

Violence against Migrant Women: Evidencing the Matrix of Colonial Power

An Interview with Ursula Santa Cruz

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Abstract: The interview with Ursula Santa Cruz contributes to the analysis of violence against immigrant women from an intersectional and decolonial perspective. Santa Cruz critically asks what lies behind gender as an explanatory category that defines certain forms of violence against migrant women and minimizes or excludes other ones. By highlighting other forms of violence that remind us of colonial history as well as the construction of non-European others, Santa Cruz shows continuities in this field, and how these affect racialized migrants who are subject to a migration control system.

Keywords: racism, intersectionality, decoloniality, feminism

Gender-based violence has evolved into one of the most dominant topics in European discourses and policies on migration and displacement. Especially since the summer of 2015, when hundreds of thousands of people crossed EU borders, and Germany ›welcomed‹ refugees, the topic of protecting refugee women (and children) has been debated. Media coverage, programmes and policies on asylum reception have started to focus on the topic of gender-based violence. Most of the political and public discussions though have not yet analysed the conditions in which this kind of violence arises, but rather tend to present very limited perspectives that reproduce stereotypes of female victimhood and marginalisation.

During the conference ›Reconsidering Gender-Based Violence in the Context of Displacement and Migration‹ held in Göttingen in 2017, we – kritnet members Katherine Braun and Simona Pagano – first met the feminist activist and facilitator Ursula Santa Cruz. During the conference, she provided us with insights about the specific situation of migrant women, both by looking at different geopolitical locations such as Peru and Spain, and by reflecting on the epistemic premises of the debate. Based on her own experience of migration and activism, and drawing on decolonial approaches to gender-based violence, Santa Cruz fundamentally questions the common western notion of this specific form of violence.

Due to her expertise in the field, we then asked Santa Cruz to elaborate her point of view in an interview, which we conducted via email. In the interview Ursula Santa Cruz talks about her work and her perspectives on violence against migrant women, the coloniality of power and the need for intersectional feminisms.

Katherine Braun & Simona Pagano: Ursula, could you tell us about your professional biography, and how you became an activist?

Ursula Santa Cruz: I don't know if the most appropriate word to define myself is ›activist‹, but I have been engaged in different collectives and struggles that have strongly affected me in the last few years from a decolonial and anti-racist standpoint, but also as a migrant from Peru.

I am a psychologist by profession, and my interest has always been in community psychology – supporting, accompanying and facilitating processes of groups and communities in Peru, specifically in marginal urban and rural areas to which I have had links since I began with my social and activist involvement, which was during my graduate studies. In my subsequent professional activities, I have worked in the field of clinical and community care on the problems of violence against women, mental health, and the political participation of women. From my university years to the present day, ›popular education‹¹ has been, and continues to be a very important tool for my associative and professional work.

Later, in Barcelona, I spent four years working in domestic service and almost three years without papers. That's where I became involved with an NGO as a volunteer and with migrant associations. It was in these spaces that I started to conceptualise what I had done in Peru and to develop my main question, namely which position society assigns to migrants, especially to women.

1 | ›Popular Education‹ is a pedagogical and emancipatory program, which is based on the revolutionary ›pedagogy of the oppressed‹ of Paulo Freire (1970). It was originally applied in the rural and poor areas in Latin America by revolutionary movements and educators like the Zapatistas and the Landless Workers' Movement (MST). Also known as ›participative action research‹ it departs from the idea that emancipatory education that is supposed to transform systems cannot be based on ›depositing‹ information (›banking education‹) about oppression systems. This form of education has to be elaborated together and has to be developed from people's own experiences and knowledge. The pedagogue becomes a facilitator, who offers the tools for reflection and solutions (Freire 1970). Freire's philosophy has inspired a lot of projects like community building programs, eco-pedagogy, etc.

How did your activist and intellectual work develop? What is your relationship with the collective t.i.c.t.a.c.?

Although this intellectual process started already during my time at the university and while working with marginalized urban populations, I still remember the turning point. I was working in a rural area of Peru. I had arrived there with my psychological standardized tests that had nothing to do with the situation of the people I studied in those areas. The tests did not fit the reality I encountered there as they were shaped by the perspective of people from the capital. However, it was in these rural areas of Peru that I learned how important it is to listen, observe, and to use the framings and codes provided by the people and to leave behind the capitalist, urban, professional gaze. I learned to focus on the needs and demands of the people I was working with. I began to theorize from the vantage point of my practice at that time, to think about my own position and positionality there and to develop strategies linked to these populations. I used theatre, humour, local customs and radio. I also used the street as a space to reach out to locals.

