mountain began to cause discomfort and tension for the facilitators at the School, as they questioned universalization as a way of ignoring the struggles of indigenous women. Feminism, apparently, was a world in which only those who called themselves feminists appeared, and the indigenous women of Guatemala had not (personal conversation with author, 2020).

Their outrage brought a proposal: through their path to recover the historical memory and knowledge of their ancestors, which they rebelliously called the “femealogy<sup>6</sup> of their ancestors” (personal conversation with author, 2020) and which had begun with their struggle for ethnic identity, they recognized that their unique path represented a different feminism. This feminism began with a different interpretation of the cosmogony, based on the *network of life*, “with a rolled-up account of time” (CABNAL, 2015).

At that time, they didn’t call themselves community feminists. It was in mid-2010 when the name came up. The National Feminist School, in which the four Xinka women participated, organized the First National Feminist Assembly. The School asked each of the mountain women who would participate in the Assembly to explain in five minutes why they called themselves feminists and which feminism they identified with, and to argue their positions with the categories and concepts they had learned at the school (personal conversation with author, 2020).

When the women reviewed the materials that the facilitators had given them, they found with concern that they didn’t feel represented by any of the theoretical feminisms they had studied. Some said that maybe they could be equality feminists, because they wanted to be treated equally, but after discussing it they found that they were not included in that feminism. Another said that maybe they could be anarchists, because they were against the State, but as indigenous people with specific struggles, they were not entirely included there, either. The work became distressing, almost to the point of tears (personal conversation with author, 2020).

The night before the Assembly, by candlelight and with each woman’s handwritten texts, and without being clear about which feminism they would identify with, they decided on the methodology for the presentation. Because of the fear caused by the school and their work (speaking in front of feminists and urban women, many of them trained at university, unlike three of the women of the mountain), they decided that they should come together and “speak as a group” (personal conversation with author, 2020). So they agreed that as soon as one finished, the other should continue, so as to not give time for questions. They divided up the topics and established the order of speaking, with Cabnal left to close the presentation. It was just at that moment that they had the idea of calling themselves community feminists (personal conversation with author, 2020).

## Weaving with Cabnal’s threads and mine

In this section, I would like to assume two aspects of this Territorial Community Feminism as an invitation: an invitation to start thinking about some of the political and philosophical ideas involved in that feminism. In the first place, I want to explore an expanded vision of politics that is the center of the group that was born from Territorial Community Feminism: the Network of Ancestral Healers of Guatemala. I will speak in more detail about this group in the following pages. In the second place, I want to think with those words of Cabnal that allow us to think about the Healers, but Cabnal in particular, as philosophers. Not as philosophers in the sense we currently conceive of the term, linked to the academy, but as a *praxis* in which thinking and action are linked together in order to live an *examined life* (to borrow that famous phrase from Socrates).

In the following pages, I will attempt to conduct a brief exercise with Cabnal’s words, *weaving them* together with the words and concepts I have learned from the place where I have built myself epistemically (with the tradition of Continental Philosophy).

I feel that accepting these invitations is a way of decolonizing perception. However, recognizing that my practice is localized, historicized, and singular, I know that these forms of receiving the invitations are not the only ones possible, and I am aware that I could commit injustices. As Cabnal points out, given the plurality of bodies and existences, there will be a plurality of inquiries. Thus, I do not intend to present the way I have received those invitations as unequivocal and total.

## Healing as resistance and the cosmic-political path: an expanded vision of politics

Although Territorial Community Feminism was born out of the specific needs of these mountain women, in a particular context, focused on the defense of the body/land territory,

<sup>6</sup> This word femealogy is from Ana Silvia Monzón, who was one of the School’s facilitators. (personal conversation with author, 2020).

it is a feminism that has continued on its path and that has found its center since 2015. That center is *healing* as a political cosmic path for those bodies in struggle; bodies that have been impoverished, violated, and oppressed by the racist, colonial, hetero-patriarchal system. A center born at a moment of inflection within this feminism, with the death of Elizeth Us Tum and the final departure of Cabnal from Xalapán, in exile due to political persecution (CABNAL, 2020).

