

## Chapter 5

### Becoming Woman

#### *On Exile and Belonging to the Borderlands*<sup>1</sup>

Sara C. Motta

As a single mother non-elite mestiza Latin Americanist, living in Australia, born in the United Kingdom, raised in a Polish Jewish culture, with the ever-present absence of my Colombian father, I have always lived in the borderlands. Never completely belonging to British society, nor Colombian culture, nor the middle-class whiteness of academia, I was ontologically *Other* from the beginning and marked as a raced and gendered subject of coloniality. In these borderlands I learned to speak different tongues and contort my heart, body, and mind in multiple ways. Yet this gift of otherness was co-woven through the shadow of exile.<sup>2</sup> As Anzaldúa so beautifully describes “we knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered ‘normal.’ And as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other” (2009, ix).

I augmented this exile paradoxically in the search for home and belonging. As a means to resist processes of subjectification and experiences of violent uprooting I became an academic. I embodied the thinking abstracted knower, developing the truth over and about others (and myself) and in the process closing off the possibilities for becoming otherwise in theory and practice and for healing my internal exile.

The work of healing began from the encounter with Latin American social movements that speak from the margins referred to as an “*other*” politics of knowledge and of life. A new relationship with my otherness was formed in which I chose this borderland space as a place of nurturing epistemological possibilities. Homecoming became an embrace of politicized hybridity; a homecoming to a self not content to exist as one more voice within the contours and limits of coloniality, but a voice which unsettles those very contours to create the world and ourselves anew.

In this piece I speak of this journey from ontological Otherness and exile to embrace of epistemological otherness and homecoming to the borderlands. I tell my story as an act of decolonizing in both form and content and as a means of creating the conditions of possibility for *other* grounds of epistemological becoming. I tell my story of *becoming woman*.<sup>3</sup>

### NARRATIVE WRITING AS HEALING

I have been careless with the fragments of my life. In many ways forgetting was a means of survival. Now these practices of survival have become blockages to living. Writing this piece in which I weave the story of my epistemological praxis with the poetics of my everyday life helps me to be careful and remember.

Telling my epistemological story of exile, becoming and homecoming(s) in the borderlands thus seeks to give *character* to history, demonstrating how social relationships and meta-processes of political, economic, and social dispossession are deeply rooted and made real in the everyday lives of raced and gendered subaltern subjects. Transformation becomes not a process of contesting power relationships *out there*, but of unlearning social relationships, subjectivities, and ways of life and learning new ones (Gibson-Graham 2006; Motta and Esteves 2014).

My epistemological story is thus not meant as a solipsistic song of individual pain, yearning, and voice. Rather, I open in my vulnerability to articulate a testimony to both the epistemological wounds of living in the borderlands *and* an imagining and enactment of decolonial feminist epistemologies through which we might articulate new grounds of becoming. In relation to acknowledging the pain and chaos of colonization, Warrior writes that “by making ourselves vulnerable, we open a process of asserting the power we possess as communities and individuals” (1995, 114). I enact, through this opening, a call to take seriously the bodies and subjectivities narrated through our stories. I believe they hold the key to the forging of decolonial politics of knowledge for the twenty-first century.

I hope that through sharing my story I help nurture bridges of relationships between other raced and gendered subaltern subjects and communities experiencing the onto-epistemological wounds of coloniality and attempting to heal from these wounds. As Rich writes in relation to women’s writing but expressive of my feelings and intentions here,

When we write for women we imagine an audience which wants our words—which desires our courage, our anger, our verve, our active powers, instead of fearing or loathing them. We write for ourselves and each other—an

ever-expanding sense of whom is part of our imagining—passionately listening and reading as we write because other women’s words are vital to our own (1979, 108).

Through my words then I demonstrate that we are never merely subjects defined, erased, and subjugated by coloniality. We have always resisted, often in ambiguous and contradictory ways, but it is through navigating these contradictions that we come to produce places and relationships of our own making.

It is also of course a practice that supports my own healing, as to be denied and to self-deny authentic voice is the stamp of less-than-human with which we are marked as oppressed peoples and which we so often come to internalize. To appear in my authenticity as a speaking and thinking subject is an act that disrupts such (self) denial. It is an act that unsettles the intimacies of coloniality as they mark our bodies, hearts, and spirits. As Native American writer-academic Gloria Bird writes, “I am motivated . . . by the belief that it is only through a critique of where I come from that the act of witnessing and the testimony I offer can become a decolonizing strategy” (1998, 47).

Yet there is another aspect to decolonizing, for to be listened to and received with love and tenderness can allow an unsettling of the colonized/colonizer separation. This is because the knowing-subject of coloniality is a subject that is also wounded, in their monological forgetting of the capacity to listen and receive. I hope that the cracks of re-humanization that this piece creates, along with the myriad other courageous voices speaking truth to power through their experiences of subjectification and active subjectivity, open the floodgates for what Maldonado-Torres describes as “the definitive entry of enslaved and colonized subjectivities into the realm of thought at before unknown institutional levels” (2007, 262).

### CREATING OUR OWN LANGUAGE(S)

As Mignolo and others have demonstrated, there is an intimate relationship between conquest and writing. In this process the word becomes separated from the world, used to name, discipline, contain, and elide the body of the colonized and oppressed. Colonized peoples become racialized and gendered subaltern subjects as the politics of ahistorical abstraction mark their lands, communities, and bodies. Anzaldúa argues that to speak our truth is to find our tongues, and these are multiple, wild, and uncontainable. It means reimagining what it means to think, theorize, and write, and involves embracing multiple literacies which reconnect the word to the world. As she describes in relation to her experience—and eminently applicable here—“I will no longer

be made to feel ashamed of existing; I will have my voice . . . I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice" (Anzaldúa 2007, 81).