In Barcelona, however, I started to articulate my own migratory, professional and activist experience. But I also included the experiences of other women and men I had encountered during my involvement in participatory action research projects in Peru into my reflections. My research, then, is both political and embodied: »Thinking doing and doing thinking«, as María Lugones (2008) says. I am a co-founder and member of t.i.c.t.a.c., a collective and self-managed space that was established in 2017. We – the founders of t.i.c.t.a.c. – met, or rather found ourselves assembling our expertise, after having fought our fights alone and after having been in only white feminist spaces; spaces that had left us with discomfort and with the feeling of not being represented.

Can you elaborate on your day-to-day work? What does your work with migrant women look like?

In the last year, I have worked as a community psychologist who accompanied practitioners in their work with migrant women and as a facilitator in city councils and institutions that as well work with migrant women. In my trainings, I have focused on issues related to racism, sexism, violence and intersectionality. On the one hand, I have co-developed an intersectional methodology with which we emphasize women's agency and value their experiences and their knowledge. We also try to promote and make visible other narratives that go beyond a narrow perspective on gender. This has

been a very valuable and enriching work for the participants and for us. On the other hand, I also have developed a concept for autobiographical writing workshops – in which 80% of the participants are migrant women. These workshops are a platform for analysing their lived realities, for expressing emotions, for connecting with their bodies. These processes are initiated with reference to their narratives and trajectories and eventually lead to them re-signifying their lives.

Your work has brought you to critique the predominant perspective on violence against women. Why? What is your critique?

In the European context I have found that analyses concerning violence against women exclude questions of race, sexuality, class, context and social-historical experiences of non-white and non-European women. These categories form a complex and multidimensional matrix of power that produces different kinds of violence. My aim is therefore to bring an intersectional and decolonial perspective to the debate and to include this perspective into the analysis of violence. In my work, I examine what lies beyond gender as an explanatory category, meaning the categories that define certain forms of violence against migrant women and minimize or exclude other ones. I highlight other forms of violence that echo colonial history, that come with the construction of non-European ›others‹, that show how these forms of violence still prevail today, and that show how racialised migrants – both men, women and gender dissidents – are treated and subjected to a system of migration control.

Why has this perspective been missing from the debate so far?

The visibility, definition and public agenda of work highlighting violence against women dates back to the 1960s, to the feminist movement and the women's liberation movement in Europe and the United States, which until today denounce domestic and sexual violence that women experience. In several stages across the decades, violence against women has become an issue of different international bodies and has been implemented both in national and international policies. As an outcome, violence against women is attributed to gender inequalities and is transformed into a universal category. In this way development agencies, NGOs, universities and white, middle-class western feminist of the so-called first world countries exported a particular theory of gender to all the regions of the world. Thus, this approach is embodied in laws, public policies, programs and intervention strategies.

The sex-gender system becomes a universal tool with which inequalities between men and women in all societies and contexts are analysed and through which women

are regarded as oppressed by patriarchy due to the fact of ›simply‹ being women. This discourse, that tends to equate all women and considers them as ›sisters‹, constitutes a violent act that strips away the historicity, memory and resistance of non-white, non-European women, both in the past and in the present. Other systems of oppression that cross the lives of people alongside a heteronormative patriarchal system are ignored, especially the violence produced by modernity/coloniality towards non-white, non-European bodies, towards their epistemologies, subjectivities and life systems. This perspective also invisibilizes the exposure of non-binary migrant and racialised bodies to violence. Thus, this kind of hegemonic feminism imposes its epistemologies, categories of analysis, and plans for liberation and emancipation on all women in the world. Taking the importance of enunciation into account in positioning oneself, I ask: Who does the naming? Who decides what violence is and what forms of violence are attended to? What is the position from which the violence is named?

In this Eurocentric feminist discourse on violence, how is violence against migrant women reflected upon?

The predominant discourse refers to violence within a relationship, which is exercised by a migrant man. It is argued that this is inherent to the latter's sexist and patriarchal ›culture‹, where women are oppressed. It also presumes that ›violence is naturalized and justified among them‹. Female genital mutilation and forced marriages are also considered to be forms of violence, both exercised by the families of the girls and women and socially legitimised by their communities of origin. The causes of these violent acts have a cultural component that demands an intervention by the liberal society to safeguard the integrity of such women and girls in the face of an assumed archaic patriarchy that oppresses them.

Prostitution is also defined as another form of violence. There is the assumption that all sex workers are unfree and that their bodies are turned into objects by the patriarchal capitalist system. This assumption then leads abolitionist feminists and institutions to want to save them. Trafficking in women and sexual exploitation is also included in this notion of violence, whereby international mafias are seen as responsible for facilitating the entry of women into Europe as part of sex trafficking. This type of ›gender-based‹ violence is addressed through protocols and intervention plans that leave aside the multidimensionality and complexity of oppressions that impact the lives of migrant women.

