

HEALING IS JUSTICE

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HEALING IS JUSTICE:

'Presente!: I Am the Voice of Memory and the Body of Liberty;'

**The Story of the Second Festival of the Memory of Women Raped in War,
Chimaltenango, Guatemala, February 24-28, 2011**

For the first time in my life after twenty years of working with women survivors of sexual violence, I participated in a Festival centred around the concept that healing is justice. For four days in February, I joined over two hundred women celebrating the lives of women, and particularly the women raped in war in the Festival, "Yo Soy Voz De La Memoria Y Cuerpo De La Libertad", organized by Actoras de Cambio, Women Actors for Change. It was an extraordinary experience with many surprises involving women's bodies, flowers and the blue sky. I left with the conviction that once again feminist activists were creating something new in the world, a way to make justice meaningful in the lives of women rape victims.

After returning to Belgrade, I had the desire to write the story of this historic feminist event. First I will present a short discussion of the context of justice for women raped in war; then, the unique political implications of this Festival that sets emotional wellbeing at the core of the need for justice of women survivors; and third, I will recreate some images and moments from the Festival as I experienced them. Each part is different and has its own way of telling.

one:

JUSTICE FOR WOMEN RAPED IN WAR – CRIMINAL AND RETRIBUTIVE

The war in Guatemala lasted 36 years, killing over 200,000 people and creating, estimated, more than 30,000 women rape victims - 89% of whom were Mayan indigenous peoples. After the peace accord was signed in 1996, activist feminists participated in writing a chapter on women raped in war in the historic document, *The Memory of the Silence*[\[1\]](#). This is a crucial document for all citizens of Guatemala because it is a collection of violations of human rights in their armed conflict. Also, this title gives a particular meaning to the concept of 'memory' and 'silence', two terms that organizers used extensively in the Festival.

In 2004, Yolanda Aguilar and Amandine Fulchiron founded *Actoras de cambio* – which is now a collective of eight feminists[\[2\]](#), Guatemalan, Mayan, Mestizo and White – with several aims: First, to reveal the truth about the extreme sexual violence against women during the thirty-six years of war in Guatemala. Second, to promote the healing of women survivors by enabling them to come together in small groups to tell their stories and hear those of others. Third, to work toward achieving justice according to the needs of women survivors and not just preexisting legal systems.[\[3\]](#)

How did I enter into the story of the Festival? Behind me is another story of war. My old homeland is Yugoslavia which consisted of 22 million inhabitants separated through war into eight states. From the years 1991 to 2000, there were 130,000 people killed and about 4 million others exiled and internally displaced. Women's organisations estimated that about 20,000 women were sexually abused in the war, most of them more than once. Some of them gave birth

to children.

In December 2010, in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the new UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Margot Wallstrom[\[4\]](#) had a meeting with women's organisations working with women survivors of rape in war. In the meeting it was clear that amongst other issues, women raped in war are still living within the emotions of their trauma, mostly away from towns where the crime took place. In contrast, the rapists are walking the streets of the same towns, having enough money to live, enjoying the company of the same old friends-criminals, backed by nationalist leaders in power. Thus the perpetrators had all their freedoms while the victims were forced into the shadows.

The news about women raped in war in the midst of Europe first came out in August 1992. Soon, feminist lawyers, researchers and international experts came to understand that every war relies on sexual violence as one of its tools. Then, in 1994, the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was formed to prosecute war criminals. Many feminist experts cooperated in drafting its statutes. The result was that by 2011, in the ICTY 15 men were convicted for sexual abuse in war with prison sentences. And, in the new established national courts for war crimes[\[5\]](#), 12 men were convicted for the crime of rape in war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

These numbers are an important success in the development of the international law. Feminist lawyers are to be credited for the historic change which included five different sexual crimes in the statute both of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the ICTY. After that, in 2007, women's organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina succeeded in lobbying for the approval of a law that recognizes women survivors of rape in war as civil victims of war, who now have a right for state compensation. This is another success. Activists report that about 600 women registered for this compensation - a small monthly sum, enough to cover the high cost of medication.

