

# A Decolonial Feminist Analysis of Narratives from Nicaragua and El Salvador

Written by Fiore Bran Aragón

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FIORE BRAN ARAGÓN, JUN 17 2021

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Since the last decade of the 20th century, globalization has stimulated different and varied forms of mobility: while it favors the transnationalization of capital, it restricts human mobility, especially for vulnerable populations. In addition, First World countries have created discriminatory narratives and policies that shape migration (Donato and Massey 2016). This paradox of contemporary mobility has favored the emergence of research paradigms that seek to respond to the challenges posed by such dissimilarity. In this context, scholars of Latin America have devoted themselves to the study of migration from different disciplines to understand causes and propose solutions to mass migration in the region.

Among those intellectuals are feminist scholars who have raised debates about the importance of qualitative methodologies that listen to and analyze the narratives of migrants, disrupting the dominant logic that makes the right to have a face and a voice a privilege of a few. In this era in which mass migration is portrayed by the media with agglomerated and anonymous bodies, research methodologies that present migrants' stories are essential to avoid their dehumanization, denormalize oppressions, and make their resistance visible (Cacopardo 2018).

To listen to and understand migrant women stories, I take the epistemological approach of decolonial feminism according to María Lugones. She proposes decolonial feminism as a theoretical framework to circulate counter-hegemonic narratives about the mobilities of women of color, to highlight the multiple oppressions they experience, but also their resistance and possibilities of creating coalitions to overcome inequality and exclusion. This approach makes visible these aspects of the stories of Nicaraguan migrant women.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), by 2012, Nicaragua had experienced three waves of emigration, but only in the last one, which started in the 2000s, have women represented 50 percent of the migration flow (IOM 2013). This third wave was mostly formed by economic migrants who had diverse destinations: the traditional destinations like Costa Rica and the United States, but also new countries, such as Panama, Spain and El Salvador. Most of the migrant women started working as caregivers and domestic workers (González 2012). By 2016, Nicaragua was the country that expelled more migrant women to other Central American nations (González 2016), while El Salvador became a preferred destination for migrants, especially for women from the border state of Chinandega.

Chinandega is the northernmost state in Nicaragua that borders El Salvador, a country in which the main labor market for migrants is in caregiving and domestic work. As a result, in the last few years, many women have migrated seasonally because it is nearer and cheaper to come and go between both countries. It is also easier in logistical terms, as no passport is required, and because Chinandegan women have extensive networks of transnational communities in the states of Usulután and San Miguel in southwestern El Salvador (Ramos 2009). Finally, migrating to El Salvador is a relatively safe option for women, who can avoid the dangers of the road taken by many Central American migrants to the United States (González 2016). All of this has favored the continuity of the

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flow of migrant women from Chinandega, Nicaragua to El Salvador, and with this, large regional care chains have been formed that involve both migrant women, as well as substitute caregivers – generally grandmothers – who stay in the communities of origin.

These regional care chains tend to bolster the oppression of migrant women and of caregivers who remain in the communities of origin, because the contemporary ‘caregiving system’ reproduces an ‘intrinsic contradiction between the actual needs of care for a good quality of life and the capital reproduction needs’ (Orozco and Gil 2011, 23). Namely, the ‘caregiving system’ and the logic of globalization of capital prioritize revenues obtained from migrants’ lives over their well-being (Sassen 2003). This tends to perpetuate inequalities suffered by migrant women and based on gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and citizenship. In the case of Nicaragua, the perpetuation of these care chains is favored by the absence of the state in providing care and by the increase in single-parent families (Espinoza, Gamboa, Gutiérrez and Centeno 2012).

Therefore, the maternal grandmothers generally take care of the grandchildren, household duties and sometimes get a job to provide children, even if they do not have the age or energy to do so (Yarris 2017). On the other hand, migrant women, who are generally heads of family, frequently receive low wages and do not have social security. This does not allow them access to better living conditions for themselves and their families and exposes them to labor exploitation. Moreover, because of the generalized violence in El Salvador, Nicaraguan migrant women are also exposed to being victims of organized crime. In this chapter, I map some of the instances of oppressions as well as the resistance strategies articulated by migrant women in this context.

## **On Narrative Inquiry as Methodology**

The research question that has led this work is: In which ways do the infra-political and political resistances articulated by migrant women and caregiver grandmothers contribute to the reconfiguration of their identities? How do these resistances redraw maps of power and create new possibilities for a dignified life in the face of an unjust care regime?