Experimenting with prose, poetry and imagery as expanding the possibilities of theorizing and theory become tools in this process of creation. Yet this also involves moving beyond the separation of the word from the world in which writing is representative and embracing writing as an expressive act and spiritual journey. This decolonizing politics of knowledge gives life to words such that the written word calls into being "other" epistemological grounds of becoming. Unsurprisingly then, for Chicana and Black feminists "the act of writing is itself a sensuous act, an act that heals trauma, and an act that is embodied through which we re-write ourselves into our bodies and the world" (Anzaldúa 2007, 88–89). Furthermore, as Audrey Lorde describes in relation to poetry—but capturing the existential nature of our writing and philosophizing—"poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change" (1984, 34). Troubling the taken for granted forms and processes of theorizing through breathing life into our words is a heretical act that seeks to (re) write the epistemological categories of coloniality through the experiences and theorizing from the placed body of the raced and gendered subaltern "other."

To find our tongues is thus to struggle with the creation of (a) language(s) formed in the intersections of coloniality, speaking that which has become unspeakable. Goeman believes that finding such a language is "[t]he first step in gathering strength" (2013, 129). My journey involves finding just such a language, or languages, in which expressive writing as an act of becoming has become essential for my existence, despite being unspeakable within the dominant epistemological script of the theoretical-political. And this involves developing trust in writing which "has been part of the not-me rather than one of the natural activities of the self" (Rich, 1979, 64). Yet such writing is not to mimic the script of the literate and literacy of coloniality, no it is a writing which disrupts such logics and disembodied rationalities, producing instead a writing of the heart in which our poetics are as Lorde describes "a way we help give name to the nameless so that it can be thought" (1984, 34). The process of finding a language involves a recalling of "other kinds of memories . . . and stories to tell" (Stoler cited in Agathangelou and Ling 2004, 41). This is because the knowing-subjectivity of capitalist-coloniality is enacted through violent separation from the raced and gendered subaltern *Other* that is rendered invisible, mute, and absent. For Lugones, this is "the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization that fits them for classification, the process of subjectification, the attempt to turn the colonized into less than human beings" (2010, 745).

Importantly, ways of knowing are also ways of inhabiting and creating the world and each other. To eradicate the former therefore enacts not merely a discursive eradication but an ontological denial of being *otherwise*. According to Lugones, this ongoing coloniality of knowing and being

justifie[s] the colonization of memory and thus of people's sense of self, of intersubjective relation, of their relation to the spirit world, to land, to the very fabric of their conception of reality, identity and social, ecological and cosmological organization . . . the normativity that connect[s] gender and civilization [becomes] intent on erasing community ecological practices, knowledge of planting, of weaving, of the cosmos (2010, 745).

Within these logics of raced and gendered non-being the experience of the *damné* is characterized by invisibility, the white gaze of suspicion, and denial of the capacity of gift. Invisibility is constituted through the denial of knowledges to the raced and gendered subaltern Other; suspicion is cast as the gaze in which the question is always asked "Are you like us?," "Are you truly human?"; and the denial of the capacity of gift legitimizes the idea that there is nothing to learn from the wretched of the Earth undercutting the conditions of dialogue, reciprocity, and humanization (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Morgensen 2011).

These epistemological logics are not external to the colonized and oppressed subject. Rather the long process of subjectification of her to the internalization of the hierarchical and alienating dichotomies of being, knowing, and relating of capitalist-coloniality creates "epistemological wounds and ontological wounds" (Gil, Purru, and Lin 2012, 11). Such a process of splitting becomes internalized within the colonized constituting an internal and external exile from self and other.

Thus recalling other memories and stories to tell is a meta-epistemological task which is deeply rooted in the existential questions and realities of those who have been denied knowing-subjectivity and internalized the external categories of being less-than-human. As West, echoing Christian, describes, the philosophies of Afro-Americans and colonized folk, "[are] an on this-earth way of being . . . not about a world to come; it is about how to stay sane in this world as members of the 'wretched of the earth' . . . it is how to handle 'hell on earth'" (1989, 223).

These processes constitute an embodied remembering which signals a coming into being in which the dehumanized affirm their existence and in the process articulate a new epistemological orientation for decolonizing practices of knowing, knowledges, and knowing-subjectivities. Memory, as Gonzalez de Allen (2006, 2–3) proposes,

assures that an “I” exists even when this existence is denied . . . it is a form of listening . . . that functions like the talking drums across communities . . . awareness of one’s situation is awakened and enhanced by hearing the “call of other” like beings whose voices reverberate knowledge about existence . . . new forms of understanding are acquired; the epistemic directives which aid in understanding what is known and how it is known begin to emerge from the shadows.

However, arguably the knowing-subject of modernity is also dehumanized in this relationship as the(ir) body and emotions become that which is to be tamed and controlled. This also constitutes a process of internal exile which marks this subject’s being and capacity to know. Yet rather than a dehumanization constituted through denial of the capacity of gift, the knowing-subject loses the capacity to listen and receive. Such monological onto-epistemological logics produce a form of speaking and knowing that is in many ways a form of muteness.

Recalling other memories and stories to tell is thus *not* a process in which memories “simply become resources of regenerating the self and the objects of hegemonic destruction; they are also combatants at the frontlines of the battle for dis-alienation and self-determination” (Gonzalez de Allen 2006, 10). It is a process that “help[s] build the world of the You . . . [through] the emergence of the damné as both a self and as an other in the world” (Maldonado-Torres 2006, 10).

### THE BORDERLANDS

Thus it is that the modern subject of knowing and *less-than-human* subject are both forms of wounded subjectivity, even as relationships of power are exercised by those enacting knowing-subjectivity in relation to those that are known. The raced and gendered subaltern subject is wounded as she internalizes the denial of her capacity of gift and becomes exiled from her wisdom and power; exiling that which is *other*. While the knowing-subject becomes internally exiled and loses their connection with all that is feminized through denying their capacity to listen and enacting a speech which is a form of muteness as it is embedded upon epistemological deafness and blindness.