Although the defense of the body/land territory had been one of its guiding principles since the beginning of this community feminism, the path of healing, according to Cabnal, had not been at its center (CABNAL, 2020). Both Cabnal and Us Tum, one of the members of the community feminist women's group, had felt illness in their bodies. According to Cabnal, Us Tum said about this: "Look how I'm dying; how our bodies are ending. How inconsistent we are" (CABNAL, 2020). This feminist inconsistency, says Cabnal, was because they put their bodies into their struggles but did not carry out processes of healing their body/land territory, healing their ways of feeling and experiencing relationships (CABNAL, 2018). Cabnal says: we wanted to "change the world, the patriarchal system, but here, our bodies [were] politically alienated from the ancient healings that sustain bodies in resistance" (CABNAL, 2020).

Us Tum, 36 years old and with a long history of political struggle, was dying. As she did so, her community, the women from the mountain, was with her. At that time and with/under the Tz'k'at, "they agreed to organize women to deal with the diseases, sadness, stigmatization, and displacement that they had experienced with their families as a result of the criminalization of their actions in defense of their bodies and the land" (CABNAL, 2018). This is how *The Network of Ancestral Healers* was born, and with this step, Cabnal distanced herself from feminist spaces to strengthen her spirituality.

Taking up the knowledge of her mother and her maternal grandmother, both traditional herbalists, and that of women midwives and time counters (Mayan calendar makers), along with other women, Cabnal embarked on a new path of Territorial Community Feminism: that of healing as a personal and political act and *acuerpamiento* (embodiment) as a way to do so.

Given this, from the place from which I am speaking, I can perceive this decision by community feminists—now as Healers—as a way to put in motion a powerful conception of politics. A conception as opposed to the liberal way of understanding politics, in which it is conceived as an instrumental activity involving state institutions, the government (the act of ruling), understanding it as an activity of a few, the rulers, which falls on others, the governed. A conception similar to those that has been developed from academy in different places, especially in continental philosophy (see Jacques Rancière, Hannah Arendt, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, among others).

I feel that this incorporation of healing as a political act and *acuerpamiento* (embodiment), which challenges ontological and epistemic conceptions, have powerful implications for what it means to think of ourselves in terms of an *us* or a community. I will try to weave this novelty, briefly, in the following lines.

Since its birth in 2015, the Network of Ancient Healers, as community territorial feminists, "has accompanied women defenders in their processes of emotional and spiritual recovery" (CABNAL, 2018). In their words:

Somatization, feelings, and thoughts are addressed with ancestral knowledge, inherited from our indigenous grandmothers and our healing mothers. For us, healing is a personal and political act to dismantle oppression and victimization; to free ourselves and emancipate our bodies. It is an act that drives us to recover the new time of liberation of the body to claim joy and, without losing our indignation and in the midst of a complex world, to celebrate life, resistance and multiple wisdoms, as well as the fact of being alive and *acuerpadas* (embodied) (CABNAL, 2018).

Territorial Community Feminism then becomes an act of bringing together, of welcoming life for a new life, a different life. As Cabnal says, it is an act of welcoming the indignation and pain of some bodies, as well as the joy and happiness (CABNAL, 2019). *Acuerpamiento* (embodiment) is, then, an act of healing in a network, because "you are me and I am you" (CABNAL, 2019). Cabnal says: "what hurts in that story, that body, hurts [in 'me'], so I *acuerpo*" (CABNAL, 2019).

It is *embracing* through *identification* with the other in/by plurality. In the certainty that he/she/they is different from me, because "nothing in the cosmos is repeated, with the same pattern or in a series" (CABNAL, 2019a). A difference that is accepted to make it part of myself; not to make it equal to me, but to make it body, based on difference.