These questions arose from my fieldwork with migrant women in the border area between Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador, between 2016 and 2017. The project aimed to identify needs for psychosocial and legal attention and support for migrant women who returned and their families. In the initial dialogues with migrant women and their mothers, I found that they defined themselves as resistant women in the face of a socioeconomic and care system that they considered unfair. Hence, I realized I needed to seek a methodological approach that would adapt to their narratives, and so I used the framework of narrative research methodology and decolonial feminism.

Narrative inquiry emphasizes the value of life stories as a ‘journey’ rather than a ‘destination’ (Ellis and Bochner quoted in Trahar 2009). This methodological approach highlights the relevance of being ‘sensitive to the different worldviews of the interlocutors’, and to recognize one’s own positionality – in terms of intersectionality – that could favor unequal power relations. In addition, narrative inquiry considers that understanding the text as a journey implies the encounter of ‘three common places’: ‘temporality, sociality and place’ as specific dimensions that serve as a conceptual framework to interpret stories and approach the narrator’s gaze. This is a process of learning to ‘think narratively’ (Clandinin and Huber cited in McGaw, Baker and Peterson 2010, 9).

Based on these considerations, I conducted open interviews with six women from Chinandega, Nicaragua: three caregiver grandmothers and three returned migrants from six different communities in the border area. The interview process consisted of multiple conversations and participant observation in community activities. To select these women, I used snowball sampling. At the time of the interviews, all the caregiver grandmothers were between 57 and 65 years old and were full-time caregivers of grandchildren who are children of migrant women. All the returned migrants were between 30 and 40 years old and were the heads of families, who had migrated to El Salvador between 2010 and 2018 and had left their children in the care of their mothers.

The interview guide consisted of a list of key topics with guiding questions. I also asked some questions directly to guide the dialogue. The key themes were childhood and youth memories in relation to caregiving, gender and

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migration; adult life, including motherhood, mobility, work and caregiving; personal and/or daughter's migratory experience; and return, including notions of care, a dignified life and resistances.

## Mapping Oppressions: Caregiving, Migration, Violence

The grandmothers I interviewed are Flora, Emilia and Pilar (names may have been altered). Flora and Emilia live in a peri-urban neighborhood in the central area of Chinandega. Pilar lives in a rural community near the maritime border with El Salvador. All of them have been intraregional migrants. The returned migrants are Deborah, Marisa and Carla. Deborah lives in a rural community near the maritime border, while Marisa and Carla live near the land border with Honduras.

In the six narratives, there are common socio-historical events that women interpret in different ways, but which are essential for understanding their views of the world and of themselves. In order to find the 'three common places' of narrative research, these events are presented:

### *The economy of the banana and cotton enclaves in Chinandega during the Somoza dictatorship (1960s and 1970s)*

The grandmothers remember the economy of the banana enclave as the only source of local employment and as a place where they suffered labor exploitation. It was also a place to gain some freedom from home and family: there, they spent time away from home doing non-domestic tasks and were able to manage their income partially or fully. The banana plantations were also sites of solidarity between women who resisted discrimination against community members for being farm workers. For Flora and Pilar, it was also the place where they got involved in civil groups associated with the Sandinista Front (FSLN).

Meanwhile, for the returned migrants, the memories of relative economic prosperity and women independence associated with the plantations were only inherited by their mothers. By 1980, as a consequence of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the war, the banana and cotton plantations had disappeared and most of the local jobs with them. In the narratives of the returnees, the banana plantations are associated with economic precariousness, the migration of relatives to urban centers and an undesirable place to work due to the abuses to which women were subjected.

### *The Sandinista Popular Revolution and the war between Contras and Sandinistas (1980s): Memories of solidarity, grief and exile*

Flora and Pilar were involved in the insurrection of 1979. For them, these processes were an opportunity to strengthen solidarity ties and carry out tasks that, before the armed struggle, were only designated for men: sending messages, supplies transportation and logistical work with the local guerrilla. Pilar's political participation allowed her to get a better job in the public sector once the FSLN triumphed. Flora's employment situation became more precarious after 1979, while Emilia, who was already a mother, returned to her native Honduras with her children, waiting to obtain her permanent residence in Nicaragua.

For the returned migrants, the Revolution is a heroic past that they did not live, but of which they have ideas and feelings derived from family stories. Both in their narratives and in those of the grandmothers, the Revolution is an event remembered with sadness and anger because it did not bring the expected change but, on the contrary, war. In addition, the war between the Contras and Sandinistas caused an increase in impoverishment, hunger and exile.

### *Neoliberal Economic Reforms (1990s): Peace and 'ghost towns'*

After the signing of peace accords in 1990, some refugees in Honduras returned to Chinandega. However, the peace did not bring jobs, as was supposed to happen. On the contrary, because of economic reforms that prioritized capital over people's lives (Martínez and Voorend 2012), impoverishment and lack of access to services in rural and peri-urban areas increased. In some communities, the few remaining agricultural farms closed, while in others the war devastated everything.

