

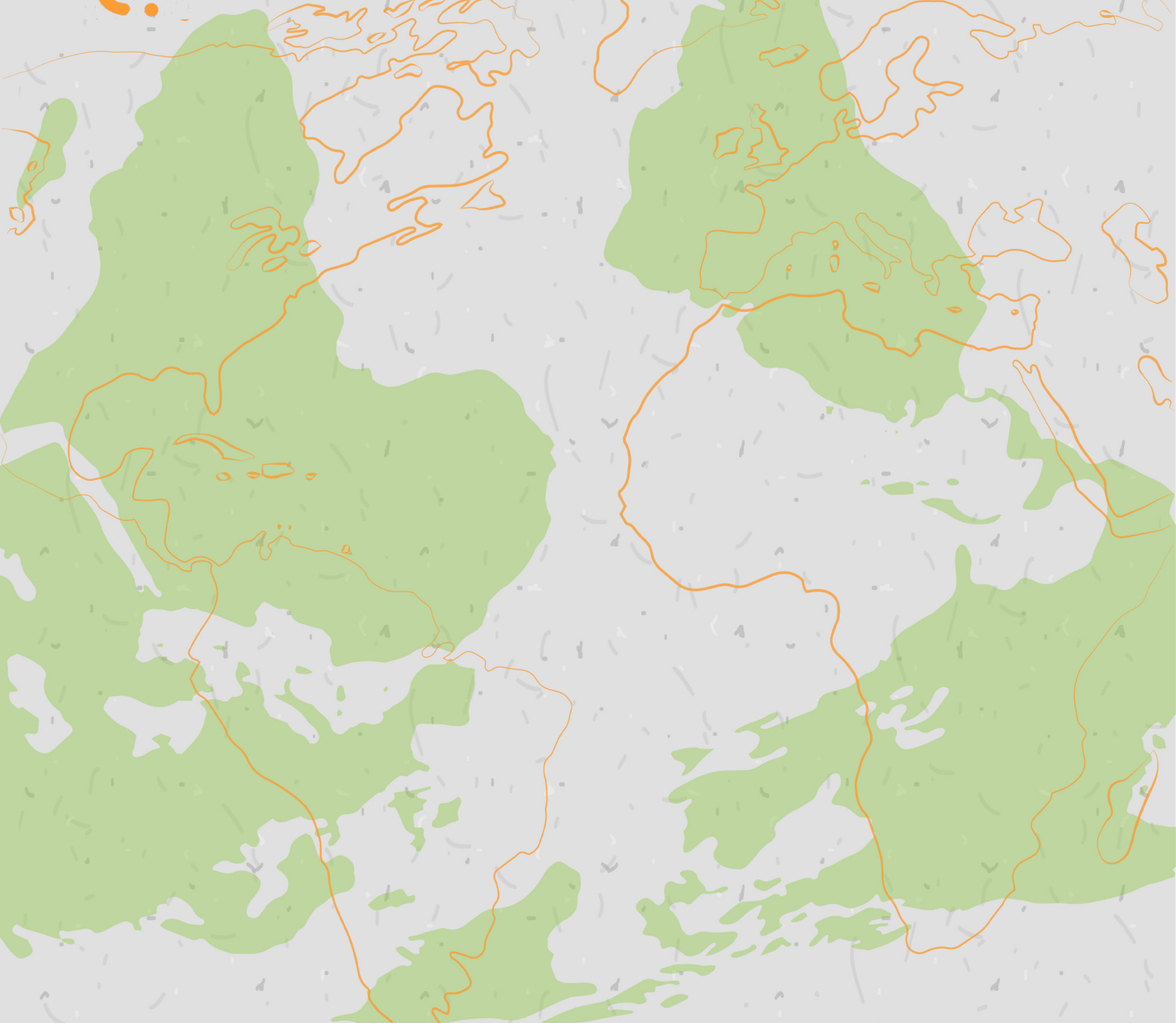


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***We are survivors of patriarchy and racism.***  
**Decolonizing bodies and de-privatizing pain, an  
intersectional approach of psychosocial-political  
healing of indigenous women in Guatemala**

Charlotta Sippel

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## ***We are survivors of patriarchy and racism.*<sup>1</sup> Decolonizing bodies and de-privatizing pain, an intersectional approach of psychosocial-political healing of indigenous women in Guatemala**

Charlotta Sippel<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract:**

In hegemonic Western psychology, psychological suffering is mainly constructed as an individual disorder rather than as context-dependent psycho-social phenomena. This article argues that it is key to analyze and take into account the contextual, social, historical, and biographical references in order to gain a holistic understanding of psychological suffering and to develop fruitful healing processes. The article presents findings from ethnographic fieldwork in Guatemala, working with the indigenous women's organization *Actoras de Cambio*, a collective of survivors of the genocide in Guatemala. As a result, three elements have been identified as key in the psycho-social work of the organization: i) their shared experience of violence, which leads to collective processing of the sexual violence through bodywork in order to reconcile with their own bodies; ii) the "deprivatization" of their pain in order to overcome silence and taboo in their communities and to initiate social transformation and iii) the decolonization of their bodies and emotions and emancipation from internalized racism as part of the healing process. By sharing the insights from their work and discussing their intersectional and decolonial approach, the article wants to contribute to a conceptualized understanding of psychosocial-political healing processes and emphasize the necessity for a decolonizing and re-politicization of psychological research and practice in the 'global north'.