This identification with the other, we can say inspired to some extent by the ideas of Jacques RANCIÈRE (1996), occurs through a kind of de-identification of the self in order to welcome the other, in a process that occurs in a network, which also means that this process occurs in the counterpart, in the other. This identification also entails welcoming the struggles of those others, who are *me*, as well. Which can lead to political action. One who was not in "my" agenda but, given the *acuerpamiento*, now is part of it. Therefore, the struggles do not always appeal to a certain identity, but they are open to anyone who can *acuerpar* them. It is not merely an empathetic feeling, but a certain way of assuming others' existence and struggles and acting accordingly. It must entail action.

Another radical aspect of Cabnal's proposal is that this proposal of identification, as the implementation of politics, does not appeal to an identification only with other human lives or other animal lives. It also involves welcoming other beings who, from a certain ontological point of view, are considered lifeless, such as stones and mountains, rivers, and fire.

Therefore, the proposal allows politics to be understood also as a way of thinking of ourselves outside of anthropocentric hierarchies, outside speciesism. The Healers' commitment allows us to perceive in a different way the political struggles for the defense of the body/land territory. Their proposal is more radical than proposals on the defense of the right to land that have circulated over the past century.

As I have said elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, many struggles for the defense of land (not only in Abya Yala<sup>8</sup>) seem to take place under a double conception of land: on the one hand, land as an object to be appropriated; on the other, land as a large storeroom from which "goods and services are extracted" (Selene SOLANO, 2020) in the present or in the future (hence it is also thought of as a reserve for humanity). This double conception underlies many of the struggles that emerge from sectors critical of liberal extractivism. Therefore, many of them, although they emerge from diverse ideological shores (struggles for property vs. struggles for the environment, for example), always bring an instrumental logic to the human/land equation: land is an instrument for the survival of human beings or of humanity (for instance, the affirmation of forests as the lungs of the world).

When we think about the body/land territory, and inside that territory the water, air, stones, etc., and other animals, as part of the *network of life*, we can understand the struggles in a more complex way. Indeed, we can understand the actions of mining companies as not only against *land* but against the *network of life*.

At this point, I would like to re-emphasize another of the Healers' powerful ideas for thinking about politics. The Healers' words that describe healing as a political cosmic path seem to embrace one of the most famous slogans of one current of white feminism, which claims that the personal is also political, an idea that Cabnal has already adhered to.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is a difference between these political positions and those of Cabnal, not only because of what I have argued in the preceding paragraphs but precisely because of what Territorial Community Feminism is: it occurs in/from/by the community. This feminism embraces the affirmation that the personal is political while, at the same time, dissolving it. From the perspective of the Healers, politics is personal but not individual. Because the personal does not allude to a sovereign (enlightened) experience of individuality, but rather alludes to the impersonal personal, as part of a network between human and non-human existences.

Therefore, it is a politics that cannot be detached from a *we*, and that *we* is not limited to understanding an accumulation of "human" singularities but embraces the flow and the construction and deconstruction of those singularities. It is a *we* that welcomes the plurality of bodies<sup>10</sup> and of existences, of struggles and of dissent, of wounds and of healings. A *we* that also includes the already gone (ancestors) who remain with us, because they will always be present in their absence, because of coiled time (circular time).

To that extent, politics can no longer be merely governance or the modification of institutions but tied to action. Politics has to mean being with each other, where those others are a multiplicity of existences in a multiplicity of temporalities, a multiplicity of presences in absences and presences in presences.

For this reason, this proposal allows us to think about political transformations inside the real community, not an imaginary one.

For this reason, healing as a cosmic political path not only departs from the (white, liberal, individual) feminist political slogan. It also constitutes a political commitment that moves away from a vision of politics that is limited to narrow conceptions of the meaning of the human world (hence, for example, the logocentric need for politics to be mediated by verbalization). But that is a discussion for another place.

## Healers and Activists, but also Philosophers?

For Lorena Cabnal, the cosmogony of her people is one more philosophy among other philosophies that exist in different territories and for different peoples. Taking this assertion seriously, we can assume that indeed the cosmogony as seen by these feminists is what we call in academia practical philosophy. In the following, I would like to briefly cast a thread and weave it with Cabnal's threads to highlight some features allowing us to call it practical philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> This text is in the process of being published and will be available later this year.