Institutions, professionals and white feminists, then, intend ›to empower‹ migrant women, to ›lead‹ them to gain autonomy, and to ›teach‹ them to be able to recognise

the violence that they live. Some examples from my field of professionals working in interventionist projects against gender violence read as follows:

»It is so clear that he mistreats her. I tell her, but she does not see it.«

»We helped her to emancipate herself, to get away from him, from her community (Morocco). She left the city, took off her veil, dressed as a Westerner. But after a while she returned to her community, put on her veil and fell in love with another Moroccan.«

»They are used to violence, it seems normal to them.«²

This underlying narrative does not pay attention to the stories of migrant women, but rather reduces their violent experiences to something they ›know‹ and are ›used to‹. It prevents deeper insight about the prevalent forms of violence they experience and the strategies they adopt to face it. Furthermore, a generalised alarmism persists concerning the excessive representation of migrant women in statistics on intimate partner violence, which reinforces the constructed discourses and representations of a violent and problematic ›otherness‹.

What other kinds of violence are inscribed in the bodies of migrant women that stay invisible from such a perspective?

I just want to name a few. Institutional forms of violence include, for instance, racism, regulations and procedures that obstruct the renewal of residence and work permits, processes to obtain citizenship, which hence place many migrants in a situation of administrative limbo. This situation constitutes a threat because it can lead to detention in an Immigration Detention Centre (CIE) for not having documents. Another institutional form of harassment includes the regulations for family reunion. The requirements include, for instance, a minimum size apartment. If certain requirements are not met – like the size of the apartment – the family cannot be reunited; or, it happens that migrant women lose custody of their children because they are considered unable to raise and educate them according to the local standards.

On an epistemic level, we can see that women are constructed as a homogenic group of ›migrant women‹. This construction entails victimising and infantilizing these women, but it is also accompanied by symbolic racism and exoticization. In this context, their experiences are denied – their capacities, their knowledge, their

² | Testimonies of professionals who work in interventionist projects against gender violence who gathered for a technical training.

aspirations and their needs. On the other hand, we see how their voices are appropriated by experts, including feminists and academics. With regard to their daily experiences, violence unfolds in experiences of sexual harassment at the work place and through labour exploitation. Migrant women often work in informal economies within racialised sectors. It is important to stress that racism is intertwined with sexism in these contexts. Unfortunately, this connection is mostly denied. Finally, another kind of violence can be traced that emerges with the denial of sex work as a labour option. It can be a personal decision of migrant women to make a living from sex work. Silencing their struggles for recognising sex work as work and for improving regulations, and instead striving to ›save‹ them, can also be regarded a form of violence since, after leaving sex-work they end up being employed in precarious and lower-paid jobs.

Our approach to violence considers race and class to be important categories for analysis, but it also thinks sexuality beyond heterosexuality and gender beyond the common binary system. The complex and multidimensional nature of violence demonstrates the ways in which gender, race, class and sexuality are intertwined.

From this perspective, the position of power and privilege that white European women hold in relation to racialised migrant men contradicts the supposed ›patriarchal power‹. The bodies of these men are brutally and inhumanly violated by a racist system in which their lives matter little, as can be seen from the thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea.

Forced migrations for different reasons also represent a form of violence. They expel, and uproot individuals from peripheral countries – such as from former colonies – who migrate to Europe and find themselves in positions of greater vulnerability. This is not the case with Europeans who can travel around the world without losing their privileges.

You speak of the gender system as being ›perverse‹. Could you elaborate on the notion and give examples?

Directing attention to, and focusing on, the visibility of violence within intimate relationships denies or removes the weight of immigration policies or immigration law (which generate racist violence) on the lives of migrants. Migrant men experience different forms of violence, but have been constructed as savage, sexist, abusive, ignorant and drunkards within a framework that Nelson Maldonado-Torres calls the ›coloniality of being‹ (2007). It is common to hear these adjectives when referring to Latin American, Muslim Arab and African men. These categorisations prevent migrant men from being recognized as individual beings outside such ascriptions of

machismo, sexism and homophobia. This perversity is also manifested in speeches that assert that the increase of gender violence in Spain is due to immigration.

This point of view does not recognise the violence of non-migrant men against their migrant partners. The physical and psychological violence that they exert is racist-sexist. Let me exemplify this with testimonies of two women I visited in a municipal help centre for women in Barcelona:

»He insults me, he calls me shitty *sudaca*³, in your country you had nothing and here you want to be a great lady [...]. I will have you deported [...] you can never take your daughter to your country. [...] and it is not only him, also his family does that [...]. I would like to go back to Ecuador.«⁴

»He forced me to eat pork and to break other customs of my religion.«⁵

»He told me I was not going to achieve anything. He said if, after all, you have got the papers by marrying me, what else do you want?«

These kinds of violence go hand in hand with labour exploitation and the absence of social networks. Their situation is aggravated by the racism of the police and the judiciary operators who are suspicious towards the women's accounts and their condition as victims. In these circumstances, other topics appear, creating an image of women who take advantage of European men for the purpose of obtaining papers and material security.