**Keywords:** sexual violence, internalized racism, trauma, collective healing, decolonialization of psychology, Guatemala.

### ***Somos sobrevivientes del patriarcado y del racismo. Descolonizando cuerpos y desprivatizando el dolor, un enfoque interseccional de sanación psicosocial-política de mujeres indígenas en Guatemala.***

### **Resumen:**

En la psicología occidental hegemónica, el sufrimiento psicológico se construye como un trastorno individual y no como un fenómeno psicosocial dependiente del contexto. Este artículo argumenta que es clave analizar y tener en cuenta las referencias contextuales, sociales, históricas y biográficas para obtener una comprensión holística del sufrimiento mental y desarrollar procesos de sanación fructíferos. Se presentan los resultados de un trabajo de campo etnográfico en Guatemala, en el que se trabajó con la organización de mujeres indígenas *Actoras de Cambio*, un colectivo de supervivientes del genocidio en Guatemala. Se han identificado tres elementos en el trabajo psicosocial de la organización: i) su experiencia compartida de violencia, que conduce al procesamiento colectivo de la violencia sexual a través del trabajo corporal para reconciliarse con sus propios cuerpos; ii) la "desprivatización" de su dolor para superar el silencio y el tabú en sus comunidades e iniciar la transformación social y iii) la descolonización de sus cuerpos y emociones y la emancipación del racismo interiorizado como parte del proceso de sanación. Al compartir las percepciones de su trabajo y discutir su enfoque interseccional y decolonial, el artículo contribuye a una comprensión conceptualizada de los procesos de sanación psicosocial-política y hacer hincapié en la necesidad de una descolonización y repolitización de la investigación y la práctica psicológica en el "norte global".

**Palabras claves:** violencia sexual, racismo interiorizado, trauma, curación colectiva, descolonización de la psicología, Guatemala.

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1 Quote from Interview partner, Guatemala 2019.

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## Introduction: The aftermath of genocide in Guatemala

*El ejército venía con sus armas. A las gentes que encontraron, las mataron. Las cosechas que encontraron, las quemaron. Nuetsra ropa, nuestros tratses, nuestras herramientas, las quebraron o las robaron. Y a todos nuestros animals, vacas, cabras, coches y pollos, los mataron también. Ellos destruían y comían todo en su camino de percusiones en contra de las gentes<sup>3</sup>*  
(Survivor of a massacre, Guatemala, quoted from Sanford 2012: 8).

*En noviembre de 1981 los patrulleros de San Bartolomé hicieron cateos en todas las casas, capturaron a muchas mujeres cuyos esposos no estaban en sus casas, acusándolas de ser mujeres de los guerrilleros porque sus compañeros habían salido huyendo. Fueron más de 50 mujeres las capturadas. Las llevaron al salón municipal donde se ubicaba el destacamento militar. Ese día robaron muchos animales y violaron a las mujeres. Los patrulleros se aprovecharon más de las que no tenían hijos, les gustaban las niñas, unos les abrían las piernas y otros iban pasando con ellas ... las violaban. Esto sucedía en medio del salón con todos los presentes...<sup>4</sup>*  
(Survivor of sexual violence, Guatemala, quoted from the truth commission CEH 1999: 221).

The truth commission, Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), confirms in their report that during the armed conflict<sup>5</sup> (1960 – 1996) in Guatemala, a genocide of the in-

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3 The army came with their guns. The people they found, they killed. The crops they found, they burned. Our *huipiles*, our crockery, our tools they broke or stole. And all our animals were also killed. They destroyed everything and ate our food while they were on their way to pursue the people (Own translation).

4 In November 1981, the military patrols of San Bartolomé raided all the houses and captured many women [...]. That day they stole many animals and raped the women. The military soldiers took advantage of those who did not have children, they liked the young girls, some of them opened their legs and others went to them ... and raped them. This happened in the middle of the room while everyone was here (Own translation).

5 Guatemala has suffered an internal armed conflict for more than 30 years under different dictatorial regimes; 626 massacres took place, 200.000 people were murdered, 45.000 people forcibly disappeared, and over 1.5 million people were displaced (CEH 1999: 72).

igenous Maya population took place, for which the Guatemalan military is majorly responsible (Sanford 2008: 4). The bombing of sacred places used for religious and spiritual ceremonies, the burning of *huipiles*<sup>6</sup>, and the destruction of the *milpa*<sup>7</sup>, as stated by a survivor in the first quote, were physically and spiritually damaging to the indigenous population. This systematic cultural destruction by the Guatemalan army is an indicator of the racist intention to destroy specific ethnic groups in genocide (Sanford 2004: 118). In a cultural psychology understanding, culture is not only a part of the external world, such as the ceremonies or the indigenous clothing but is also inside us: it exists as a dynamic and reciprocal co-constitution of culture and psyche (Sluneko & Wieser 2014: 348). Experiencing the destruction of material culture, such as the *huipiles*, as well as cultural practices, such as collective cultivation of the *milpa* in the context of the genocide, has left deep traces in the individual and collective memory of indigenous communities throughout Guatemala. As a survivor of sexual violence describes in the second quote, soldiers and other armed actors have also raped and terrorized women during the armed conflict.