However, from the position of what justice is for women, the survivors present in the meeting in December said they were not satisfied at all. 'I am angry because we survivors feel we are not heard. I am angry because politicians never listen to the victims. I am angry on the system of jurisprudence because all the perpetrators are still around us.' - One of the participants said. Nevertheless they emphasized that if the perpetrator is punished by the state it is important respect women can get as a first step in obtaining justice. This was stressed many times, but women also stated they need greater validation from society - they needed a sense of dignity most of all, emotional and economic dignity. They have a need to be understood and to be included in society with a caring concern about their employment and emotional boundaries. The conclusion was that despite the work of ICTY and national courts, despite the new law on compensation - there is no Justice yet for women raped in war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Another sense of justice needed to be conceived, more so knowing that the numbers of women raped in war increased outside of Europe with a million women in armed conflict including in the Congo[\[6\]](#) and in Colombia within the last decade.[\[7\]](#)

We must now look to the two prevailing models of justice — retributive and restorative justice to

see if they give us any reason to hope.

First, 'retributive' criminal justice was conceived through the lens of the 'do not kill, do not steal' logic in times long before sexual violence was defined, named and criminalized. Women survivors of sexual violence say that their feelings of pain, loss, guilt and shame had a different intensity and logic of intimacy than the experience of survivors of stolen properties or survivors of murdered family members. The entire legal system and court procedure misses addressing this sensitive aspect – the consequence of rape to women's bodies, souls and meaning of life.

Up to now the evidence is that there are no more than 100 men prosecuted for the crime of rape in war in the entire world, and even the women who succeeded in putting perpetrators in prison are only partly satisfied. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, some of the rapists are already out of prison, walking the same streets where women have to stay away from. This is a theme for a separate study, but in short, it is clear that this old framework of justice - 'the perpetrators in prison' - does not bring back the joy of life to survivors of war time rape. It keeps the focus on the perpetrators and turns away from the daily needs of re-building life freeing oneself of the chain of terror, guilt, shame and devalorization.

In her historic research on the needs of women who have survived male violence in the US, Judith Lewis Herman, the feminist psychiatrist researcher, concludes in the *Justice From the Victim's Perspective*, that many women who have succeeded in sending the perpetrators to prison as part of the criminal justice system or have participated in forms of restorative justice system are not satisfied. She says: 'The victim's vision of justice is nowhere represented in the conventional legal system. Victims understand only too well that what awaits them in the legal system is a theater of shame. ...Because the law is technically blind to any disparities in power based on age, race, gender, social status, or wealth between accuser and the accused.'^[8] This conclusion practically sums up the result of the plea of needs of women versus justice system. In addition:

in-depth-research on the criminalization of sexual violence in Europe^[9] conducted in 11 countries shows that such violence is the crime that is the least reported, and of all reported cases the smallest percent of offenders are convicted. Moreover, despite the work of the feminist movement, the percentage of convictions in EU countries has not increased in the last ten years! Feminist activist professor Liz Kelly has concluded: 'The majority of women reporting rape across Europe do not see justice done.' Feminists have never been satisfied with the existing legal system.^[10]

Now we will consider the second paradigm, that of restorative justice. Here many of the outcomes are also unsatisfactory.^[11] Restorative justice like retributive justice was conceived before the times of the modern feminist movement, and it implies dialogue with offenders to 'repair the harm they've done'. As well, the model of the offender was first as a thief- which means that again a specific emotional context is missing in this 'repair hypothesis': most women survivors of sexual violence do not want to see the face of their rapist, much less to concentrate on his socialization or to enter into 'reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships' with perpetrators, all of which are classical elements of restorative justice.^[12]

There have been, as a result of feminist work, efforts to incorporate feminist principles into the restorative justice model. In the last thirty five years, since radical feminists organized the *International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women*, in Brussels, in 1976, feminists have created different forms of peoples' tribunals, such as different types of truth commissions, alternative courts known as women's courts and women's tribunals. This history of hundreds of popular women's tribunals and courts shows the power of women in organising civil society to take the doing of justice into their own hands when governments and state institutions continue to fail to do so.^[13] These events give women the chance to empower a community by speaking of their experience of injustice in public.^[14] In the region of the wars in former Yugoslavia, feminists have long been discussing the possibility of using the form of court for speaking out about crimes against women, and it proved not to be an easy task in the region of the recent conflict. For the moment, activists from four states are in the process of consciousness raising about the meaning and importance of Women's Court in general.^[15]

In conclusion, criminal justice is almost non-existent in the lives of survivors of sexual abuse in war, and while restorative justice is potentially empowering for women, it is missing a complex sense of what women are asking for.

two:

JUSTICE FOR WOMEN RAPED IN WAR - HEALING IN COMMUNITY

Now I would like to go beyond both of these concepts of justice and explain the philosophy of this Festival and its ground breaking insight: justice must heal us.