It is more convenient to argue that migrant women are victims of the patriarchal system of their own societies of origin than to recognise the modes of power and control which have been designed, implemented and perfected with the purpose of maintaining and perpetuating the relations of domination over migrants' bodies. In this way, as Ramón Grosfoguel (2014) asserts, it is not questioned where these oppressions are produced in the world, who is oppressed, and what mechanisms are used to exert violence. I refer to this context, then, when I speak of the gender system or rather the construction of violence as being perverse. I consider this common

3 | *Sudaca* is a pejorative term for South American.

4 | Testimony of an Ecuadorian woman interviewed at a municipal help service for women in Barcelona. She has been living in Spain for eleven years and has got a permanent residence permit. She is a care worker for an elderly person without a contract and works every day without the right to vacation or extra payment for 600 Euros per month. She has a five-year-old daughter with a Spanish man who is retired. She has been abused for two years.

5 | Testimony of a Moroccan woman married to a Spanish man.

notion of violence to be theoretical, Eurocentric and abstract. It is perverse because it denies the history, genocide and violence caused by Europe in this context, especially since the beginning of modernity/coloniality. Violence was done to non-white bodies of men and women, their systems of life, production, land, knowledge, spirituality, sexuality, subjectivities, aesthetics and so on. Humanity itself was stripped away from two-thirds of the world's people, establishing a distinct line between the human/non-human while allocating people of colour to the latter category.

If the common notion of violence is so deeply Eurocentric, what would a decolonial approach to violence look like?

The colonial matrix of power continues to operate nowadays on the bodies and lives of people misnamed as the ›third world‹ and on racialised migrants that are constructed as inferior, that are violated and placed in subaltern positions. Our lives have little or no value and are set in the realm of the nonhuman. Policies, laws, mechanisms and technologies of control and surveillance, repression and suspicion are exercised against us.

Argentinian decolonial feminist philosopher María Lugones, reveals the colonial influence on the construction of gender. Gender was imposed on societies and cultures that had other ways of naming, defining and organizing themselves. Race and gender are thus co-constitutive categories of the modern colonial episteme, and they can neither be thought outside of this episteme nor separately from one another.

The epistemological contributions of black, chicana and migrant feminism in the United States, afro- and decolonial feminism in Latin America and the Caribbean, have been crucial for the understanding of the subordination and exclusion of *indigenous-black-third-world-migrant-lesbian* women who have been impacted by various systems of oppression, and who have called the ethnocentric bias of hegemonic feminism into question. African-American women from the United States challenge white feminist theory, roles and spaces, for example by showing the treatment of black female slaves who did the same work as men on the plantations and were sexually abused by their masters at night. Angela Davis (1983) discusses how black women openly challenged the gender roles implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love relationships, and how blues music was a means by which they broke the silence against misogynist violence.

What effects does this analysis have on your work as a community psychologist and facilitator? Could you give some examples?

Racism is not discrimination, stereotypes or prejudices of some groups or individuals towards or against the migrant population. Racism is a structuring system of domination, protected by the institutions and their social, legal, political, police, economic, educational and cultural mechanisms that legitimise it, regulate it and put it into practice. It is this racism that we, migrant women, can recognise violating our bodies and lives.

Following Rivas (2017), violence against migrant women has to be thought of as a continuum of colonial-capitalist, racist and heteronormative domination, and as a result of the policies of the neoliberal-western world. These phenomena are mutually inclusive and are part of the modern/colonial gender matrix that operates by permeating through the whole system, identities and subjectivities, and shaping the ways of how they define themselves, define violence, and their strategies of resistance and struggle.

Violence is structural and will not be resolved with laws and policies regarding equality, intercultural education or similar programs until the underlying problem is tackled: the process of civilisation involving death and destruction originated in Europe (and was followed by the United States) since modernity. So, who exerts violence against migrant women? Their fellow migrants? Or the Spanish state, its institutions and the European Union with its racist policies?

Ursula Santa Cruz holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (UNMSM) in Lima, Perú, and a master's degree in Gender Equality Policies from the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (UAB) in Barcelona, Spain. She is a feminist specialized in violence against women in transnational contexts from an intersectional and decolonial (intervention and analysis) standpoint. Working on empowering groups and following their dynamics, she develops educational and interventional methodologies. Moreover, she has participated in several research projects related to migrant women, gender, and transnational political participation. She is also an active member of the collective Centre for Transfeminist Antiracist Critical Interventions (in Spanish, Taller de Intervenciones Críticas Transfeministas Antirracistas Combativas, t.i.c.t.a.c.).

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