The Truth Commission emphasizes that violence against women was used by soldiers as a “weapon of war” (CEH 1999). The destruction of the reproductive capacity of the indigenous groups is part of the genocide and women and girls are primary targets, therefore genocide is also a “gendered atrocity” (Sanford 2008: 5). Even today, Guatemala is still one of the countries with the highest rates in feminicides and gender-based violence worldwide (Nolin & Fraser 2015). The truth commission furthermore reiterates, that the

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6 *Huipil* is the most common traditional garment worn by indigenous women in Guatemala before the Spanish invasion of *Abya Yala*. The pattern can indicate the wearer's ethnicity or community, as each has its own methods of making the fabric, colours, designs, and decorations.

7 *Milpa* (Nahuatl language) refers to a maize field or a field in the cleared forest of ancient indigenous cultures in Guatemala where maize is grown in mixed cultivation with other plants, such as beans.

intent of a systematic annihilation of the indigenous population was a traumatic experience for the majority of survivors of all indigenous communities in Guatemala (CEH 1999). Concluding their report by focusing on the psychological impact of violence is of great importance to countless survivors of massacres, political persecution and sexual violence fighting for justice in Guatemala. Unfortunately, on an international level, traumatic experiences are not widely acknowledged as social suffering caused by political violence but are categorized as a psychological individual illness, the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Becker 2006).

### **Postcolonial critique to 'hegemonic Western psychology' applied in (post)conflict contexts**

Already in the mid of the last century, the Algerian psychiatrist Frantz Fanon sharply criticized in his work *The Damned of the Earth* the pathologization of the non-western psyche by hegemonic Western psychology (Fanon 1966).<sup>8</sup> Hegemonic Western psychology constructs people in the Global South as dependent, vulnerable, and incapable subjects (Pupavac 2016: 316). In its majority clinical Western models, applied in contexts of conflict and crisis in the Global South, often lack a contextualization to the specific conditions and tend to overlook and exclude local knowledge and practices (Summeffeld 2016). In consequence, they tend to once again victimize survivors of violence and lead to a depoliticization of the psychological impacts of war and violence (Mlodoch 2021). In sum, they run the risk of being imperialistic when people in the Global South were taught that there were different ways of knowing and that

their knowledge was secondary (Summeffeld 2016). From a critical-psychology perspective, authors argue that it may be just the opposite: The experiential background of communities accustomed to hardship and misery means that they are likely to prove remarkably resistance and coping mechanisms in the face of adverse circumstances (Pupavac 2016). Local coping mechanisms are often not developed within formal professional training but gained from daily life experiences being situated in a conflictual context and dealing with violence, trauma and losses for decades (Mlodoch 2021). Furthermore, hegemonic psychology from North America and Europe privileges individual therapy; whereas in Guatemala (and other Central American Countries) the focus of psychosocial accompaniment lies primarily on the social dimension, because it is a collective liberation rather than an individual one (Martín-Baró 1989).

En este contexto donde no son sólo individuos los afectados, sino el colectivo entero, las terapias tradicionales de revisar la propia historia acompañada de un psicólogo no funcionan porque la afectación es grupal y la revictimización es constante, y es una estrategia de los perpetradores<sup>9</sup> (Aluna 2017: 11).

Psychosocial accompaniment in Guatemala counters the "cultural invasion" (Freire & Macedo 2000) of exporting diagnoses and treatment interventions around the world that should not be universalized or imposed from positions of cultural supremacy (Watkins 2015: 3).

Against this background, I discuss the following questions: How did survivors of the genocide in Guatemala manage to deal with the experienced violence and integrate the social, political, and historical dimensions that caused the suffering in their individual and collective healing processes? After

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware that no homogeneous 'West' or 'Western knowledge' exists. However, in order to distinguish the tradition of nature science-based, individualistic psychological approaches developed majorly in Europe or North America, from the community psychology and psychosocial practices from Central America, I use the term 'hegemonic Western psychology' for lack of a better term.

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<sup>9</sup> In this context, where not only individuals are affected, but the entire collective, the western therapy models of reviewing one's own history accompanied by a psychologist do not work because the effects are group-based and re-victimisation is constant, and is a strategy of the perpetrators. (Own translation)

an introduction to the situation of indigenous women in the Guatemalan context and some reflections about the research process and my own positioning, the article sheds light on the 'political-spiritual healing' processes of the indigenous women's collective *Actoras de Cambio* (actors of change). I argue that their psychosocial work goes beyond Eurocentric clinic-psychological models (such as PTSD or resilience) and that the work of *Actoras de Cambio* can be understood as a counter-hegemonic psychosocial approach, centering decolonial and intersectional perspectives. Clinical practitioners from different contexts can learn from their knowledge and experiences in order to decolonize Western psychological research as well as their own practice.