The history and herstory of many women's experience shows that women can hardly speak about the sexual crimes they were subjected to. Post traumatic women's silences must be understood in the context of the social patriarchal interpretation of rapes that inverts the burden of the shame and responsibility on women who were tortured, instead on rapists. This is misogynist context that Amandine Fulchiron names: perverse patriarchal inversion. As well, women's post rape silences are consequence of a historical discrimination against women that is perpetuated on all levels, by the state laws and regulations, by traditions and cultural rules embodied in family members and finally in our own bodies and psyches. Post traumatic feelings of war rape are similar to feelings after torture, but there is still that 'little difference'^[16] of the sexual dimension in the context of patriarchal inversion, which makes this crime and its consequences like no other. In order to create a community context for justice of women survivors, organizers of the conference stated that the first step they chose was to understand how this 'little difference' affects women and their post rape silence, and second to create conditions in which women could feel safe, have trust and speak out. This is exactly where the story of the Guatemala festival starts.

From its founding, the *Actoras de cambio* have worked with human rights organizations in filing complaints for genocide and crimes against humanity to lobby their national judiciary system as well as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (CIDH)^[17] to denounce the failure of both systems to punish criminals.

In all these years, there has not been a single conviction ordered by the court; not a single man

has been taken to court; national or international institutions of justice have done nothing - NOTHING - to punish the perpetrators of rape in the Guatemalan war. It is this lack of action, of recognition of the unaddressed and unhealed suffering of the women that inspired this group of women to find a way to end this silence that is continually exiled.

The First regional festival[\[18\]](#) by *Actoras de cambio* in 2008 in Huehuetenango for the memory of women in wartime ended with the strong political declaration on *Women in Wartime* and demanded that state institutions stop the silence of women's memory of the sexual violence in wartime, and respond to the needs of women through the implementation of an integral policy of reparation for women victims of rape during the wartime.

But – Nothing!

At that moment the activists of *Actoras de cambio* concluded that there were no conditions to realize the process of creating dignity for women survivors of rape in war through the formal justice system in their country; nor conditions to map the truth or receive validation through compensation.[\[19\]](#) Neither the judicial nor political forces in Guatemala guaranteed any change which feminists wished to achieve for survivors of sexual violence in wartime. On the contrary, there was much evidence that the justice system was and is sexist and racist.

Actoras de cambio knew from the beginning that in order to heal, women have to be listened to, their suffering must be recognized socially and accepted in the community and only then women can start transforming the traumatic experiences that victimized them and become possible actors of change.[\[20\]](#) *Actoras de cambio* therefore decided to organize the entire Second Festival around the celebration of the memory of women raped in war, meaning that the organizers of the Festival were not going to spend any energy on evoking women's rage against government institutions. In fact they would not address them this time at all. Instead, this Second Festival directed the energies of the participants to themselves, to creating safe supportive social and community spaces that acknowledge and allow healing. The Festival stepped out of conventional thinking and practice of justice and focused on the process of creating a new political practice -- *Justice as healing*.

This time the aim was to develop a new social context in which shame and guilt fell on the perpetrators and criminals. Dignity belongs to the women. Women have lived far too long in the world of hatred and they know very well that their feelings of traumas are not recognized, that their emotions have to be hidden. For example, *They have always told us Don't be emotional when you go to the police, they don't like it, (as if not liking is not an emotion) Don't cry in the court, Don't think of the rape. Forget it!* All these commands serve to stop justice from occurring in our lives. As Albert Memmi said, "The colonized are condemned to lose their memory." [\[21\]](#)

In her discussion, Laura Montes from *Actoras se cambio* has called their work in the community *integral justice*, because the Festival uses everything that can create dignity for survivors and inspire healing: the four elements of the nature, mind and body, freedom of expressing feelings in public inside the local community. Some of us call it *feminist justice* because the Festival implied that the private is the political, that post rape pain, that expressions of the body and soul

are part of the same continuum that should be validated in the public space. Some participants called it *alternative justice* as it offers endless possibilities beyond (al di là) the homogeneity of the criminal justice. It can also be a form of *transformative justice* because the Festival is an intervention in a society aiming at transformation of its power hierarchies and values.