This suggests that onto-epistemological decolonizing involves processes of dis-alienation and recovery from the denial of authenticity and voice for the colonized, and a learning to listen and receive for the colonizer. Like this we can co-create a process of dialogue as humanization through recognition and embrace of radical difference.

However, processes of subjectification do not result in closed and neatly bordered subjects. Into this complex set of alienated and wounded

onto-epistemological relationships between self and other I would like to complicate the story even further through foregrounding the experience of existing in the borderlands between peoples, places, cultures, and languages. Existing in the borderlands as ontological experience often means experiencing an in-betweenness of multiple oppressions which can be excruciatingly painful. Gloria Anzaldúa captures this in her work about being a Chicana, feminist queer scholar existing as she describes as a Mexicana *de este lado*, Mexican, Anglo, Indian, being in-between worlds, belonging neither fully to the Mexican nor to the Anglo, speaking a Chicana language of combination. She described how as a Chicana she faced oppressions within her own community yet also faced denigration, racism, and violence of dominant white-Anglo society. This experience of multiple intersecting oppressions was a place of great pain and suffering.

And yet Anzaldúa in speaking from this experience also creates an opening to another way of being, thinking, and creating the world and the self. She gives epistemic privilege to this hybrid state because such a state of in-betweenness, of transition, and of potential possibility develops *la facultad*—the capacity—to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities. Those who are pushed out, brutalized, those who have faced multiple oppressions are, according to Anzaldúa, most likely to develop this sense. The ones possessing this sensitivity are “excruciatingly alive to the world” (Anzaldúa 2007, 60).

To prevent the death of the self that such excruciating sensitivity can bring involves a conscious journeying that enables the transformation of the pain of denial into a voice of tender opening and loving becoming. This involves multiple crossings in which “every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again” (Anzaldúa 2007, 41). The borderlands experience as epistemological and political choice offers a way of imagining, being, and inhabiting our bodies and relationships that is beyond fixed categories that separate, simplify, and silence.

The complexity of these processes of the coloniality of knowing suggests that one can inhabit hybrid ontological being, as both colonizer and colonized logics are interpolated into subjectivity. They also suggest that such hybridity, when politicized, can become a key to epistemological decolonization. In the following parts of this story of finding a language to speak my epistemological journey, I focus on three periods in my life as a writer/academic-activist. I place emphasis on the silences and that which was spoken, that which I spoke, in these periods and how these relate to the journey of coloniality of knowing-subjectivity and decolonizing of my life and epistemological practices. As Griffin captures, “each silence and each eruption into speech constitute a kind of struggle in the life of a writer” (cited in Goeman

2013, 210). While presented as if chronological, these three periods intersect in uneven ways across the last twenty years of my life. Yet through retelling in this way I am able to excavate with finer detail and greater depth my epistemological story of *becoming woman*.

### EXILE IN THE EARLY DAYS: EMBODYING THE KNOWING-SUBJECT OF COLONIALITY

As I have outlined, the wounds of coloniality are gendered and raced. They mark my mother-line in intensely painful ways. I came to womanhood having been mothered by three women from my mother's family—my mother, my grandmother, and my aunt—and in separation from my father's Colombian family. My mother's family was deeply marked by the heritages of the gendered impacts of coloniality and also the raced traumas of the Second World War, for my grandfather was Polish Jewish. The writings of Rich (1979, 175–76) on the impact of patriarchy on the psyche and spirit of women speak to the experiences of my three mothers:

For many women the stresses of this splitting, in a world so ready to assert our innate passivity and to deny our independence and creativity, to extreme consequences; the mental asylum, self-imposed silence, recurrent depression, suicide, and often severe loneliness.

Immersed in a family of women who had suffered trauma was both an experience of deep love and also one marked by the consequences of those soul wounds to their psyche. To survive I made the choice of exile from my biological mother and would experience life for many years as a wandering without home and a feeling of deep aloneness.

I internalized the trauma of exile from my mother-line with a separation from my inner feminine emotions and embodied knowing and clung to the separate, in-control, and controlling mind. After having my first daughter and experiencing isolation and homelessness, I came to study in my mid-twenties. In many ways I mirrored Rich's description of her entry into the world of academe, in which at first "even in reading these women [poets] I was looking in them for the same things I had found in the poetry of men, because I wanted women poets to be the equals of men, and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same" (1979, 39).

I embodied the knowing-subject of coloniality, yet embodied this subject both as a means of desperate clinging to my Polish Jewish intellectual heritage, and as a means to feel human through experiences that were deeply dehumanizing. Finding a tongue through which to affirm my humanity not because of the experience of trauma but through surviving those experiences,

involves coming into being as a subject on the page in ways that transgress the confines of philosophical categories of patriarchal capitalist-coloniality. It is here that poetry and expression from the heart returns the world to the word and enacts “other” epistemological grounds of becoming. Putting my poetry to public page in this way feels as Anzaldúa describes “like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart - a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act...It is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else” (2007, 95). It is a prefigurative act of healing; of decolonizing the politics of knowledge of capitalist-coloniality, an open hand across the walls that divide us, a way to bring sense to my story by breathing life into my resistance and becoming.