### **The situation of women in Guatemala: Patriarchal violence and its consequences**

In the 1996 Peace Accords, the Guatemalan State committed to promoting the eradication of discrimination and violence against women, building specific institutions, and adopting economic, political, and social measures in favor of gender equity (Méndez Gutiérrez & Carrera Guerra 2014: 27). At the same time, it was acknowledged, for the first time, that Guatemala is a multiethnic and multilingual country and a set of policies and institutions aimed at eradicating oppression and discrimination against indigenous peoples were also established (ibid: 27). However, the government soon replaced the peace agenda with the neoliberal agenda in its policies, truncating the most important commitments (ibid.).

The current intersectional discrimination and violence indigenous women face due to their ethnic identity and gender is a continuity of the violence of the past: Violence against women has increased in all its forms in recent years, including domestic violence, sexual violence, human trafficking, and femicide, exacerbated by limited legal enforcement and institutional support (Sanford 2008; Nolin & Fraser 2015). Especially ext-

reme forms of violence against women have intensified and gender-specific violence is the most reported crime in security and justice institutions (Méndez Gutiérrez & Carrera Guerra 2014: 29). In addition to the structural causes rooted in the patriarchal system, the current social context exacerbates violence against women (ibid. Méndez Gutiérrez & Carrera Guerra 2014: 29). Women experience structural disadvantages in key areas such as education, healthcare, employment, and political participation (ibid.). This systemic inequality perpetuates their vulnerability to various forms of violence. Furthermore, indigenous women often stem from poverty and resource disparities in rural areas. Indigenous women play a crucial role in preserving (cultural) practices based on the maya cosmovision's and (ancestral) knowledge about natural resources (Tapia González 2018). However, they frequently confront challenges related to land rights, environmental degradation, and dispossession, particularly due to activities like mining, agribusiness, and infrastructure projects (ibid. Tapia González 2018).

At the same time indigenous women have established social, feminist and indigenous organizations of Mayan, Xinka, and Garifuna women, asserting their identities as women and as indigenous people. *Actoras de Cambio* is one of the many organizations, which organize themselves to defend their rights and fight for justice. Furthermore, the contributions of indigenous academics have enabled a more profound analysis of how multiple systems of domination intersect and affect the social status of indigenous women and their processes of emancipation (Cumes 2012). This is how Auma Cumes analyses the situation:

Las mujeres indígenas tienen una experiencia de dominación con múltiples aristas, que reta la comprensión monista de entender la estructura social bien sea a partir del patriarcado, de la dominación étnica o de clase social. Están cuestionando un sistema-mundo opresivo e interconectado. Esta misma condición les permite aportar

a la construcción de sujetos colectivos no ensimismado en la etnicidad, en el género, en la clase social, sino creadores de nuevas formas de vida liberadoras que trasciendan las miradas unilaterales de los procesos de emancipación<sup>10</sup> (Cumes 2012: 1).

### **Research in the context of violence: Reflections on field work, own positioning and relations with research partners**

The findings I present in this article, result from ethnographic fieldwork in Guatemala between 2019 and 2020, conducting participant observation, interviews<sup>11</sup> and group conversations with (indigenous) women from the organization *Actoras de Cambio*. For the first time, I had met some of the women in 2018, when I was volunteering as a social psychologist at the human rights organization *ACOGUATE* in Guatemala, accompanying indigenous communities who are defending their rights. My experiences during this time and especially the accompaniment of indigenous women's organizations touched me deeply. The stories the women shared with me were stories of extreme suffering and human rights violations, but they were also stories of resistance, dignity and strength that have shaped my own life and the position I want to take in society. So, I decided to return to Guatemala and accompany some of the women's organizations as part of my field research on local psycho-social practices. My previous relationships and experiences working with indigenous communities and women's movements

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10 Indigenous women experience various forms of domination that challenge the monistic understanding of social structure, whether based on patriarchy, ethnicity, or class. They question an oppressive and interconnected world-system. This same condition enables them to contribute to the construction of collective subjects that are not self-absorbed in ethnicity, gender, or social class, but creators of new liberating ways of life that transcend the unilateral views of emancipation processes (Cumes 2012: 1).

11 In order to guarantee the safety of the interviewees, quotes from transcripts in the article are anonymized.

in Guatemala, have influenced my work as a researcher. As I already knew some of the women through my work in a human rights organization, I quickly established a trusting relationship with them. I adopted an 'engaged' and solidary stance, which means that I had a 'double role' as an interpreter and supporter of women's political struggles (Hale 2008; Sanford & Angel-Ajani 2006). This position is important to me, because as a 'neutral' and 'objective' researcher I run the risk of becoming an accomplice to oppression, perpetuating post-colonial power relations and furthermore it would have been impossible to gain trust of the women's group. Certainly, neither an 'engaged position' does alter the existing privileges and power relations and is not free of contradictions. But I concur with Dana-Ain Davis, who states:

Knowledge production around issues of poverty and violence must be conducted in the service of some greater goal than just getting research done, because people's lives are often at stake. Research on particular issues, such as those that uncover persistent patterns of marginalization, should always be connected to emancipatory praxis (Davis 2006: 236).