How does it look in practice? Activists, facilitators, feminist therapists, ceremony leaders, teachers of *Actoras de cambio* worked with indigenous women in villages in different regions of the country: in Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango and Polochic for the last six years. They decided together with the women, their children and the young women leaders in the community what they wanted to work on.

In this festival women intervene in the community through theater, music, ceremonies and touching of bodies, to show the wider public that Yes the guilt and shame women will speak of in order to no longer live with them, that rape in war is the responsibility of the men who have committed these acts. Women from villages and women from cities, indigenous and white, young workers, autonomous feminists, grandmothers, theater actors, musicians, neighbors created a collective safe space to talk and break the silence. And in many, many forms it was repeated that Yes sexual violence is not women's fault,[\[22\]](#) so that citizens started believing this and that women themselves started believing it.

Amandine Fulchiron, one of the passionate activists of *Actoras de Cambio* sums up their politics:

“Rape is an instrument of war, it is an act of femicide and can be an act of genocide. Rape in war destroys identity of one community, and more than that destroys identity and the soul of women victims themselves. Nevertheless, no one speaks of it. This is certainly why rape is used as a weapon of war, as it deeply destroys the whole social network and ensures total impunity to its male perpetrators. For its perverse patriarchal imaginary, the whole society considers it as a shameful act of which women are responsible, and not as a crime against humanity planned by the army.

Silence is not neutral. Silence make women experience disappear from collective memory. Erasing collective memory of the experience of suffering means taking away the possibility of women to exist and to reconstruct themselves, and allows sexual crimes and destruction of women bodies to go on. That is exactly what happens now with the rise of the femicide in post conflict Guatemala.

This is why recovering memory of women is a profound and radical gesture that enables us to exist, to heal, to make the truth public and to create conditions so that sexual crimes do not continue. This is what justice means to us.”[\[23\]](#)

JUSTICE IN FEMINIST HANDS

My thesis is that this Festival I AM THE VOICE OF MEMORY AND THE BODY OF LIBERTY is an example of what could be the making of feminist justice. Here are some political principles that explain my position:

- ° HEALING IS JUSTICE implies a long process of making collective and community conditions for women to be heard and believed. Justice therefore starts from the need of women to be accepted in the community, to come out of isolation, to feel good, placing feelings in the central place of justice-making.
- ° BREAKING SILENCE in the community is a political act of speaking out about our experiences in public space. It is a form of intervention in the community. As the women's movement has shown, a women's experience revealed is potentially the beginning of consciousness raising, of nation changing.
- ° BREAKING SILENCE means naming rape as a crime and not as something that is part of 'normality' of women's destiny.
- ° SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN WAR IS A POLITICAL AND CRIMINAL ACT OF MISOGYNY AND RACISM COMMITTED IN THE COMMUNITY where silence is constructed to serve the perpetuation of this crime. [\[24\]](#) This is why speaking out about one's personal experience of injustice in the community can serve as a means of transformation of that community.
- ° BREAKING SILENCE IS POLITICAL because it means we are remembering and we are resisting the patriarchal demand to forget and leave criminals, and the system, undisturbed.
- ° BREAKING SILENCE means that emotions are validated by the collective and community. This is an anti patriarchal act because in the thousand years of history only what is rational is validated, while the emotional field is said to be 'womanish' therefore not important and shameful. This Festival gives social and historical validations to emotions.
- ° SHAME AND GUILT BELONG TO THE PERPETRATORS: this belief has been stated many many times in this Festival: through music, street theater, workshops, speeches, songs. Women were given a chance to receive the message that they have done the best they could in the given situations in order to survive, and that shame and guilt must be delegated to where it rightly belongs.
- ° HEALING CEREMONIES ARE POLITICAL – Mayan ceremonies performed in the Festival were modified to be gender specific and enable the empowerment and the dignity of the women survivors, knowing the specificity of their oppression. And for that reason, sometimes they were done in only-women groups.
- ° REMEMBERING IS HEALING because we need to remember and retell many times in a safe environment the experience of crimes that we have been forced to endure. And because it enables us to name what happened according to our own words and emotions, and not according to inverse male voice. And because retelling enables us to understand why crimes happened and how we can transform the social practices and ideologies so that rapes do not continue.
- ° NATURE IS HEALING because we can use the power of the sky, wind, sun, moon, earth, fruits and fire for healing. Nature can be used as a safe space.[\[25\]](#)