***The Hostel\****

*I used to wake up early,  
dress the baby,  
not let her feet touch the ground  
for the layers of dirt and grime.*

*The manager of the place  
she never smiled  
as I left not looking back  
running from the decay and the broken minds.*

*I couldn’t wash  
me or her,  
the shower covered with spit,  
blood splattered on the chipped tiles.*

*I remember the cracked sink  
in the corner of our room  
4 meters by 4  
enough for me and you, a cot and a narrow bed.*

*I went away that Christmas,  
family got sick  
caring for her I stayed  
too many days.*

*They never let us have  
the phone number of the place,  
No chance to ring them  
No chance to explain.*

*It was really cold that night,  
my girl on my hip,*

*her cheeks red with cold,  
as she shook her head.*

*All my worldly possessions  
in 10 black plastic bin bags.  
I'd lost my room, she said,  
too many days without permission.*

*They put me somewhere else  
that night.  
Dead cockroaches on the wall,  
we lay curled around each other on the hard tearless floor.*

*Next day she gave me permission  
to unpack my life  
back in my room, 4 by 4  
with the bed, the cot, the cracked sink, the grey walls.*

*Up early, always  
to go outside  
sit in the McDonalds  
cheap meals and happy smiles.*

*That's the place they put you  
when you're down and out and desperate  
when you're vulnerable and in pain.  
That's the place they put us  
me and my baby girl.*

Studying in an elite institution as a non-elite mestiza single mother marked me out for the gaze of suspicion in which it was asked of me “Is she like us?,” “Is she truly human?” And so to become accepted, to become like them, I made the choice, as bell hooks argued, a choice which is often our only choice, of assimilating to avoid denial.

I became the producer of abstraction on the bodies of others and producing my body as the abstract, universal knower. I mapped and was mapped and became an exceptional, *special* subject who had overcome the odds and was successfully enrolled in a PhD. Yet such splitting and *internal* denial constituted a great loss from the self and from others. Through this I augmented my disconnection from my erotic power which as Lorde reminds us “is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply fem[inine] and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (2000, 1).

My pedagogy and research were marked by these dynamics: research focused on critical theorizations which demonstrated the logics of complicity with neoliberalism of the Third Way in Latin America, particularly the Socialist Party of Chile and the Workers' Party of Brazil, with pieces such

as *Neither Pragmatic Adaptation nor Misguided Accommodation: Modernization as Domination in the Chilean and British Left* and *The Chilean Socialist Party (PSCh): Constructing Consent and Disarticulating Dissent to Neo-liberal Hegemony in Chile*. While committed to telling a popular history from below, my subjects remained objects of research, with theorization produced in abstract by me as the theorist. My focus was on negative critique; to deconstruct power and open possibilities for the re-visioning of emancipatory struggle; possibilities, I argued, which were opened by the critical theorist. As Mignolo characterizes, at this time I was caught within the terms of the conversation of the coloniality of knowing, “[in] disciplinary or interdisciplinary controversies and the conflict of interpretations” and thus “the control of knowledge [was] not called into question” (2009, 4). My pedagogy reflected this for it focused on the cognitive, with the idea that to know was something that we came to through argument, and that success of this knowing (as both epistemology and politics) was to determine and demonstrate the best (emancipatory) argument and so convince others. And in both I was successful according to the criterion of value of coloniality.

Yet my body was still marked; I still encountered the white, classed, and masculinized gaze of suspicion in other social encounters with state institutions and in everyday personal interactions. I was still marked with socio-economic poverty and the *private* and invisibilized struggle to survive while existing at the same time as a student of an elite institution. I existed in the borderlands between my temporary home from exile and community of the inner city underclass in which I felt safe, and the place of elite, abstracted, and separated space of the university in which I had felt alive. For both I was in differing ways an outsider, uneasily accepted into the arms of each community; forever feeling an unbelonging and out-of-placeness. I remained in the ontological borderlands not yet embracing these as a radical epistemological possibility of becoming other.

The dissonance and contradictions between the discourse of belonging and my experience of exile and out-of-placeness meant that from the start I had identified with critical theory and research for emancipation. Thus despite embodying the universalizing claims and politics of knowledge of dominant twentieth-century conceptualizations of emancipation, I was left with political and existential unease; unease which I began to excavate.

This led me on a journey of discovery, an epistemological choice of entering into the borderlands; one from which I would begin to realize that emancipation was not about power relationships *out there* but a deeply intimate decolonization of our subjectivities and social relationships. This journey did not negate the work of negative critique or critical theory making as traditionally conceived, however, it did mark a decentering of the privileging of this politics of knowledge, exposure of its intimate links with

coloniality, and a reconnection of the word, through embodied encounters, with the world.

## ENCOUNTERS IN THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BORDERLANDS

### *Women on the Margins*<sup>5</sup>

*A breath.*

*Look, listen, believe.*

*Now I see*

*the moment*

*I could breathe*

*with a home and communities*

*that fragilely embraced me.*

*Life as disconnected fragments,*

*history in shadows,*

*encounters of the borderlands.*

*Listen to the submerged voices,*

*look into the mirror,*

*recognise, visibilise, retrieve.*

*Breath, look, listen,*

*Believe.*

*Now I see.*

*I began to breathe,*

*with the women on the margins*

*who were like me.*

Through my research and political activism in the United Kingdom I was invited on a solidarity-economy visit to Buenos Aires in 2001, to explore and make connections with movements and communities responding to the crisis of neoliberalism with new forms of economic production and social reproduction. While I was there I met members of the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados de Solano* (MTD Solano), an unemployed workers movement that was actively involved in reinventing the nature of the political and social change. They were questioning in theory and practice dominant twentieth-century understandings of emancipation. Developing a prefigurative politics which rejected the need for leaders, political parties, and party lines, they were embodying a new type of politics; a politics which emerged from the lived experiences of communities experiencing social exclusion, political delegitimization, and economic marginalization. They were challenging the terms of the conversation of capitalist-coloniality as expressed and reproduced in leftist traditions.

Known for their use of the *piquete*—the blocking of roads to disrupt the smooth flow of the economy—as a means to make demands on the state, the majority of members of the MTD Solano were women, often mothers, fighting for the dignity of their children, families, and communities. In their thirties and forties they were at the head of *piquetes* wearing masks and standing behind burning tires. Such women were presented as delinquent, uneducated, and unfit mothers.

Yet as they argued one of the reasons for wearing a mask is because there was no space for them in political society as they faced the coercive power of police and security forces, the delegitimizing discourse of political and media elites, and the use of sexual violence to intimidate and silence them. They thus covered their faces to be seen and heard politically. Through this they embodied a rejection of the sexualization and objectification of women and a politics revolving around the marketing and selling of great leaders.