<sup>8</sup> I assume the Kuna name of this territory as a political gesture to challenge some colonial impositions - such as that of naming us as America - and to vindicate the memory of that warrior people, who fought against the occupation and even made alliances with French corsairs against the tyrannical and bloody Spanish occupation.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Cabnal 2010.

<sup>10</sup> In an interview, Cabnal affirms about the plurality of bodies: "There cannot be a closed or established body as a man or a woman within indigenous conceptions, because before colonization there were already manifestations of bodies, *cuerpas*, *cuerpes* that are not subject to the heterosexual construction of bodies." (CABNAL, 2019a)

I believe that taking this statement seriously is a way of questioning the boundaries of what is accepted as philosophy in the western academy.

In a personal conversation with Cabnal (2020), she highlighted the importance of asserting that indigenous peoples have a philosophy, which is simply their cosmogony. But this wasn't the first time Cabnal made this assertion: she has made this affirmation in different places. With it, she has denounced the violence exerted by the prejudiced gaze of the colonial European hegemonic academy that seeks to hierarchically separate the conceptions of native peoples from those that are known as scientific or that seek to practice scientific thought (and even so-called proto-scientific thought). This epistemic violence, as she has pointed out, has often labelled those cosmogonies, pejoratively or at least condescending, as magical thought.

At this point, I tighten my thread with Cabnal's, and an episode from an ancient philosophy course, The Pre-Socratics, comes to my mind. It was during my undergraduate training in philosophy at the National University of Colombia. I remember that they had us read some excerpts of no more than four lines from Thales of Miletus. At the end of the reading, the teacher asked us how the text we had just read was different from the creation myths we had heard in school or that we remembered. The difference, according to the teacher, lay not primarily in the type of answers but in the type of questions, which led to other inquiries about the world and palpable reality.

But beyond pointing out this difference between the types of questions, the teacher's judgment highlighted a border that I already knew about from my previous years of training in the colonized academy (the school); a border that established a linear progression with respect to human knowledge, but, more problematically, a border that did not only refer to knowledge but to ways of existing. A border between some people who were far more distant from sophisticated forms of *true* knowledge and who lived far from the delights bestowed by knowledge, and others who enjoyed them. Some existences that had a subordinate position in comparison with others, precisely because of the establishment of that hierarchy. A hierarchy that was established with the invasion and looting of the Abya Yala territory by Spanish and other Europeans, and which continues today.

Let me return to Cabnal.

In the face of this dominant vision that disparages indigenous peoples' cosmogony by calling it magical thinking, Cabnal's statement that they are equivalent to what other peoples call philosophies is a powerful gesture. Not because her words bring into the realm of philosophy those forms that have been shut out of it, but because her words question the very division that causes a hierarchical difference between philosophy and cosmogony. I would like to dwell on this and briefly point out the process that has led me to this statement.

Cabnal asserts that cosmogony is a vital element for native peoples because they are "forms of interpretation of life in the world" (CABNAL, 2015). In the Mayan cosmogony<sup>11</sup>, for example, Cabnal says, everything is related to the cosmos, in a nonlinearity of time. In this sense, this interpretation of life in the world is the matrix from which peoples establish patterns of behavior (in accordance with cosmic harmony).

Cosmogonies are, then, different ways through which coordinates of meaning are established, that is, through which peoples locate themselves in the cosmos and establish relationships with other beings and with other human beings. It is, then, a kind of grid from which vital principles and values emerge, through which behaviors are governed. And given the plurality of life and the diversity of peoples, there is no single way to read and inhabit the world; that's why there are different types of cosmogony. Therefore, it is understood that there is not a single cosmogony but rather cosmogonies in the plural (thus, in that pairing of magical thought and science, there is no reason to establish a hierarchy between the two, given that they are diverse coordinates of meaning).