- ° JUSTICE IS IN OUR BODIES implies that social justice is created, as well, by emotional transformations that need to go through our bodies in order for us to breathe in peace and conclude that we have gained justice. We need to replace the cruelty of the injustice to our bodies with tenderness toward ourselves.
- ° FEMINIST ETHICS OF CARE implies that we decide to take care of ourselves as well as of others, to inspire each other to take oneself seriously. One survivor cannot heal herself alone nor in isolation, we need each other to create justice.
- ° SOLIDARITY IS HEALING because we are witnessing the pain of others and giving a chance to the other to share her pain with us.
- ° FEMINIST APPROACH TO JUSTICE implies that the rational and the emotional have equal values, for example, that a court sentence is as equally important to justice as is the opportunity of survivors to meet each other and dance together. It is from the ground of survivors' wellbeing that we measure what justice is.
- ° FEMINIST NOTIONS OF JUSTICE imply the attempt to interchange the objects and subjects of the healing. That is one way we can grow away from the space of victimhood. All participants in the Festival were celebrated in these four days as victims - survivors - transformers - leaders in our communities. This is a way we can create a new history together.

three:

IMAGES FROM THE FESTIVAL AS I HAVE EXPERIENCED THEM

Image: Opening of the Festival

The festival was held in Chimaltenango... a town that is around 40 km west of the capital, Guatemala City. In a country of 13 millions of inhabitants this is a small municipal center of 35,000 people. The opening is in the Cultural Community Center, and women who arrive live in villages, many of them are dressed in their specially embroidered skirts and shirts in fire colors which are worn only on particular days and which take months to make. Some women have babies in their scarves on their backs; mostly, they are indigenous women and mestizas^[26] also feminists, activists from trade unions and young leaders. There are more than two hundred of us. People's music pours through loud speakers. I am excited.^[27]

We are seated in a large hall illuminated by a gentle light. A Voice comes from the back; it is Mercedes Blanco in her mono-drama, breathing, shouting, creating the journey from the victim who is crying to a woman who is strong. She speaks of war and the fear that rapists have produced in her. Her voice breaks through the huge space and I shiver, my whole body is alive to her voice. She shares her pain with us. She touches us with her power. I start feeling the presence of the women near me.

Image: Women with candles in the circle

After the introduction, the Festival starts the ceremony with flowers and candles in front of the

stage. Women from all countries present at the Festival are invited to come and light candles to call on the women before us.[\[28\]](#) A circle of women holding candles is created. I realize I have to let go of my lifelong aversion toward candles as symbols of the church that hates women and lesbians. The women's faces are caressed by candle light.

Image: Calling to remember women

Three women were planned to speak. The first is an indigenous leader, feminist Rosalina Tuyuc, human rights activist, politician and an ex-member of parliament.[\[29\]](#) She stands speaking a few words of introduction in which she calls on our mothers and grandmothers, so that we can remember their strength today. She thanks the leaders who have made it possible for women to fight for their rights. Then she tells us to stand up. With a full sense of responsibility, dignity and calmness she says:

- I desire to ask in this moment that we give a big applause for women who have decided to break the silence!

(Sound of applause from the hall)

Then she says:

- For the memory of all tortured women

We, two hundred women standing there in solemn silence, interrupted by few children's murmurs, repeat her word *Presente!* with our fists in the air:

- Presente (Present with us)!!

Then she continues:

- For the memory of all disappeared women
- Presente !
- For the memory of all massacred women
- Presente !
- For the memory of women sexually abused
- Presente !
- For the memory of our fight
- Presente !

- I desire to say that when we have one, when we have twenty or a thousand women on the path to freedom, everything is possible!

(Applause)

I look at the women's faces around me; I am shaken to the depth of my heart. I don't recall remembering my ancestors, friends and women whose pain I carry in myself in a public space. Today, I stand in Guatemala and I call on my mother and grandmothers all of whom are not alive, to be here with me, and tears roll down my face. I am not alone. I am full of women inside me.