The *piqueteras* built spaces in which there are no great leaders speaking, acting, and thinking on their behalf. Planning a *piquete* was organized using procedures of direct democracy and consensus decision-making. As a participant in the MTD Solano, explained, “We don’t need anyone speaking on our behalf; we can all be voices and express every single thing. They’re our problems and it’s our decisions to solve.”<sup>16</sup> The wearing of masks, as a part of this process, was an egalitarian practice of breaking down hierarchies and relationships of power.

Through covering their faces the *piqueteras* were attempting through anonymity to reconstruct political community and subjectivity. Such reconstruction of democracy and politics happened both during *piquetes* but also in the building of non-commodified social relationships in their community around collective processes of social reproduction in relation to childcare, education, and housing, as well as cooperative forms of economic production. This also involved a *política afectiva* (politics of affect), in which family, womanhood, love, solidarity, and community are reimagined beyond relationships based on competition, hierarchy, and inequality. As they argued, “we do have a political project . . . our goal is the complete formation of the person in every possible sense.”

Mothers, often single mothers, fighting for the dignity of their children, families, and community, putting their bodies on the line, and reconstructing the conditions of their everyday life, spoke to me on deep levels. There was recognition. There was a feeling of homecoming and of mutual understanding without the need to explain and account for myself and my experiences. They were creating a politics of life. This was embedded within an epistemological project, in which all were considered knowers and in which social transformation was an intimate process tied with creating languages of their own outside of the dominant script of the political.

They were thus giving a language to questions I found hard to articulate, but which emerged out of my experiences of trauma, silencing, and denial of the capacity of gift of my authenticity. They were speaking out of experiences of single motherhood, bringing dignity to experiences in which they were reduced to the non-human, to the bad mother, unsettling these misrepresentations of them as victims and pariahs. This *feminization of resistance* turned coloniality's conversation on its head, creating other grounds of onto-epistemological becoming.

This encounter unsettled those elements of me that were cut off from the emotional and embodied places of alienation that I had exiled. They opened a window onto a possibility of revolutionary affirmative critique to fill as bell hooks described, "that vacant space after one has resisted" (1990, 15); the emptiness left from remaining in a movement of deconstruction or anger at the experience of inequities of power and violent exclusions.

In a slow and fragmented way I began to realize that the necessity to become and to make oneself anew was central to social transformation and that key to this, as Hooks continues, was to "come to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one invents alternative habits of being and resists from marginal space of difference inwardly defined" (1990, 15). I began to realize that I had a right and ethical obligation to myself and others to appear as a political subject, writing with others our own script of the political through a prefigurative onto-epistemological project of emancipation.

Important as the resonances were, it was clear that this politics was not about creating a model in one place that was to be transplanted into other places. Rather it was a politics of radical dialogue, of speaking and building from the place-based experiences of multiple oppressions and violences, and of learning to listen to each other and the wisdom of ourselves. Dialogue in this sense is not merely a method, as it is often misrepresented, but an ethical and political commitment to a politics of knowing and being which counters the authoritarian monologue of the politics of knowing of coloniality. Paulo Freire (cited in Cotos 2013, 112) articulates aspects of this dialogical philosophical underpinning in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Dialogue is an existential demand and enables a form of meeting which fosters reflection and action . . . Dialogue is the terrain which grants meaning to desires, aspirations, dreams, hopes and makes possible an exchange of ideas and critical conversations that emerge from reality . . . To exist humanly is to speak the world . . . Dialogue is the meeting of people mediated by the world, which enables such a speaking of the world.

Dialogical construction seeks to break the domination of monological thought, practice, and being and instead open space for multiplicity, doubts,

questions, and discontent with the world as it is (both internal and external). To foster such dialogical spaces involves turning toward the other and everyday life, co-constructing the conditions for voice, speaking, and listening. As I came to learn from my encounter with the MTD Solano, and later other movements and communities in Latin America and the United Kingdom, this process was inherently pedagogical, in the sense that it involves a process of unlearning and (re)learning new ways of being, relating, loving, and creating.

These shifts and openings to listening and learning; to a practice of creating radical dialogue as the grounds for an *Other* politics of emancipation were reflected in my writings, with pieces such as *Notes Towards Prefigurative Epistemologies*; *Old Tools and New Movements: Political Science as Gatekeeper or Intellectual Inspiration*; and *Leyendo el Anarchismo a través de Ojos Latinoamericanos: Reading Anarchism through Latin American Eyes*. However, these pieces in many ways remained within a cognitive understanding of knowing and knowledge-production even as they began to unsettle and question the form of knowing-subjectivity constitutive of the politics of knowledge of coloniality and its complicity with dehumanization and processes of alienation. They suggested the exhaustion of traditional conceptual frameworks, recognized the collective philosopher in all of us, challenged the practice that the word should, and can, be separated from the world, and suggested that there were multiple forms of knowing and creating knowledge which stretched far beyond, yet encompassed, the cognitive. My teaching and pedagogy too began to question the Socratic notion of dialogue between “thinking” heads that had underlain my previous practice. I continued with a focus not only on a multiplicity of perspectives but also began to experiment with embodied forms of knowing and became mindful of the subjectivities performed in the classroom and the impact of affect upon the possibilities and limitations in fostering a critical classroom in a time of neoliberal subjectivities.

However, it was crisis and multiple traumas, in which my life, integrity, and children were threatened by the violent processes of subjectification of capitalist-coloniality, that pushed me toward a praxis of epistemological emancipation as healing. This would come to involve, as liberation theologians Boff and Boff call, “integral liberation” (1987), in which (the) I cannot be separated from (the) You.