For example, according to the founding cosmogony of many native peoples, complementarity and duality are two principles that govern the cosmic balance and, therefore, the balance between women and men. A duality, observed by Cabnal, which is "based on heteronormative human sexuality" (CABNAL, 2010, p. 14). According to the Mayan cosmogony, both the stars and the earth enter the heteronorm (they are female or male), in a kind of anthropomorphization based on heteronormative biological sexuality. Under this conception of the stars and planets, women are "complementary to men in everything, for social, biological, and cultural reproduction. [...] [Men are] responsible for symbolic and material reproduction, as well as the reproduction of thought" (CABNAL, 2010, p. 14).

But, given the pluralities of cosmogonies and the principle of giving life in the *network of life*, this cosmogony is neither closing nor closed. Cabnal warns that there has been an imbalance in the *network of life*; for that reason, indigenous women have been mistreated. She points out that relationships between beings, based on the feminine and the masculine, where one depends on, relates to, and complements the other, "have been strengthened by these practices

---

<sup>11</sup> The Mayan cosmogony is extremely rich and has been studied extensively for many years. Those studies have shown that this cosmogony not only talks about the genesis of the gods or the world, but that it has a very elaborate notion of circular temporality, which led this people to refine their numerical and astronomical systems, as well as led to the creation of writing due to the need to keep memory of events.



of hegemonic spirituality, thereby perpetuating the oppression of women in their heterosexual relationship with nature" (CABNAL, 2010, p. 16). Therefore, says Cabnal, the gendered division of the cosmos constitutes "the most sublime ancestral imposition of obligatory heterosexual norms in the lives of indigenous women and men, which is legitimized through spiritual practices that name it as sacred" (CABNAL, 2010, p. 16).

Cabnal says that there can and must be a liberating worldview that restores balance. That is why Cabnal, together with other mountain women, carry out a "communal, feminist decoding," (CABNAL, 2019a) taking the cosmogonic and giving it a territorial feminist content:

We take the agricultural/lunar calendar and seize two dimensions. We choose the red color that represents the blood of bodies: territory/body. On the other side of the lunar-agricultural calendar is the color green: territory/land. We begin to say that in the *network of life*, everything acts with reciprocity and decoding begins there" (CABNAL, 2019a).

This new cosmogony is what they recreate to enrich the *network of life* and make it flourish:

Its content is spun with elements that promote cosmogonic equity throughout the whole of life; it is dynamic, cyclical, and spiral; it is open to deconstructions and constructions. Its symbols promote the liberation of historical oppression against the sexed bodies of women and against historical capitalist oppression against nature, but in turn they evoke and invoke the ancestral resistances and transgressions of women (CABNAL, 2010, p. 24).

Now, taking all of the above into consideration, and from my threads, I can conjecture/weave a power in this: that these movements by Cabnal put into play what has been called philosophy for life<sup>12</sup>, as part of practical philosophy.

Cosmogony, for Cabnal and the Healers, also seems to refer to a certain exercise through which peoples emerge and establish a shared community of meaning, through which they locate themselves in the world and give meaning to their experiences. Cosmogony does not refer, then, only to a doctrine but to the exercise that allows them to weave codes, read experiences, and inhabit the world, while knowing that these coordinates of meaning are not eternal, but are modifiable by life itself. It is therefore an exercise that is not static, but that can be set in motion by its deep connection with life.

For example, speaking from her cosmogony, Cabnal warned that there is a disharmonization in the *network of life*, and from there she posed the need to restore harmony to that network, through the modification of certain cosmogonic interpretations.

This way of thinking about cosmogony makes me think of philosophy as an exercise that is anchored in life, in an openness to life, to the contingency that life itself supposes. It is not in any way a set of ideas far away from the world, because it responds to the world, to the concretion of human experience.