Image: Awards to high school students

At the end of this first afternoon, there are awards to be given to the high school girls and boys who have written stories and poems about women raped in war with the theme: I AM THE VOICE OF MEMORY AND BODY OF LIBERTY. Six of them get awards. The President of the Committee for awards calls out their names. One by one they come up the stage, embarrassed, excited, shy, happy... I am thinking whose brilliant idea was this? Only then I realize that among the hundreds of us in the audience, there are many high school girls and boys, some with their families and teachers. Each one of the award winners receives flowers & applause. These young people live in villages with scarce opportunities to go to Chimaltenango. They have dressed up for today in their best clothes. One of the boys reads his poem about strong women. About hundreds of pupils in the primary school were given the task to write about women raped in war. I am applauding, standing by the feminist from India, Nimisha Desai, telling her, am I dreaming? She is also in awe.

Image: workshops in the public school 'Pedro Molina'

The next day of work is in the public school in the valley away from the center of Chimaltenango. The history of this school is that the military used it for their needs for many years. Now the city has won it back and the school is in service to the people again! This is a weekend day and the pupils are not there. As part of the Festival programme there was a call in the region for artists and citizens to submit their art work on the theme WOMEN RAPED IN WAR: I AM THE VOICE OF MEMORY AND BODY OF LIBERTY. The exhibition is outdoors on panels under the sun. Photos, words and colors depict empathy with the victims of war. Fantastic – a Historic Gallery!

The space for panel discussion is in a field covered with a tent. The sound of birds and crickets backs up the stage talks. After the introduction, twelve different workshops are in the classrooms. In my workshop there are about 15 of us, mostly indigenous women, a few women from the trade unions, a few European feminists, two high school girls from the villages and two babies. I am sitting in a chair belonging to schoolchildren, such a precious place, and I watch the different, so different women's energies around me. This is the workshop I always wanted to be in. One woman is making notes in laptop. One older woman is trying to sleep, one girl is checking her mother coming in and out the door of the classroom that goes directly to the green yard. Some women are shy. We create a safe place for secrets to be broken, for feelings to melt

into words. After some time, I tell my story, how I was sexually assaulted by my colleague when we met to talk about books. I have told this story many times, a long time ago. While I was talking now I realized that at some moment my voice was trembling. I was surprised that after all the workshops and retellings of my story I am still trembling. How many times do I need to tell it? Ten, Twenty, Thirty times at least? The stories of sexual violence come pouring out one after the other, of those who have been violated in the wartime, or have abusive husbands now. One woman from the village was watching me fiercely, I knew she was telling me she had it all the same and yet was not ready to say it out loud. Through our eyes, we recognized each other.

The workshop continues in the afternoon and we continue talking. At the end, the task is to sum up the workshop's theme in a form other than speaking. This we shall report to the plenary under the sky. In the group, one woman suggested singing a remake from a very well known song. All of the women are happy with her proposal, and in total excitement are inventing new words for the old rhyme. One refrain is in Spanish, another in the Mayan language. Rehearsal singing can be heard through windows: *We are breaking the silence, no more shame on us... ayaya ya paloma...*

Image: Drumming & chanting under the moon, la Luna

The day in the school yard closes with the sound of drums arriving closer and closer. Battucada, a drumming band, lead us to a storehouse space where the drums echo loudly. Suddenly, the activists started jumping high, soon the women in the fire-colored dresses joined in one by one and their children too... it was a hot night and sweat was pouring from our bodies. I am looking at the women's eyes; I recognize the woman from my workshop who had told us her story of torture during the war, now she's first a little surprised, then a little shy, I am calling her name out loud and always leaping, she smiles with love. I wonder if she is thinking that I am crazy, yes we here are all crazy, she's offering me her hand and she moves close to me. Balloons floating, drumming, drumming does not stop, we are whirling around each other, jumping with sweat pouring off our bodies, our voices loud and high. Sisterhood shines under the moon, la luna upon our exhausted smiling faces.

Image : Ceremony in the fields of Iximche of the Mayan people

The third day we get up before seven in the morning to go by buses to the valleys of Iximche in Tecpan known to be the places for Maya rituals. We walk through the valleys that have some unusual and ancient forms. Under the blue sky and sunshine and on green grass, for the next three hours we will have a ceremony guided by four ceremonial leaders, one of them Angelica Lopez.