### THE BORDERLANDS AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHOICE AND RADICAL POSSIBILITY

When one enters in her nakedness into the text, *chisels herself into being* and calls in practices, relationships, energies, and possibilities through her words, there is fear. The door to transformation and becoming is a door in which

one opens to vulnerability as strength; to embodying a full emotional palette, in which the stories we tell are whispers of transformation on a breeze that caresses our hearts and minds. Yet there is fear of not being heard, of receiving the silence of others' turned faces, of imprisonment in a language that misrepresents, vilifies, and ontologically denies. There is fear also from the internalized shame and denial of our traumas.

It is thus hard to find the words, and speak them.

During this time, I was able to begin to write “for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman” (Rich 1979, 44). I came to write as an embodied subject and began to enact, with others, processes of unlearning and learning to become otherwise, connecting all elements of my life to a decolonizing onto-epistemological politics of becoming. It is here that I came to find the beginnings of my voice, after decades of feeling silenced and living a censored life. What brought me here?

### *Life.*

Life reminded me that central to this journey of recovering from the onto-epistemological wounds of coloniality is embrace of the cycle of life/death/rebirth. As Rich (1979, 191) describes

We begin out of the void, out of darkness and emptiness. It is part of the cycle understood by the old . . . that materialism denies. Out of death, rebirth . . . The void is the creatrix, the matrix . . . We are not supposed to go down into the darkness of the core . . . [yet] the politics worth having, the relationships worth having, demand that we delve still deeper.

Nottingham is a metaphor for those years of my life. Those years were bridging years; years in the borderlands of being and becoming between fear and love, between walls of protection and boundaries of possibility, between enforced silence and embodied voice, between forgetting and remembering, between disassociation and intimacies with self and other.

A deafening enforced silence, victimhood, betrayal, loss, and abandonment weighed down my steps and haunted my head. On the outside you couldn't really tell: I spoke, I taught, I organized, I wrote, I mothered. But inside I was in a constant state of fear—like a deer's frozen body when faced with the oncoming lights of a car. I was disassociated from my heart that was broken and from my emotions that had been trampled on.

So began my journey to breathe, to sing, to feel—a journey that came to be through the body, the embodied in land, laughter, trees, friends, sisters, daughters, lovers, myself, my body. A passage through the wisdom of the dark emotions, as Greenspan counsels, “from fear to courage, from anger to tenderness, from pain to love” (2003, 2).

Our bodies carry the marks of trauma, of violence, of loss, like iron brandings on our skin. My emotional palettes faded as I adapted living a life cut off from that which is feminized, or the erotic, our deep knowing of authentic desire embedded in the womb space which as Lord speaks, “once felt, touched, tasted, can never be forgotten” (2000, 1). To reconnect to my deep knowing and heal the wounds of coloniality that marked my body and penetrated my heart, I had to learn to produce myself differently. This wasn’t a conscious journey: it came out of desperation, when the patterns of self-denial, of violence, of victimhood, pushed me to an edge of my being.

I remember sitting in my office, in that world of disembodied ghosts, crying and crying, not out of emotional knowing but out of emotional exhaustion. My dear friend Laiz walked in for a meeting. She said “Sara stop, you need to stop and look after yourself.” She held open a door and handed me a key which I accepted by giving myself permission to feel. She showed me a place of peace and serenity in the heart of the university space. A tree circle—the body of the land, the wisdom of the trees. There I fell under the spell of the sensuous world, which Abram (2006) so beautifully describes as being rooted in the Earth, learning to breathe, beginning to stop from the constant demands to perform as mother, worker, and organizer.

In that space I would sit every morning, breathing, stretching, grounding. In the worst moments I would look to the bud coming up from the muddy ground, listen to the squirrels rustling through the branches, hold the trunk of the tree, and remember that I was here and alive in the web of life, in its beauty. Here is where I found goddess, Gaia, the feminine divine, interconnection, an *other* way of inhabiting my life and of being immersed in the world. I would breathe with mindfulness, slow down time, notice the small beauties, and refuse to be colonized by disembodied logics of subjectification that I experienced in both the public and private spaces of my life.

A practice of the feet, of being grounded in the places we inhabit, their rhythms, their changes, their energies and histories, roots us in a politics of tenderness. Through mindfulness with the Earth beneath our feet we return to the body and find our sacred breath. As Abram describes, “uniting our breathing bodies not only with under the ground . . . not only with beyond the horizon . . . but also with the interior life of all that we perceive in the open field of the living present” (2006, 3). Connecting through the land to our sacred breath brings to us a knowing of another kind, a knowing often beyond words, a knowing of liberation and love.

And then I found the women of the place, in circle, multiple circles, moon circles, anarcha-feminist circles, reading circles, women in movement. This was a slow awakening, a slow finding of voice, a slow removal of the walls to intimacy I had built to protect me and survive. In these spaces, with these

women I began to emerge out of the enforced silence. I could speak what it meant to be in fear for your child's safety. I could speak what it meant to be spoken over and silenced by violent men, judges, police, social workers, and solicitors. I could speak what it was to be alone with two children in a strange place, to feel cold, to feel desperate. I could begin to speak in different ways with different intensities, sometimes whispers, sometimes shouts, sometimes cries, sometimes sighs. To speak with our own tongues by necessity rupture the myth that words can only represent and that thinking can only come through the head; and instead it re-connects the mind to the body, the heart to the head, and the word to the world, so that with our words we create ourselves and the world anew. As Anzaldúa expresses, "For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body - flesh and bone - and from the Earth's body- stone, sky, liquid soil" (2007, 97).