### **The effects of violence during research**

Living, working, and researching as a young woman in Guatemala can be challenging due to the prevalence of (gendered) violence, fear, and tension. According to Rohr (2011), despite the end of the armed conflict over 20 years ago, violence dominates everyone's life and daily routine. Guatemala, alongside El Salvador and Honduras, has the highest rates of gang crime, homicides, and violence against women in Latin America (Sanford, 2008). However, the justice system is often unable to take action, and crimes such as the murder of activists frequently go unpunished. Conducting research in this context means being confronted with violence and its consequences as a researcher. As the focus of my

work is on the experiences of indigenous women, I have come across numerous reports of sexual violence that penetrates the most intimate spheres of life. Additionally, genocide is a constant and latent theme in the interviews. The impact of violence on me as researcher is evident, as well as in the violence in everyday life. According to Naucke (2011: 27), experiencing violence, witnessing death, and encountering violent actors is not only a cultural shock, but an existential one. As a researcher, I bear witness to the experiences of the interviewees. Naucke (2011: 28) highlights the importance of addressing violence in one's own writing process: Researchers attempt to reflect on and 'organize' the contradictory reality of violence, which can cause the violent act to lose its uniqueness, absurdity, and incomprehensibility – but these are precisely the main characteristics of violence for the survivors. As a researcher I experienced mental exhaustion due to my strong identification with my research partners and their struggles. The daily exposure to stories of torture, enforced disappearances, and sexual violence, as well as the current climate of violence and intimidation, and the ongoing human rights violations were not entirely new to me due to my time at the human rights organization ACOGUATE. However, they nevertheless affected my mental and physical well-being. Violence, oppression, and injustice can never be normalized, as Rohr and Duque aptly stated:

There have been so many dramatic stories that I have heard, there has been so much human pain that I have felt, and I know that this gesture of lending someone your ear is enough for the people who need it. But who would lend me their ear, who could take away all the pain I've collected day after day from interviewing people? (Duque & Rohr 2012: 271).

## **An intersectional and decolonial approach to the collective healing sexual violence**

In the following, three aspects will be examined which are central to the psychosocial accompaniment of *Actoras de Cambio* – or in their words, in the healing process as a 'political-spiritual path': i) Their shared experience of violence, that led to collective processing of the (sexual) violence through bodywork in order to reconcile with their own bodies; ii) the 'deprivatisation' of their pain in order to overcome silence and taboo in their communities and to initiate social transformation; and iii) the decolonization of their bodies and emotions as well as the emancipation from internalized racism as part of the healing process.

The women from *Actoras de Cambio* auto-define their organization as a feminist proposal of a horizontal, autonomous, and intercultural collective of women, whose central objective is their own decolonization, as well as regaining power over their bodies, lives and territories, living in freedom, dignity and joy and transforming collectively the social conditions needed for the non-repetition of human rights violations (*Actoras de Cambio* 2020a).

Cada una ha aportado sus experiencias de rebeldías, transgresiones, insubordinaciones, valentía, alegría y creatividad para romper el silencio alrededor de la violación sexual en la guerra y en nuestras vidas cotidianas, con las ataduras de las opresiones, la subordinación, el sometimiento y la esclavitud. Nos ha reunido un profundo sentimiento de amor por las mujeres, por la vida y un gran compromiso con las sobrevivientes de violencia sexual. No somos ajenas a las condiciones de las mujeres que acompañamos. Somos parte de la misma realidad, y problemática a resolver. Todas, de una forma u otra, compartimos con las sobrevivientes las vivencias de la guerra, la violencia sexual, el racismo, y/o la colonización. Todas además somos sobrevivientes del patriarcado y del racismo. De allí, la decisión política en *Actoras* que to-



das, y juntas, sanemos la historia de crueldad, opresión y colonización, la desarticulemos de nuestras prácticas y formas de pensar, y actuemos cada día conscientemente para transformarla individual y colectivamente<sup>12</sup> (Actoras de Cambio 2020a, paragraph 5).

The women from Actoras de Cambio construct the healing as hybrid processes: linking emotional, spiritual, mental and embodied healing to issues of political reflection, history, their living conditions as well as women's and human rights (Actoras de Cambio 2015: 66):

Nuestra metodología es una alquimia entre el feminismo, la cosmovisión maya, las terapias energéticas. Por un lado, estamos en conexión con la Madre Tierra, por otro, nuestros planteamientos también se basan en la reflexión política de nuestras experiencias como mujeres indígenas empobrecidas<sup>13</sup> (Interviewee ADC 2).

During the first years of their organization, Actoras de Cambio mainly focused on healing the body-memory and re-signifying individually and collectively the sexual violations experienced during the war in Guatemala. Their work was almost clandestinely in order

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12 Each one has brought her experiences of rebellion, transgression, insubordination, courage, joy, and creativity to break the silence around rape in war and in our daily lives, with the bonds of oppression, subordination, subjugation, and slavery. We have been brought together by a deep sense of love for women, for life, and a strong commitment to survivors of sexual violence. We are no strangers to the conditions of the women we accompany. We are part of the same reality and the same problem to be solved. All of us, in one way or another, share with the survivors the experiences of war, sexual violence, racism and or colonization. We are survivors of patriarchy and racism. Hence, the political decision in Actoras is that we all commonly heal the history of cruelty, oppression, and colonization, disarticulate it from our practices and ways of thinking, and act consciously every day to transform our realities individually and collectively (Own translation).