Women gather around the black round pedestal on which the four basic power elements of the Mayan cosmo-vision are distinguished with colored sugar: water, fire, earth, wind. Many of us there do not know anything about ceremonies, nor rituals. I am one of them. I am trying to tune into the feelings and movements of women who prepare pieces of wood, flowers, seeds, fruits... Melons are opened in half, apples are placed on earth. The philosophy behind this unique women-only ceremony is explained with words by the ceremonial leader: 'One of the

fundamental aspects of our methodology is that women who are part of the ceremonies have a chance to take responsibility for their process of healing. Each one in her own possibilities, with her own rhythm. Our ceremonies are open spaces in which we can revive our hearts and our bodies.[\[30\]](#)

Ah, I am thinking, isn't this what feminists have always said, and I am repeating it in our workshops. He

Many symbolic activities follow ... chanting to thank the ocean... to thank our foremothers... The chants that we repeat are part of the Mayan tradition, but those chosen today are feminist. At one moment we are told to embrace ourselves. The ceremony leader says: *Hold your body with your two arms strong and gently. They told us that something is missing in our body, but that is not true. Everything we need is already in our body. Hold your body tenderly. Love her.*

re we are together, women from Mayan villages, young women, activists, lesbians, women older and younger and all different skin colors – each one of us holding her own body under the sun. Then, at one moment, the leader says: *turn to the right, look at the face of the woman near you. She is exceptional, she is unique, look at her eyes, concentrate and embrace her thirteen times.* Touching her thirteen times.

We circle around the fire that is in the center of the four elements. Women are sharing seeds with us. I need to listen and learn from the feeling in my body what it means to throw seeds in the fire. The sound is surprisingly crackling. How does the transformation of energy from one thing into another thing have a power I can use? This has never been my concern before. The ceremony leader says: *Now we walk around the fire and we chant: todo cambia, todo cambia, todo cambia, todo cambia.* I have the image of the grandest singer of the people's freedom in Latin America, as if I can hear her voice. Mercedes Sosa – *Presente!!*

The women are circling. The power of the ceremony leader is to share her powers with us, to inspire the strength of our souls and our bodies - at one point we name each part of our body with her, we say them out loud touching them gently. Vagina is especially pronounced. Some women at the beginning of saying 'vagina' have a joking smile. But since all women are speaking the word 'vagina' loudly, the shyness soon disappears. I am smiling again, one more touch of feminism is obvious. By the third time we repeat it, the word 'vagina' is in tune with us.

As the ceremony goes on, I feel that each part of it serves to create a collective space for some of our intimate uneasy emotional processes to come out.

By the end, the four ceremonial leaders go around the circle and give each one of us standing there a handful of flower petals. Women have separated petals from hundreds of flower bouquets. My hands are cupped together full of pink flower petals. We are all standing in a large circle facing each other, small and big, in skirts and pants, old and young. I watch faces becoming dear to me. The ceremony leader says: *Breathe deep, slowly take you hands with flowers above your head. Tell yourself I love myself with all my heart and start pouring flower petals on your head... pour flowers on your body, your body is beautiful with petals dropping on you.* We repeat, *Yo quiero mi cuerpo con todo mi corazon... I love my body with all my heart ...*

Tears again, this time I stand fully breathing and let tears travel down my face and my neck. The leader says: *We are calling our hearts to open for ourselves as we are.* Yes, I was raped, I was harassed, yes I stand here with beautiful women and feel soft. Tears are in my mouth. I feel, I taste love.

Image: In the middle of the workshop discussion

In the room, the very last day, about twenty women are discussing rape in war and how sexual violence in war is a political act of misogyny and racism. Yes, I agree. Angelica Lopez asks for her turn. We listen carefully. She says: *Take off your shoes; get up on your chairs; put two hands on our heart and breathe.* Again the sound from the inside of us is given space. We are having a theoretical round table session and now we are standing on the chairs with our hands touching our bodies. This is serious work, NO giggling. Women have hands on their skin... Yes, I have said so many times that a feminist approach means synchrony between mind and body. But I never imagined this is how it should look! Interrupting our discussion by lifting ourselves on to chairs. Here we are: standing, breathing and warming our bellies. I think one should do this act in the middle of EU or NATO sessions to give the attendees the opportunity to feel and get in touch with themselves. Maybe we would have less wars. Research says that those who are in connection with their mind-body-soul are less likely to kill.