***Big Brown Belly. Single Mother.***<sup>7</sup>

*They make us shameful.  
Quiet, ever so quiet  
no voice,  
nothingness.*

*Not seen the vulnerability  
as openness  
but weakness  
to your mess.*

*Big brown belly.  
Single mother.  
Something fishy.  
Undressed*

*violence,  
fear pulsating,  
shaking.  
Blood*

*dripping from her  
curvaceous thighs.  
"Lying"  
they said.*

*Writing notes  
that slit  
my throat.  
Words*

*blocked  
in shock.  
My baby  
born*

*in hiding.  
Running  
far away,  
keep her safe.*

*Stop.  
The hand  
of the state  
covers*

*my mouth  
to suffocate  
the possibility  
of speaking.*

*Now,  
it is time  
to speak what's mine,  
to lose the shame*

*and unfasten  
the pain  
of those days,  
distant*

*memories  
remain.  
Big brown belly.  
Single mother.*

*Made to feel  
a crime  
for being  
Other.*

*Safe  
are we  
us three  
across the magic seas.*

*Safe  
are we  
us three.  
Here to be me.*

It was here that I learned more about the arts of speaking and listening, of decolonizing the monological logics of coloniality and producing the possibilities of dialogues of radical difference. I found that for those who have suffered the gaze of coloniality and internalized their non-being we need monologue; not the monologue of speaking over others, of exerting one's voice by silencing others. No, the monologue that enables speech, in whatever form that takes: comprehensible, incomprehensible; vomited from the body; screams from the throat, whispers to the ground, moans of exhaustion.

And it is in this way that we can create the grounds of possibility for decolonizing dialogue. As like this we appear as people. We appear from the enforced silence. We can choose when to speak, when to be silent, how to speak, who to speak with. Monologues of healing prove that others will listen, that you are not alone. They build a bridge to trust. From here our words begin to breathe our stories and selves into life and create loving community.

Then came the wider circles of men and women, in everyday life, as neighbors, as fellow organizers, as storytellers and craftspeople, crafting words and practices of another kind, to produce us differently. From bringing us vegetables when we ran out of food, letting me sleep when I was exhausted, singing songs with us to soothe the loneliness, cooking a good meal so we didn't get sick, filling in legal forms or helping me finish a lecture late at night for an early morning start, sending loving energies when I had to go to court, organizing projects, getting drunk, dancing, holding hands.

Here is where we weaved together the strands of trust, opening, vulnerability, and solidarity. This, as Venezuelan feminist theorist Alba Carosio (2007) explains, is a politics of collectivizing care in our everyday lives which politicizes and transgresses the caring maternal role through which women are interpolated into individualized and sacrificial roles. This is a politics of creating other rhythms and relationships which break the isolation and separation between people and bring together, in the micro-practices of fulfilling our most concrete needs, ways of reproducing ourselves, our families, and communities differently.

This is a revolution of decolonizing love. It enables difference and multiplicity. Through these acts of kindness, care, and holding we plant seeds of possibility and nurture the conditions for worlds beyond the painful separations of coloniality. Here we learned to love ourselves, embrace our histories, and sing our songs. Here we learned to become women differently. Here I discovered the loving eye, tender hand, sensitive ear, erotic lips, deep yoni, and sacred feet. Here I came to know, as Aymara feminine wisdom says, that "we understand the size and strength of our own ability and that we should not surrender that ability to anyone" (Gutiérrez, 2012, 61).

Here I discovered the multiplicities of form, tongue, becoming self and other, of becoming woman.

Here I came home.

As I began to consciously heal from the wounds of capitalist-coloniality, the knowing-subjectivity of coloniality, which I had embodied, now no longer served me. The emancipatory possibilities which I had given this epistemological way of being now became barriers to dis-alienation and decolonization. As I connected to my deep embodied knowing and wisdom of the erotic I could no longer perform the terms of conversation of coloniality. I became ontologically and epistemologically *other*, a heretic in the university space at a time of the intensification and deepening of the authoritarian monological logics of coloniality through increased marketization. I was therefore a marked subject with active attempts to deny value, visibility, and voice to my critical praxis.

Yet through these processes of healing I came to learn with others an *other* way of being and becoming in which I was connected with my deep emotional knowing and my capacity for joy. Through such a connection I came to discover what our joy and affirmation feels like and conversely to know what separation, estrangement, disassociation, and lack of meaning feel like. Thus I learned to *see* the processes, situations, relationships, and ways of being to which I must say no, as well as those to which I could surrender. As hooks describes, such practices “expressed in writing, teaching and habits of being [are] fundamentally linked to a concern with creating strategies that will enable colonized folks to decolonize their minds and actions, thereby promoting the insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (1990, 8).

This was not a separate process of healing and then learning a new epistemological politics as a result of this process. Rather, healing was a pre-figurative epistemological politics, *was* the practice of creating other grounds of onto-epistemological becoming. It occurred in multiple communities; autonomous political community in Nottingham, anarchist feminist groups in the United Kingdom, goddess healing circles in Glastonbury, with women and educators of the *Comite de Tierra Urbana*, Caracas Venezuela, the *Movimiento Sem Terra*, Ceará, Brazil and the *Escuela Política de Mujeres Pazíficas*, Cali, Colombia. All these communities speaking in multiple tongues, developing their own languages and scripts of the political practiced and theorized emancipation as a deeply embodied and intimate onto-epistemological process of healing.

It was thus that the question of the pedagogical became central to my research praxis; in a way which sought to develop methodologies of collective co-construction of knowledge with communities and movements which embraced multiple literacies, including art, music, sacred touch, ritual,

storytelling, and theater. Here I did not seek to embody the knower but rather become a co-facilitator in creating the grounds of possibility for radical dialogical practices of unlearning and learning to become *other*.

The pedagogical as an essential element in the epistemological emancipatory praxis I was engaged with became a way of transgressing borders between community and university, public and private, mind and body, education and life, and South and North. I actively became involved in systematizing the pedagogical practices of movements and communities I worked and lived in. This translated into the university space, not merely in the classroom, but in our everyday lives as academic workers struggling to create possibilities of radical dialogue and emancipatory praxis in an increasingly epistemologically authoritarian and violent space (see Motta 2012, Motta 2013 for further discussion).