Therefore, I feel that this notion resonates with the vision of Deleuze and Guattari (1993) and, in a certain way, the vision presented by Hannah Arendt (1978) with the figure of Socrates. Deleuze and Guattari described philosophy as an art of *creating concepts* in singularity, starting from or based on questions or problems that are in process of becoming. On the other hand, Arendt seems to indicate, although not explicitly, that philosophy, rather than the construction and writing of theories, is the exercise of unfreezing concepts—understood as the way that human beings have given themselves to locate themselves in the world—in order to embrace the uniqueness and contingency of human existence on earth. Indeed, considering Cabnal's statements cited above and given that patterns of behavior are given by/in the cosmogonies of peoples, those patterns, morals, or ethical principles are therefore also mutable. To that extent, they are not a corpus of norms or static principles through which the behaviors/lives of peoples must be governed *ad infinitum*. They mutate as soon as they stop contributing to the *network of life*.

I feel that the fabric of ethics in the Healers is deeply connected to what I have spun as the fabric of political exercise. To that extent, it is linked to the possibility of giving oneself other bodies and other possibilities. However, I plan to elaborate on this in another text; I leave these lines here, for now.

## A way of closing

The above words and exercises around Territorial Community Feminism are a beginning of the explorations that are possible based on this powerful proposal from these Guatemalan women. It is also a beginning of exercises that can be initiated as a way to decolonize academic feminism and other academic fields. It is a way to begin to take seriously, as Gayatri Spivak says, proposals by intellectuals in our region and to investigate other conceptual coordinates that are ready to be used.

Questions and several issues remain to be explored, such as what we can think about the non-verbalization and non-logocentrism of politics, as well as the meaning of philosophy according to the words of Lorena Cabnal.

<sup>12</sup> In the way Nietzsche, Lacan, Arendt, and Hadot think about philosophy.

Even though this was only a beginning, Cabnal and those powerful statements and actions by Territorial Community Feminism have opened a new world of understanding of my body and of myself as an academic. They have helped me to give more strength to a notion that I had already been developing: thinking of myself as a mestiza, as a mestiza philosopher (following in part Gloria Anzaldúa's *New Mestiza*). A mestiza who is not a fusion of different kinds of intellectuals (from the West and from the global South), but who feels inside herself the struggle between different intellectual forms, as well as the struggle between desires and needs as a woman, as a mestiza. A mestiza who doesn't perceive that mixture as the result of something totally new, like the summation and overcoming of traits; a mestiza who often feels destroyed by that.

A mestiza daughter of a mixture that allows me to situate myself from/in this crossbreeding and territoriality, leading me, for example, to denounce (as I have discussed elsewhere) and be outraged at the problems with many narratives in Colombia about the birth of the feminist movement here. These narratives revolve around a production of the feminist subject that continues to operate under the logic of the universalization of the subject "woman," who is an erasure of the plurality and diversity of women. Under these narratives, women are only understood as a group that is defined by a generic identity, heirs to the colonial category of sexual dimorphism. These stories do not question the concept of the "waves" of feminism that, although it emerged from a specific need of the feminist movement, seems to have an independent ontological/mythological existence, as if these waves were real existences and not created categories, always under the logic of linear progress.

I close these lines with an energetic call from Cabnal: To reclaim joy without losing our indignation!

## Bibliography

ANZALDÚA, Gloria. *Borderlands. La frontera. The New Mestiza*. Madrid: Capitan Swing Libros, 2016.

ARENDETT, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt, 1978.

DELEUZE Gilles; GUATARI, Felix *¿Qué es la filosofía?* Barcelona: Anagrama, 1993.

CABNAL, Lorena, "Acercamiento a la construcción de la propuesta de pensamiento epistémico de las mujeres indígenas feministas comunitarias de Abya Yala". In: LAS SEGOVIAS. *Feminismos diversos: el feminismo comunitario* [online]. ACSUR, 2010. Disponible en <https://porunavidavivible.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/feminismos-comunitario-lorena-cabnal.pdf>. Acceso 10/03/2020.

CABNAL, Lorena; CICODE UGR. "Ciclo sobre Género y Desarrollo: "Voces Feministas desde el Sur" Ponente: Lorena Cabnal 1/2" [online]. CICODE UGR. YouTube video, 54:14, 23/06/2015. Disponible en <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVYrkW04r6g>. Acceso 10/03/2020.