Image: Power to la clitorisa

We are again in the Municipal Cultural Center. Another discussion will start with three speakers. There is no electricity today in the town, nor water until late afternoon and the government is responsible. The big hall is in dim light. Before the panel, Angelica Lopes stands in front of the audience, serious as she is, she tells us: *Stand with legs apart, take the finger of your right hand and put it on the clitoris, take the finger of the other hand put it on the other side on your ass, lean toward the earth... feel the energy of the earth entering your body from between your legs. Breathe with your clitoris...* I look around and see lesbians and *autonomas*^[31] following these instructions as if they are in their bedrooms. I look around and see that by now most of women take it as a serious matter. We are learning to love our bodies in the Municipal Cultural Center of Chimaltenango. Rape in war, rape in peacetime makes us detached from our clitoris. Who has ever reminded us of this? Pinch me! Ah how I love feminists, and the new world of caring for ourselves and others we are creating.

Image: Festival in the main plaza in Chimaltenango

The last day there is a big fiesta: The women musicians from Mexico and Guatemala are singing peace and love songs on the open stage in the central square in town. Citizens are arriving from different places on their regular Sunday afternoon walk, families chilled out on their weekend with the kids. Street sellers with pieces of mangoes, avocados and pineapple are already there. The women on the stage say many times THE VOICE OF MEMORY OF WOMEN RAPED IN WAR... Yes. It is repeated and repeated so that it stays in our body. *What is this music about?* The woman passerby asks? *We are celebrating the memory of women raped in war*, one of us says. The first time when I had to say what I was going to do in Guatemala, I felt uneasy. It is only during this Festival that I realized that it is this uneasiness in my body, created by the

misogynic society, that this festival is made for! To let go from my body precisely this discomfort of talking about rape. Women have been raped in war and that is a fact we want to speak about. Then, suddenly, the performance of Magda Angelica starts. The feminist performer is on the asphalt dust, groaning in pain, screaming in rage, watching us, we are watching her, intensely. At the end, she is lifted up in joy that we feel, and some of us embrace each other. How many times have I embraced women here?

Then back to the stage, more theater, more music. In one moment on the stage one actress says to the other *'If you feel pain call a women's organisation. They will help you!'* Applause. ...All of a sudden loud music comes through from the back street, we move to go there ... and, the theater with actors on stilts arrives. Young performers with painted faces and masks on stilts and loud music, dancing, dancing... we go after them through the Parque Central de Chimaltenango... hundreds of us are circulating, laughing. Batucada – *mi cuerpo es mio!* The women drumming band with the name: *My body is mine*. Loud drumming enters the body. We come back to the small plaza and dancing begins to whirl up in circles. The shouting takes rhythm, *Power to women! Break the Silence! No more shame of women!* Banda Feminista Centroamericana! We are all together here, the indigenous women from the Festival, citizens, families, the feminists from far away countries, jumping up as high as they can! Children's laughter too. Walking, we end up all together entering the old well known Municipal Cultural Center just around the corner, once again. The alternative theater play starts there, another one, this time the old Greek drama that shows the absurdity of war.

The end: Praising the organizers

After the play the closing of the festival follows. The Mistress of Ceremonies is on the stage with the microphone. She uses loving words to thank every woman at the Festival, to evoke once again the beauty and the strength of the encounter. At the end, she invites the organizers, the members of the *Actoras de cambio*, to come out on the stage. We start with loud applause, here they are: Amandine, Angelica, Laura, Lidia, Liduvina, Marilila, Marta, Virginia walking up the stairs. And then, all of a sudden, the women in fire-colored skirts start climbing on to the stage after them! Wait a minute! The Mistress of Ceremonies has asked very precisely that only the organizers come on stage. She is little embarrassed, but open. Who are the organizers here? With full pride, certainty and eagerness, the indigenous women from the villages are walking up one by one onto the stage. One, three, ten... twenty.... They take the microphone, they start speaking in their native languages, they ask for translations, they take their time in this historic moment. They are thanking us all; they say how important it is that women from other countries have shared their experience; how they grew in these three days.... A dream come true. Yes – the process of years of working together, sharing power between white and indigenous, between the city and the rural, hearing the Other, respecting the differences – all disclosed in front of us. Who are the organizers? Not the eight feminists but all the women present in the process. Congratulations! The subjects are the objects of the Festival, the victims are transformed, and the organizers are the organized! I jump as high as I can, some of us are shouting Bravo Bravo!! We are embracing. Yes, Feminists make small big events, for a hundred for two hundred women. Justice is the joy of women from small villages, from big villages, from cities and valleys. One indigenous woman speaks in translation, and then another one speaks who has a baby on her back. No scenario has been planned for them to talk at this moment except their own! There is no

revolution if I can't dance. There is no justice if I cannot be happy in my body. Together with another one.

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