These processes became reflected in my textual work in which I systematized the pedagogical in books such as *Education and Social Change in Latin America* and *21st Century Socialism: The Role of Radical Education*. I also began to try and give a language to non-cognitive languages, particularly the languages of the embodied and the divine, in works such as *We are the ones we have been waiting for: The Feminisation of Resistance in Venezuela* and *The Goddess Queers*. And finally I realized that integral liberation involved the I as much as the You; that our stories are a way of weaving other realities into being. I recognized that I no longer had to censor myself and my story of becoming.

## BECOMING WOMAN

My homecoming to the epistemological borderlands has allowed me to embrace the cycles of life-death-rebirth, not become stuck in the onto-epistemological logics of coloniality, in which it is assumed that death as otherness is a feminized pathology to be disciplined, controlled, and denied by the knowing-subject of coloniality. Instead I come (for it is an ongoing process and struggle) with others, to be able to let go that which no longer serves and embrace that which supports our collective projects of onto-epistemological becoming; our revolution of decolonial love.

This is a slow process of unlearning the censorship and self-censorship through tender collective practices of creating the conditions of possibility of dialogue. Such dialogues enable a flourishing of radical difference through the creating of multiple literacies and a remembering of our embodied stories through which we might, piece by piece, put together our existence as knowing peoples. There are thus no happy endings, rather as Harjo expresses,

“In the dark. In the beautiful perfume and stink of the world, we find strategies to cope and remain connected” (cited in Goeman 2013, 156).

Narrative and storytelling allow us to emerge from the silence and bear witness, be seen and heard with an *other* gaze of love and recognition, and soften the world through the word. Here we find our own languages and narratives of connection. Here we find our dreams—our way to freedom—that as Lorde describes “are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare” (1984, 37). These processes do not reproduce the categories used for our subjectification as knowable and disciplined subjects, yet neither deny our experiences of subjectification as places from which we might begin to make ourselves and our worlds anew. Liminal subjectivities of the epistemological borderlands thus remember that, “the planet is always in movement, spinning on an axis and always part of something much larger, as we are” (Harjo cited Goeman, 2013, 147). In these spaces and through these prefigurative epistemological practices we can come to embrace our full emotional palette, and enact again and again a homecoming to that exiled within and without. Here we learn a flexibility to sway in the wind against and beyond our subjugation, and cultivate openness to deep dive into the waters of our onto-epistemological wounds.

New beginnings are also endings. In 2014 we came to Australia, my daughters and I. I said no, refused to be submitted to logics of dehumanization and onto-epistemological denial and embraced a place in which I *knew*, as the Aymara women know, I, with others, could continue and deepen our projects of onto-epistemological emancipation. As Gloria Anzaldúa so beautifully describes we can imagine this process as, “La mestiza has gone from being the sacrificial goat to becoming the officiating priestess at the cross roads . . . participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. *Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings” (2007, 104–5). And so through my words I hope to contribute to question the very meanings we give to terms like theory, knowledge, knowing and give them new meanings and new forms of expression.

***A Place Called Home III: Waves In, Waves Out.*<sup>8</sup>**

*Unpacking times,  
distant places*

*running through  
like sand.*

*The tender slice  
of memory  
cuts to the bone  
like a knife*

*as I remember  
their faces  
covered in soot  
packing up our lives.*

*Too much to speak.  
So photos she took  
to record  
a life,*

*my life, barely remembered.  
Our crossing  
to the other side  
a leap of faith,*

*a moment of grace  
as patiently waiting  
with gentle fans  
they wiped*

*the sweat away  
of a labour  
that took us away  
from our night and day.*

*Listening to  
the CD  
from the woman  
like me*

*who let us stay  
after the fire  
that burned  
it all away.*

*Let us swim  
in the waves  
barely breathing  
in the flames*

*to fall  
into her knowing eyes,  
his silent presence,  
as together*

*they opened  
the gate  
of the dreaming  
into being*

*somewhere to stay  
with family  
stitched from  
the fragments*

*of broken pieces  
embraced  
as the place  
of our homefulness.*

*Made in the shadow  
of an exile  
chosen  
with bare hands*

*our blood drops  
onto the land.  
Hold my hand  
leap into*

*the light  
my babies in tow  
waves in, waves out  
changing we grow.*

(Dedicated to Margo and Stephen)

I realize that these practices of healing, becoming other, and embracing the epistemological borderlands through emotion and poetics as Spry describes “constitute scholarly (and political) treason . . . heresy” (2001, 709). Like her, and the many others, I continue to commit to committing heresy by being here in flesh and emotion, and by re-birthing, through my/our words, other stories, and histories to tell.

Over thirty years ago, Rich talked of a new generation of women poets creating new space on the boundaries of patriarchy, “women speaking to and of women in these poems, out of a newly released courage to name, to love



Figure 5.1 “Portrait of my Mother II” by the author’s daughter, Sujey Antoinette Mera-Motta, October 2014.

each other, to share risk and grief and celebration” (1979, 49). May our stories honor the voices of our foremothers and breathe life into new spaces and practices for *our* times. May the poetic metaphors of our weaving of words anchor my daughters and son, anchor our daughters and sons, and anchor our communities in their own knowing and practices of self, other, and community.

#### NOTES

1. I dedicate this piece to my three children, Sujey, Jaiya, and Zion with the wish that they are free to remember and are not forced to forget.

2. Otherness is used when referring to the processes of subjectification, otherness processes of active subjectivity, or at least potentiality of this. It is not meant as a binary thing rather as a limit, impossibility, and the unspeakable within the dominant script.

3. This is not an essentialized notion of woman. Rather it seeks to speak from a minoritarian positionality whose becoming disrupts the contours, meanings, and conditions of possibility of coloniality.

4. Original poem by Sara C. Motta, June 2012.

5. Original poem by Sara C. Motta, March 2015.

6. Based on oral conversations with the author, April 2001.

7. Original poem by Sara C. Motta, November 2014.

8. Original poem by Sara C. Motta, April 2014.

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