CABNAL, Lorena. "La sanación como camino cósmico-político". 25/01/2020. *Ruda*. Interview by Celeste Mayorga. Disponible en <http://ruda.gt/la-sanacion-como-camino-cosmico-politico/>. Acceso 02/08/2021.

CABNAL, Lorena, "TZK'AT, Red de Sanadoras Ancestrales del Feminismo Comunitario desde Iximulew-Guatemala," *Ecología Política*, 01/01/2018. Disponible en <https://www.ecologiapolitica.info/?p=10247>. Acceso 20/03/2020.

CABNAL, Lorena. Lorena Cabnal: sanar de la violencia. 08/10/2019. *DW Historias Latinas*, YouTube video, 25:49. Interview by Adriana Bernal. Disponible en <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3zVvCafBr&t=564s>. Acceso 23/03/2020.

CABNAL, Lorena, "Recupero la alegría sin perder la indignación, como un acto emancipatorio y vital" Interview by Florencia Goldsman, *Pikara Magazine*, 13/11/2019a. Disponible en <https://www.pikaramagazine.com/2019/11/lorena-cabnal-recupero-la-alegria-sin-perder-la-indignacion-como-un-acto-emancipatorio-y-vital/>. Acceso 19/03/2020.

CABNAL, Lorena. "El relato de las violencias desde mi territorio cuerpo-tierra" In: LEYVA SOLANO, Xochitl; IZACA, Rosalba. *En tiempos de muerte: Cuerpos, Rebeldías, Resistencias*. San Cristóbal de las Casas: Cooperativa Editorial Retos, 2019b. 113-126.

CABNAL, Lorena. "Lorena Cabnal: El cuerpo como territorio de defensa" Humus, chapter 2. *La Tinta* [online]. YouTube video, 03/12/2019c. Disponible en <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOkbzksSakQ>. Acceso 15/03/2020.

GARGALLO, Francesca. *Feminismos desde Abya Yala*. Bogotá: Ediciones desde abajo, 2012.

PATIÑO, Diana Milena. "Re-andando mis pasos para una filosofía mestiza". *Nómadas*, 54, enero-junio 2021. 277-288.

RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *El desacuerdo*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1996.

SOLANO, Selene. *Cartografía infantil-juvenil, artística y popular de los cerros compartidos. Trayectoria de una metodología de investigación popular en la construcción de un diseño ontológico: Los Pactos de vida*. 2020. Tesis para optar por el grado de Magister en Antropología. Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá.

UCHILE INDÍGENA. "Lorena Cabnal, feminista comunitaria indígena maya-xinka (parte 1)" [online]. *UChile Indígena*. YouTube video, 29/08/2016. Disponible em <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wo-JK4Uddk>. Acceso 10/03/2020.

**Diana Milena Patiño Niño** ([dm.patino48@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:dm.patino48@uniandes.edu.co)) is Doctor of Philosophy from the Universidad de los Andes in Bogota, Colombia. Recipient of a full scholarship from the Colombian government and a Fulbright Scholarship as a Visiting Researcher. Research interests: ethics, political philosophy, Latin-American feminisms, and philosophy of education.

#### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE ACCORDING TO THE JOURNAL'S NORMS

PATIÑO NIÑO, Diana Milena. "A philosophical conversation with Lorena Cabnal from Guatemala". *Revista Estudos Feministas*, Florianópolis, v. 31, n. 3, e89457, 2023.

#### AUTORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Not applicable.

#### FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Funding from the Colombian Government through MINCIENCIAS. Funding from the University of Los Andes, Colombia.

#### CONSENT TO USE IMAGE

Not applicable.

#### APPROVAL BY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Not applicable.

#### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Not applicable.

#### USE LICENSE

This article is licensed under the Creative Commons License CC-BY 4.0 International. With this license you can share, adapt, create for any purpose, as long as you assign the authorship of the work.

#### BACKGROUND

Received on 04/06/2022  
Resubmitted on 05/05/2023  
Approved on 27/06/2023