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Deborah refers to this period as marked by 'ghost towns', because refugees who returned from Honduras and repopulated communities soon left for Costa Rica and El Salvador in search of jobs, leaving entire communities abandoned. According to Deborah and Carla, the population flow that left the towns was mixed: it was no longer just men fleeing forced recruitment into the army or entire families fleeing the war, but young women migrating alone or in groups of friends looking for jobs.

*'After being a mother, one is a grandmother and goes back to playing the role of mother. But I no longer had the same force': Interconnected oppressions in the narratives of caregiving grandmothers*

Some 'interconnected oppressions' in the grandmothers' narratives marked their lives and the ways they saw themselves and the world. Among the oppressions that were intertwined in their narratives were gender violence, motherhood/being a grandmother, caregiving and migration.

For all of them, gender violence that manifests itself in physical, verbal, psychological, sexual and patrimonial violence has been a constant in their lives. All this violence has marked the way they see their relationships with men of power and with the state. Emilia told me:

At home, we had to be quiet. Whether you were a girl or an adult, women had to be quiet. We had to do all the housework, and if we worked outside in the banana plantations, we had to give the money to our father. But my dad and then my husband spent everything on liquor... Who was going to look after me? Now they tell me that the government has protection programs for women, but I have never seen it here. We are like abandoned.

That feeling of being 'abandoned' and unprotected from those who exerted gender violence against her is repeated in the stories of the other grandmothers. When they mentioned reasons why they tolerated gender violence, they generally referred to their children. They described motherhood and parenting as a rewarding process, but one that was not undertaken fully voluntarily, but rather considered a part of the process of becoming an adult. All three grandmothers had children when they were teenagers. Flora said:

Nobody ever explained anything to me about menstruation or how to have children. I only remember that my boyfriend told me that I had to have a child, and I did not know, and when I looked, I was already pregnant. Later my grandmother told me, 'Well, my little girl. Now you have to look for a stable job and learn to take care of the baby'.

Early motherhood was also a cause of migration for the grandmothers seeking a better life for themselves and their children. Usually, they left their children in the care of their mothers. Although, historically, this social organization of caregiving based on extended families led by grandmothers has been fundamental for sustaining life in rural Nicaragua, caregivers do not necessarily think of it as the best option. On the other hand, they all recognize that both fathers and the state should play an equally responsible role in caregiving and in the redistribution of paid and unpaid labor. They also admit that this organization of care is exhausting and that a change is necessary that involves a shared responsibility for the family, especially for fathers. Pilar commented:

My grandmother and my aunt took care of me. My mom also took care of my cousins. It has always been like this. I also left my children to my grandmother when I migrated, and I thank her, but I know it is exhausting. And it should be otherwise. When my daughter left, I also stayed looking after my grandchildren... I do believe that women and men have the same ability to work, both outside and inside home. What divides us is gender, but we must all assume everything evenly.

The grandmothers consider that the state should also assume part of the care needs; however, their experiences with government care programs has been negative. According to Emilia:

I once went to the hospital with my two grandchildren. As the girl had a mark on her foot because she fell while playing, an official from the Ministry of the Family told me in a threatening way that if I did not take good care of these children, they would take them away from me. I was enraged, and I told him, 'Tell the Ministry that I want to set my rules too. If they are going to demand something of me, give me something for these children: a little help for their

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education, for their clothes. But you demand and you don't give us anything'.

*'There, it is Not Like in Nicaragua. One Has to Learn the Law of The Neighborhood: See, Hear and Be Silent': Interconnected Oppressions in the Narratives of Returned Migrants*

The returnees' narratives have common oppressions with those of the grandmothers, but they also differ in the particularities of their migratory condition. Among the most common oppressions are gender violence and the impact of generalized violence in migrant women's lives. For example, both Deborah and Marisa migrated to El Salvador due to intra-family violence. However, as Deborah relates, migration did not end gender violence:

When my partner threatened me with a gun in front of my children... I left the country. I was terrified. I only had \$20 and felt bad about leaving my children. I believed that after arriving there, there was going to be a change, but no... I met some men who called me 'whore', 'thief', just for being Nicaraguan. And that is why I got involved with my husband, the other one who tried to kill me, so that they would not attack me any more in the street... I think I have a bad fate.

For Carla, the immigration experience was different. Her mother migrated to El Salvador when she was a child and left her with her grandmother. When she was 13 years old, her mother decided to take her to work with her. Carla returned to Nicaragua a couple of months later because gangs threatened her. At 18 years old, she had returned to El Salvador looking for a job and, since she was undocumented, she only had access to precarious jobs where her safety was at risk.