13 Our methodology is an alchemy between feminism, the Xinka and Maya cosmovision and energetic therapies. On the one hand, we are in connection with Mother Earth, on the other hand, our approaches are also based on the political reflection of our experiences as impoverished indigenous women (Own translation).

to ensure confidentiality and safety for every woman (Actoras de Cambio 2020a). The psychosocial work allowed the women to have a space for dialogue, mutual support, listening and to reflect on the socio-political context. The women became aware that their pain is related to the macro-social reality and that they are not alone in their suffering: "I'm not crazy, there are many of us who are in a situation like that. The reactions we have are normal to the abnormal situations we experience" (participant, cited after Aluna 2017: 7). Actoras de Cambio developed the process of healing and empowerment within their own context originating from their daily experiences, from the conflicts within their communities and the structural violence and oppression they suffer. For most women who have experienced sexual violence, sexuality is marked by the painful memories of this experience. The consequences of sexual abuse for those affected include mistrust, fear, shame, anxiety, guilt, sexual dysfunction, sexually transmitted infections, and depression and other psychological suffering. In consequence, for Actoras de Cambio bodywork became an important part of the healing process, because their experiences of terror and violence felt like imprinted on their skin and the feelings of guilt, fear and shame have been memorized in their bodies (Actoras de Cambio 2015: 83).

Las mujeres decían con la violación nuestro espíritu se fue, pero es la fuerza vital. Pero ¿cómo recuperas la fuerza vital si no es a través del cuerpo? ¿Con la mente? No. Es con las terapias energéticas que usamos, a veces un trauma se queda en tu rodilla, a veces se queda en tu estómago, a veces se queda en tu garganta, en tus ojos, en tu cabeza ¿Cómo sacas? ¿Cómo liberas esa energía que se queda en tu cuerpo?<sup>14</sup> (Interviewee ADC 1).

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14 The women said that with the rape their *espíritu* disappeared, I think they mean the vital energy [...] and how can you recover the vital energy if not through the body? With the mind? No. Sometimes trauma stays in the knee, sometimes in the stomach, sometimes in the throat, in the eyes or in the head. How do you get it out? How do you release the energy that remains in

Bodywork takes the approach of treating sexuality from the body, but not by approaching it through the pain of sexual violence, but through feelings of happiness, tenderness and compassion with oneself in the process of re-appropriating the own body (Actoras de Cambio 2015: 84).

Ellas nos dijeron que nosotras éramos indigenistas, y también nos decían ¿Por qué trabajan con el cuerpo? Porque nosotras trabajamos mucho con el cuerpo, movimiento, danza, tocarse, sentirse, nombrar nuestro cuerpo, porque está tan expropiado de nuestra vulva, nuestra vagina, nuestros pechos. Ellas decían pero ustedes ¿Por qué hacen eso? Estas mujeres están tan violentadas en su cuerpo. Pero nosotras decíamos, no, para recuperar nuestro cuerpo, hay que sanar la relación con cada parte. Para sanar la violencia sexual tiene que sanar la vergüenza, las creencias que tienes de tu cuerpo<sup>15</sup> (Interviewee ADC 1).

The women learned over time to open up, feel, touch, and be in harmony with their bodies again, they started to express deep sadness and lose the shame. They have been reprocessing experiences of sexual violence through dance, massages or energy therapies. By 'reconciling' with their body parts, they became able to heal the experience of sexual violence and the multiple other oppressions, which also manifest themselves in their bodies.

Patriarchal capitalism wants us to die with sad, alienated, crying bodies, it does not expect us to reconcile with

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your body? (Own translation).

15 We used to be questioned why we work with the body when women survived sexual violence, why we move, dance, touch, feel, name our body parts... We do this because our bodies are so dispossessed, our vulvas, our vaginas, our breasts. They said, but why are you doing this with women who have experienced violence to their bodies. But we said that to re-appropriate our bodies, we have to heal the relationship with each part of the body. To heal sexual violence, we also have to heal the shame and the relationship we have with our bodies. (Own translation)

our menstruations, to break down the hegemonies between women in the midst of the complex world and celebrate the plural wisdoms of women. Capitalism does not expect us to celebrate life and resistance as well as being alive and united with other women (Cabnal 2017).

The women from Actoras de Cambio had to go through this dolorous and complex process of collective mourning and have been dealing with their shame and guilt for years.

### **"Deprivitazing our pain"**

When once the women felt empowered, they wanted their stories as survivors of sexual violence to be known. They felt encouraged to convert their suffering from a 'secret pain' into a shared experience in order to regain active social roles within their communities or society as a whole. Their objective was that such cruelties would not continue to happen to their daughters and granddaughters. A new phase began in which the women from Actoras de Cambio started to break the silence on a social and public level: Festivales de memoria (festivals of memory) were organized in different regions of the country, making the voice and experience of the survivors visible (Actoras de Cambio 2020a).

Las mujeres pasaron de ser víctimas a actoras de cambio. Recobraron la legitimidad de ser, la alegría, las ganas de vivir, reír y bailar. Ya no tienen vergüenza y se han convertido en referentes para las mujeres de sus comunidades y familias<sup>16</sup> (Actoras de Cambio 2020a, paragraph 10).

This phase was important because, with their testimonies about their experiences, the women challenged the hegemonic historical narratives, which predominantly represent

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16 The women went from being victims of sexual violence to actors of change. They regained their legitimacy, their joy, and their will to live, laugh and dance. They are no longer ashamed and have become role models for the women in their communities and families.

the experiences and memories of the privileged elites of the society and not the victims and survivors of human rights violations. Many of the women strove to preserve in their memories what they were supposed to forget. Surviving silent memories was, at times, even the only way of resistance (Koleva 2009). When dealing with the past, it is important to find a language for what was previously kept silent and to acknowledge the violence and injustice suffered. In the case of the women from *Actoras de Cambio*, the wish was to find words for their experiences of sexual violence and break the silence about it in their own communities. The festivals took place in public in order to make the voices and experiences of the survivors of sexual violence heard, in order to dignify the women and to claim non-repetition (*Actoras de Cambio* 2020a). They wanted to take rape out of social taboo and shame and place it in the public sphere so that it is considered as a serious social and political problem that concerns everybody, not only women (*ibid.*). Their vision was to learn from history and promote changes in practices and mentalities in order to eradicate rape entangled with racism. These moments and activities had the potential to uncover the past silence and not to understand it only as a consequence of repression but also as a form of subversion and resistance of the women (Koleva 2009). The festivals have not only been focusing on sexual violence but rather been a space for remembering resistant practices of the women during the war in order to challenge and irritate official historical narratives through intersectional counter-memories.

Esta estrategia se refiere a la recuperación de la Memoria Histórica desde las mujeres y feministas que históricamente han propuesto, construido y co creado diversas formas para liberarse de la violencia sexual, y en particular desde la recuperación de las sobrevivientes de violación sexual durante la guerra vivida en el país, ya que sus voces y miradas aportan la posibilidad de repensar Guatemala como una sociedad donde la guerra y la violación

sexual nunca más se repitan, y donde sea posible construir nuevas relaciones basadas en libertad, justicia y respeto para las mujeres, la humanidad y todo lo que existe. Por ello la Colectiva y las sobrevivientes hablan de la memoria desde la fuerza, alegría y celebración de la vida y las posibilidades de reconstrucción individual y colectivamente<sup>17</sup> (*Actoras de Cambio* 2020b, Paragraph 1).

### **“Decolonizing out emotions, bodies and thoughts”**

During the healing processes, the women reflected on how sexism and racism are entangled and how they internalized racism caused by discrimination as indigenous women. They analyzed colonialism’s affective lives and afterlives and reflected on how they had been affected by this during the armed conflict and within their daily lives. Based on the reflection, they started to develop strategies to liberate themselves from internalized inferiority. In the interviews, several women described that they had stopped speaking their language in public places or stopped dressing ‘traditionally’ as not to be identified as indigenous. Adults would consciously choose not to teach their children their own mother tongue in order to avoid discrimination against their children, as speaking the indigenous language had connotations of being ‘uneducated’ and ‘backward’. The majority of the women also explained the discarding of traditional clothing as a result of ethnic discrimination and racism:

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17 This strategy refers to the recovery of historical memory from women and feminists who have historically proposed, constructed and co-created diverse ways to free themselves from sexual violence, and in particular from the recovery of the survivors of rape during the war experienced in the country, since their voices and perspectives contribute to the possibility of rethinking Guatemala as a society where war and rape are never repeated, and where it is possible to build new relationships based on freedom, justice and respect for women, humanity and all that exists. That is why the Collective and the survivors speak of memory from the strength, joy and celebration of life and the possibilities of individual and collective reconstruction. (Own translation)

Ya no se llevan los vestidos que llevaban nuestras abuelas y que nosotras llevábamos de niñas hasta que empezamos el colegio. Esto es lo que les pasa a muchas mujeres: Ya no les gustan los vestidos cuando van a la escuela, por la discriminación<sup>18</sup> (Interviewee FC1).

When the women became aware of the psychological effects of the attempted destruction of the indigenous cultures in Guatemala since colonization, they started mourning and grieving the losses collectively. After centuries of social marginalization and devaluation they started to reconstruct the indigenous culture and cosmovision in order to re-value their own indigenous roots. In the interviews, I asked the women what has healed them the most and they unanimously said the ancestral cosmovision, because it allows them to be at peace with their own indigenous being and it shows how all these behaviours and racist attitudes can be broken. One participant told me:

No podía explicarme por qué nos odiaban tanto, me preguntaba si realmente había algo tan terrible dentro de nosotros, que merecíamos ser tratados así. Pero ahora entiendo que tenemos mucho que ofrecer al mundo, y por eso querían desaparecernos<sup>19</sup> (Interviewee FC 1).

The indigenous spirituality and culture had become valuable resources giving the women the necessary strength to acknowledge and work through the injuries and suffering

caused by daily experience of racist discrimination. Reconstructing the indigenous Maya or Xinka culture and cosmovision helped the women furthermore to decolonize their thoughts, bodies and actions and to proudly pass on these practices to their children as an act of resistance towards the hegemonic 'Ladino culture'.

Continuamos esta lucha para que nosotros, como pueblos indígenas, podamos decirles a nuestras hijas e hijos, quiénes somos y que somos personas con una cultura y con una identidad<sup>20</sup> (Interviewee FC4).

Regaining the knowledge about their own history, and reconstructing the collective identity, culture and cosmovision, as well as the reintegration of these into the everyday life of the people, have been important for the individual and collective confrontation with the past and with their own indigeneity. At the same time, the recognition of the destruction on a social level also enables the women to point out the persistence of colonial and patriarchal mechanisms of power, oppression and exploitation in their political struggle in order to demand justice as well as to challenge the dominant narratives of history and to help shape the social memory.

### **Conclusion: Decolonizing psychology**

*Sanar es un acto personal y político, un acto de ternura con una misma y con la vida, un acto de emancipación y rebelión contra el sistema<sup>21</sup>*  
(Lorena Cabnal 2017)

More than 1,000 women are part of Actoras de Cambio, they organize themselves as

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18 They do no longer wear the dresses that our grandmothers wore and which we wore when we were girls until we started school. This is what happens to many women: They don't like the dresses anymore when they come to school, because of discrimination (Own translation).

19 I couldn't explain why they had treated us with so much hatred, I wondered if there was really something inside us that was so terrible, that deserved to be treated like that. But now I understand that we have a lot to offer the world, and that's why they wanted us to disappear (Own translation).

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20 We continue this struggle so that we, as indigenous people, will be able to tell our daughters and sons who we are and what makes us people with a culture and with an identity. (Own translation)

21 Healing is a personal and political act, an act of tenderness with oneself and life, an act of emancipation and rebellion against the system (Own translation).

a community to heal the history of war and colonization in Guatemala, to prevent sexual violence and defend their lives, bodies and territories. Many of them began to participate as political actors to also make the violence against indigenous women visible that continued after the armed conflict. The women locate the roots of the suffered violence and oppression in the destructive patriarchal, postcolonial and capitalist system we all live in.

For *Actoras de Cambio*, healing is not limited to the directly affected person but rather includes the whole community and even the environment: Healing can be reached by (re-)connecting with the ancestral spirituality, connecting with nature, the earth, the moon, the sun and the plants that bring revitalization to the bodies and through creating relationships and embodiment between women (Cabnal 2018a, paragraph 22). Therefore, in their vision, healing refers not only to feeling better individually but to connect healing with the reflection about the causes and consequences of historical and contemporary violence and oppression in order to transform collectively the societal conditions which made the cruelties possible (*Actoras de Cambio* 2015). As shown in the article, their healing process goes beyond hegemonic Western ideas of psychological support, they unfold their real power through the community of women, mutual acknowledgement and appreciation. The collective desire is to understand the entangledness of gender-based violence with other (internalized) oppressions such as racism, heal the wounds caused by them in the past and emancipate from them for the future. During this process, the women from *Actoras de Cambio* used methods from bodywork, mutual support and listening, collective grieving and rituals from their ancestral spirituality. The overall societal goal is non-repetition, which means the certainty that such human rights violations will never happen again. In order to achieve this, the women make the personal political, bring their stories into the public sphere and demand justice. An important aspect is the recognition of the destruction and the suffering

by the society, through e.g., reparations or memorials, as well as giving space and acknowledgement to the grief and despair of the survivors. Diagnoses such as PTSD can be part of such a process of recognition and bring relief to those affected.

However, the external causes should always be taken seriously into account in order to avoid individualization and pathologization. An integration of the individual, collective and social dimensions is needed for a holistic approach to healing. Therefore, a mental, social and epistemic decolonization of psychology in the Global North is required, which means that we have to get rid of professionalized roles that come from a sense of expert knowledge and excessive power (Watkins 2015). We have to abolish the higher valuation of Western or institutionalized psychological knowledge, over indigenous or local healing practices and rather come to a point of mutual learning and exchange of experience (see also Mlodoch 2021). In any context in which psychological suffering is negotiated, it is key to analyze and understand the contextual, social, historical and biographical references.

While working with politically traumatized people, it is unavoidable to address the past in order to be able to shape a new future. Therefore, an understanding of the context is necessary to be able to help survivors of political violence to reconstruct what happened and to deal with the trauma they suffered. It is essential to create space for remembrance and to weave alternative narratives, starting from the memories of the affected people. Dealing with the past enables people to develop new life perspectives for their future. To (re)gain political influence and advocate collectively for the transformation of the societal conditions, can also be a powerful resource of healing. The psycho-social practices of *Actoras de Cambio* can be fruitful for clinical practitioners around the world, because in a culture-psychology perspective, there is no context-free psychotherapy, psycho-social work or psychological research (Sluneko & Wieser 2014: 350). In contrast, a cultural-psychological understanding is suitable for the analysis of persons in all their

intentionality and historicity. It's worthwhile for psychologist to be conscious about this interconnectedness of culture and psyche and to make use of it for their own work in clinical contexts. Against this background, the decolonizing of western psychology includes a transfer of practices and knowledge from the margins, and a re-politicization of psychological research and practice, that does not only treat symptoms but fights the causes of violence and suffering.

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