I told my mom that I wanted to come because a gang member wanted to make me his girlfriend. And I did not want to [be his girlfriend] because that is how they makes girls prostitutes and 'mules'<sup>[1]</sup>. And I went back without telling her... But after [a few] years, I had to leave again because there were no jobs. And that is when I started at the bar as a waitress. But that was a dangerous place too. The gangs were the VIP clients, and they scared the waitresses with their guns.

Marisa also worked in a bar, but left to work as a domestic worker: '[A]lthough I earned less, it was safer for me'. However, her safety was threatened due to an error in compliance with what she calls 'the law of the neighborhood'.

I worked and lived with my employers and had a day off every two weeks. I washed, ironed clothes, cooked, [and] looked after their children and my son. I also did the shopping, cooked and served as a waitress at the patrons' restaurant. They paid me \$75 a month without insurance. But sometimes they gave me milk and clothes for my son. Everything was going well, but when I went to live alone, it changed.

I went to a neighborhood with several Nicaraguans, but there were some gang members who were neighbors, and one day I saw them doing something, and they looked at me. I did not speak. There it is not like in Nicaragua. One has to learn the law of the neighborhood: see, hear and be silent. And since they thought I was going to say something, they threw me to the police. They gave a false lead and I was accused of being a drug 'mule'.

The police entered the house, put a gun on me in front of my children, yelled and beat me. Although they found nothing, I got imprisoned. Because there, a migrant woman without money, who was going to look after me? Being in jail away from my children and my country was the saddest thing.

## **Mapping Everyday Resistances: Infra-politics and Coalitions**

In all the narratives, multiple and sometimes fused oppressions persist. Therefore, the possibility of resistance or emancipation seems insignificant. According to Lugones (2008), the modern/colonial gender system sustains these oppressions. This system categorizes, separates and subtracts agency from individuals by placing them in a 'fractured locus' in the margins of power. But against this 'logic of oppression, there is a 'logic of resistance' that implies the recognition of interconnected oppressions and the possibilities of concrete coalitions in everyday life to overcome it. Women of color, situated at the 'margins' – geographically and of power – have an 'epistemological

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advantage' to learn the logics of oppression from experience and, at the same time, articulate resistance in the liminal space they inhabit.

These resistances are infra-political, anonymous, intersubjective and collective. That is why 'they include the affirmation of life above profit, communalism' (Lugones 2011, 116). These conscious and shared practices can lead to the beginning of a major political struggle. Some of the 'infra-political resistances' are 'adaptation, rejection, non-adoption, not taking into account', the silences and the celebration of life (Lugones 2011, 116). All of them shape the way in which women understand themselves, and their world, and facilitate the reconfiguration of their identities, which are historical and situated processes, open to change based on new experiences. In the narratives of the grandmothers and returnees, the process of 'oppressing →← resisting' and its impact on their discourses and practices regarding identity are remarkable.

## *'But When I Talked About it with Other Women in the Community... I Felt Accompanied': Dialogues and Silences As Resistance*

In the interviews and community activities I witnessed, the grandmothers and returned migrants emphasized the importance of recognizing and naming oppressions in order to confront them. This implies denormalizing oppressions that are culturally accepted as parts of life. For Emilia, the experience of self-organized mutual support groups, formed by grandmothers, allowed her to speak of experiences of sexual abuse in childhood. An essential part of her healing process was feeling heard:

That is why I suffered a lot when I was a child. I had a hard time seeing how that was related to me accepting violence from other men as normal. But when I talked about it with other women in the community, and they listened to me, I felt accompanied... It was also accepting the anger I felt. I also saw that there were beautiful things in life for me and my granddaughters.

During her time in jail, Marisa talked to a psychologist about her experiences and emotions. That was essential to feel healthier and planning for the future.

She told me that I was going to get out of jail and that I had to be ready for that. She talked to me about my self-esteem and self-care. She helped me write a plan for life after jail. So, I started going to workshops on baking, and I managed to get the best position in the bakery. There, I earned money to buy my things, and it felt good... But with my children, I chose to shut up. Maybe one day I will tell them all about the jail, but now my silence is better for them.

## *'When you have your own house and earn money, no one will stop you': Economic independence as resistance*

One of the fundamental resistances in the narratives is the pursuit of economic independence. Pilar believes that this facilitated a life free of violence and certain stability for her and her children.

After I came back to the country, I bought my land. Only with my land I felt fulfilled. When you have your own house and earn your money, no one will stop you. This way, you will be free and will not have to endure *machismo*... Before it was not common for a separated woman to buy a house to live alone with her children, but I managed it, [and] there are more of us. Now, we hope that our daughters will achieve the same, even if it is by migrating.

## *'I like to Dance and Laugh to Feel Free': Playfulness as Resistance*

Playfulness, despite oppression, is also a common resistance for the narrators. Sometimes, even laughter and jokes about politics and the situation of their communities are used to simplify the difficult and find the good in the adverse.

Carla: 'I like to dance and laugh to feel free. Even if they tell me, "Do not dance and sing, that is crazy", it makes me feel good in the face of adversity'.

Deborah: 'And sometimes we just make jokes about this country, the corrupt ones and that. Well, we have to laugh

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so as not to cry’.

## *‘I Cry Out to God to Give me Peace and do me Justice’: Spirituality as Resistance*

In the grandmothers’ narratives, the Christian God is a source of spiritual strength to overcome adversity. They see God as a close friend fighting injustice. Also, some grandmothers combine Christian spirituality with the indigenous religious traditions of their communities. Flora and Pilar commented:

Flora: ‘Every day, I cry out to God for peace and justice for the death of my son. I cannot do justice against the gang members, but God can. I forgive them, because God is merciful to me, and he will know how to do it. Talking with God gives me a lot of relief and strength’.

Pilar: ‘For me, it is my San Roque Indio and the people’s Santería. I ask him for miracles, and he does them for me. I remember that a *curandero* from Guatemala said that hard things were going to happen, but that everything would be fine. And now I see it that way’.

## *‘Even if I am Not in My Country, I Have the Right to Know What My Rights Are in the Other Country’: Knowledge as Resistance*

In addition to personal resistance processes, grandmothers and returnees articulated forms of collective resistance and organization to support themselves emotionally, demand rights and organize projects for community well-being. The grandmothers organized mutual support groups to discuss strategies for balancing caring for grandchildren with self-care and other issues of their emotional and physical health. Returned migrants worked together in both Nicaragua and El Salvador to organize human rights workshops in their communities and raise funds for projects to support migrants in El Salvador. According to Carla, all these projects have been inspired by knowledge: ‘That process of organizing ourselves has been good and is a result of us learning about rights. I am happy to be here and to do something’.

Deborah is now a facilitator in the group of returned migrants. She shares her immigration experience and knowledge of human rights. For her, the solidarity networks that she managed to establish with other women in El Salvador were key to learning about and overcoming oppression:

I went to Ciudad Mujer<sup>[2]</sup>, to a support program for migrant women. There, they taught me about my rights and my self-esteem, and I shared with other migrant women from other countries. I made friends, and one of them who later went to the United States was the one who sent me money for my son’s food when I didn’t have any... Now I know that, even if I am not in my country, I have the right to know what my rights are in the other country. It does not matter if I am a citizen or not. I have rights.

## **Conclusion**

The narratives analyzed from the perspective of decolonial feminism show that the grandmothers and returned migrant women are agents of their own change in complex processes of ‘oppressing →←-resisting’ that take place in everyday life. These infra-political resistances have favored the articulation of discourses and praxes that support the emancipation of women in contexts of multiple oppressions. In the case of these women, those oppressions arise from questions and complaints of the state and those with power in the socioeconomic order that sustain the care regime. Their discourses also question ideas of family loyalty and the suppression of female anger. In terms of practical resistances, these women have organized mutual support groups and community initiatives to assist migrants and returnees.

These are all valuable practices that should be considered and reproduced by the state when thinking about policies on care provision and integration for returned migrants. It is important for the Nicaraguan government to change its policy approach from one focused on welfare and short-term solutions to one that considers women’s and

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communities' experiences, capabilities and worldviews to create long-term solutions grounded in the community. As Carla put it: 'Only with this support can we build a community where no one has to leave if it is not by will'.

## Notes

[1] *Mulas* in Spanish is a slang term that refers to people, usually women, who carry and transport drugs, with or without their consent.

[2] Ciudad Mujer (Women's City) is a Program of the Social Inclusion Secretariat of El Salvador. It supports the human rights of Salvadoran women and has some projects for migrant women.

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**Fiore Bran Aragón** is completing an MA in Latin American Studies at the University of New Mexico (USA), where she is also a Spanish language Instructor. Since 2016, she has consulted to migrants' rights projects in Central America, Mexico, and the United States. She is co-founder of the Migration narratives project '*Me lo contó un migrante*,' and is the South American Focal Point on Migration at the United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth. Her research interests include legal anthropology and international human rights law. She is currently working on a project to analyze integration policies for Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica.