

# Indigenous Literature and Ecofeminism in Brazil

---

Anna-Lena Glesinski

Woman! Come, sister  
drink from this fountain that awaits  
you  
my sweet tender words.  
(Potiguara 2004: 76)<sup>1</sup>

This essay examines two different perspectives on the relationship between women and nature, both of which are deeply rooted within the Latin American continent and especially in the Brazilian rainforest. The movement of contemporary indigenous literature of Brazil makes visible how indigenous literature has always existed and explains the importance and strength of its narratives. From the 2000s until the present, female voices are particularly strong within this movement and often reflect the position of women in history, society and nature. Another aspect presented in this essay is the ecofeminist movement, which had its starting point in the 1980s as part of feminist theology.

Contemporary indigenous literature embodies experiences of trauma of 500 years of colonialism at the same time as 500 years of indigenous resistance and resilience. Its texts witness production processes of knowledge of culture and a change in historical views on indigenous subjects, whereas the early Brazilian ecofeminists' intentions were to deconstruct colonial and patriarchal power structures and create a different view on female bodies and identities on the theological stage. The ecofeminist and indigenous movements are tied to constant change. The ecofeminist movement and the use of the term *ecofeminism* has come a long way and changed during the last 40 years.

---

1 All translations made by the author.

Both movements function as developers of theories and practitioners of change. The female writers create a collective voice of indigenous women and at the same time prompt a metatextual literary criticism of indigenous authorship. This short investigation marks similarities, differences and convergences of the two perspectives and defines crucial points of the discourse on women and nature. It provides insights into processes of theorizing, action-taking and changing dominant discourse and examines how feminist, ecological and decolonial theories are always bound and interconnected with concrete practices.

### **Strong Female Voices of the Movement of Contemporary Literature and Literary Criticism of Brazil**

As Julie Dorrigo highlights, the movement of contemporary indigenous literature from Brazil arose and consolidated in the 1990s and positions itself in a supporting role within the sociopolitical indigenous movement that was originally strengthened in the 1980s and associates directly with it (Dorrigo 2018: 165). Julie Dorrigo herself is an author and literary critic with a PhD on indigenous literature, publishes poetry and belongs to the Macuxi. In recent years, she has published important articles and co-edited various anthologies on the movement (Dorrigo 2017; Dorrigo 2018; Dorrigo et al. 2018; Dorrigo et al. 2020). She highlights different aspects in which indigenous literature integrates into and complements the indigenous movement, namely politicization, activism, militancy and engagement (Dorrigo 2018: 267). The indigenous movement's aims can be described as follows:

Since its beginning, therefore, the politicization and publicization of the indigenous movement represented, correlatively, a gesture of self-affirmation and ethnic-identitarian self-expression and a praxis of resistance and political-cultural struggle against exclusion, marginalization, and violence experienced and suffered by indigenous peoples as a political minority in the dual sense of the term: as a negative political-normative construction on the part of our peripheral modernization and its epistemological-political and sociocultural baseline subjects – such as the engenho lord, the bandeirante, the slave owner, the military, the missionary, the landowner, the professional politician and the state bureaucrat –, and as the result of a political process of material violence in which the domestication and, even more so, the destruction of the indigenous were the central goal (Dorrigo 2018: 167).

Indigenous literature in Brazil aligns with the idea of constructing oneself as a voice-praxis activist (*voz-práxis ativista*), militant and engaged in the indigenous cause (Dorrigo 2018: 172). Indigenous leaders and intellectuals keep emphasizing that the indigenous people need to be and remain protagonists of their own cause, create and stabilize autonomy, auto-affirmation, and auto-expression without any mediation when it comes to the narration of anthropological-ontological as well as sociocultural and epistemological singularity and the narration of exclusion, marginalization, violence, and they will always have to assume themselves as subjects and political actors (Dorrigo 2018: 170). Theoretical and literary texts of indigenous authorship often refer to shamanism, which reflects life as an interwoven whole where nature, culture and metaphysical or religious perspectives are imbricated and interdependent (Dorrigo 2018: 170). Dorrigo states that intellectuals have to publish to influence public and political discourse about modernity and the urge to protect nature for indigenous as well as non-indigenous people:

protection of nature – she who constitutes this vital and normative whole in which we are inserted, this whole that is the condition of human life itself and its development over time – is *conditio sine qua non* for human well-being they write to whites, in the sense of dialoguing and interacting with them (Dorrigo 2018: 178).

Graça Graúna is another important voice in creative writing and academia. In 2013 she published a monography on indigenous literature in Brazil where she explains the main counterpoints of contemporary indigenous literature between a life in the large cities and roots in small villages. In addition, she asks the question of what role literature and literary critics play in decolonizing processes and the extent to which they can influence understandings of reality and the world (Graúna 2013: 11).

Contemporary indigenous literature is a utopian place (of survival), a variant of the epic through orality; a place of confluence woven of voices silenced and exiled (written) throughout more than 500 years of colonization. Rooted in its origins, contemporary indigenous literature has been preserved in the self-history of its authors and in the reception of a differentiated reading public, that is, a minority that sows other possible readings in the universe of autochthonous poems and prose. In this process of reflection, the voice of the text shows that the rights of indigenous peoples to express their love of the land, to live their customs, their social organiza-

tion, their languages, and to manifest their beliefs have never really been considered (Graúna 2013: 15).

In her poem *Escrevivência* (2020), Graça Graúna expresses the same complementarity: “In writing, I make sense of my ancestry; of my way back, of my place in the world” (Dorrigo et al. 2020: 19). These few lines show how words and writing open possibilities to reflect one’s own social and personal position, while simultaneously being an important part of life itself. Indigenous literature must be seen as an embodiment of the indigenous experience, which at the same time (re)creates knowledge and works as a medium to transfer knowledge.

Although not always in written letters, indigenous forms of expression have always existed. As Graúna highlights, in various indigenous cultures the word is a holy element with a soul and is not only spoken by human beings but every entity of the world: “words filled with water, words coming out of the earth, words heated with fire, words so necessary as the air one breathes; words that cross the time” (2013: 173). Highlighting that the word comes from the world (*terra*), she refers to the earth as female – as many different cultures do – which indicates a deep-rooted belief in female power in the world and an urge to listen to these words, like the Chiapas people from Mexico who are always striving to strengthen the connection to mother earth in search of democracy, equality and justice (2013: 173).

Not all writers of the movement have an academic background, although a significant part of the female writers do. Their words not only spread in a creative sense, but they challenge the dominant literary field as well as the field of literary criticism. The literary field is also an imbalanced ecosystem. The indigenous perspective of the academic texts adds a very important perspective to the scientific discourse about indigenous literature and is crucial in processes of decolonizing academia. The authors themselves play an active role in the discussion process and reception of indigenous texts. They have strengthened their own voice and appropriated the theoretical<sup>2</sup> discourse on indigenous literature.

---

2 Since the 1980s and especially the 1990s, various theoretical texts have existed on social, political and educational questions written by indigenous authors in Brazil, such as Davi Kopenawa, Daniel Munduruku, and Ailton Krenak.

The most well-known authors of indigenous literature in Brazil might be Daniel Munduruku<sup>3</sup> and Eliane Potiguara. Thinking of the literary work of Eliane Potiguara in isolation from her social and political activism does not make any sense. She was born in 1950 in Rio de Janeiro as child of a family of displaced Potiguara people (Da Costa 2020: 98). At a very young age, she started her activism and founded the women's network GRUMIN, which shows how she has always acted on different levels: *A terra é a mãe do índio* [The earth is the mother of indigenous the people] (1989, financed by Unesco) was a publication intended to inform and fight analphabetism (Potiguara 2004: 140). The narrative is a connection between literary and social levels of activism.

Eliane Potiguara's groundbreaking book *Metade cara, metade mascara* [Half face, half mask] (2004) might be the most read and analyzed narrative publication of the movement. It is a text of different structures and narrators. It shows fictional as well as factual elements and alludes to biographical content as well as mythical stories. It has been translated into English and analyzed in various dissertations about Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism in the United States, because it reflects the fights of Potiguara women (Graúna 2013: 97). Graça Graúna describes *Metade Cara Metade Máscara* [Half face, half mask] (2004) as a space of multi-signification and an ensemble of different voices (2013: 98). One of these voices is the narrator of the first chapter: "Invasão às terras indígenas e a migração" [Invasion of indigenous lands and migration] (Potiguara 2004: 23). This part introduces the life of dislocated and separated families and the ways in which women built intergenerational resilience and connects female bodies to territories of mother earth:

---

3 Daniel Munduruku publishes novels and children's books and has been invited to international book fairs (for example, the German Buchmesse in Frankfurt, 2013). His works are dedicated to the question of belonging, indigenous identity, a change of perspective and indigenous consciousness (Todas as coisas são pequenas (2013), among others). Munduruku has a doctorate in education and connects the creative and the academic worlds in his educational seminars and workshops for the indigenous community as well as non-indigenous public to create consciousness about indigenous history and present. He has also published different essays on indigenous literature. Like many writers of the movement of contemporary indigenous literature, he acts on different levels, in literary, academic and social activism. Other important male figures are Yaguarê Yamã, Olívio Jecupé, Cristino Wapichana, and Renê Kithãulu, among others.

With the exception of one Aunt Evanilda, all of them married and, some time later, their husbands left or died, leaving them alone with their children to raise and facing the racism and intolerance of society. The girl to whom we refer, had this story as her life scenario and became a very observant, quiet, sensitive, and spiritualized person, an inheritance from these indigenous women who, even outside their original lands and violated by the historical, political, and cultural process, have maintained their culture and traditional habits, especially their ties with their ancestors, their cosmology, and their spiritual heritage (Potiguara 2004: 26).

The narrator also clarifies that the word of the grandmother saved the character (*a menina*) when she tells her real stories that took her into a magic and literary world (Potiguara 2004: 26) and describes how indigenous women have always been sources of energy and as well as savage and resilient, resisting to the dominant culture and using their intuition and forces of nature spirits to guarantee the survival of their family (Potiguara 2004: 46). This heritage allows contemporary authors and activists to be strong in wider social contexts when it comes to human rights, the demarcation of indigenous lands as well as the recovery and recuperation of cultural and literary space. Various poems of the book specify and demand women leadership and sorority and use metaphors of nature or direct references to the relation between women and nature:

*“Woman! Come, sister  
 drink from this fountain that awaits you  
 my sweet tender words.  
 Shout to the world  
 your story  
 go ahead and don't be despaired  
 [...]
 Come sister  
 wash your pain by the riverbank  
 call for the little birds  
 and sing like them, even alone  
 and see your strong body flourish  
 (Potiguara 2004: 76f).*

Humans are part of nature and people should be able to grow with it and find mental awareness and physical strength when acknowledging this fact. The

moment of realization is the moment when ties are built. This development opens possibilities and cultural and political space to strike back against patriarchy and colonialism in a collective and intergenerational way. There are two axes of female power – the sorority between women in a synchronic moment and the diachronic bond between mothers, grandmothers and female ancestors – both of which are directly connected to Potiguara’s ecological and feminist criticism. The analyzed literary texts can show this collectivity as a whole. In *Metade cara metade máscara* [Half face, half mask] (2004), female complicity and ancestry are not merely a topic, but an element that determines the narrative discourse itself.

The idea of a strong bond between mothers and daughters as a textual structuring element leads directly to Julie Dorrico’s literary creation. Her book *Eu sou macuxi e outras histórias* [I am Macuxi and other stories] (2019) includes a chapter called “Contos de minha avó” [Tales of my grandmother]. This text combines passages of a female narrator remembering her grandmother and her daily occupations in a very natural and fluid way – giving a vivid impression of life in an indigenous countryside household – with mythical stories. Many of the passages refer to the crucial role of mothers and grandmothers in the daily production of food and home for families. The whole text integrates an inherent criticism of patriarchy and domination while presenting a dynamic and equal world system between male and female human characters as well as non-human characters and entities. The following excerpt demonstrates the interwoven structure of references that the text makes. On various occasions, passages imply a certain direct or indirect complicity between women, like the grandmother’s paxiúba trees that the homodiegetic narrator grandmother planted near the river and that serves as a hiding place and medium for the seduction of a man.

She hid behind the paxiúba my grandmother had planted on the riverbank. Seduced, the man dropped his bananas and swam into the river trying to get closer, but every time it seemed he would be able to embrace the woman, the man saw her image further away [...] The man followed the current without bothering about the danger of the deep water. He didn’t know, the woman was the daughter of the waters, she was the daughter of Makunaima. When at last he could reach her, the woman, in an abrupt gesture, took him to the depths of the river. The woman was a mermaid. The mermaid was an enchanted being (Dorrico 2019: 50).

The whole passage describes how a man falls in love with the daughter of the river who lures him into the deep waters. In the water, the man becomes part of the enchanted world of non-human beings of the water. Attributions like male/female or human/non-human exist in complementarity rather than competition or domination, lines and between them tend to be fluid and reflect transformation between states of natural existence.

Under the water, the man came across the mermaid's father, the shaman of the waters, the sisters, the sisters-in-law, the grandmother, the great-grandmother, the curumins. And they all turned into fish, stones, wells, of all kinds, always choosing the form they liked best. He realized that he was in the non-human world of the waters (Dorrigo 2019: 51).

Apart from the literal sense of the story, it tells about the dynamic relationship between humans and nature, explains how traditions and knowledge pass from one generation to the other and how family strings and interpersonal (not necessarily interhuman) strings are tied. Relations must not always be neither harmonic nor always peaceful but display balanced movement systems and power structures between different entities. The siren has seductive power over the man, female characters share power in complicity, the man engages in a teacher/learner relationship with the water community, and finally, the former stranger becomes an important member of the community.

There he learned the ritual of the young girl, the time of planting manioc, how to find the piranha wells, the seasons that favored the cultivation of pumpkin, dar, ingá, bananas, hunting, fishing and gathering, and all the things that the water enchanted cared for. Many, many moons have passed and man has not forgotten his family. Even though he did not forget his sister-in-law and his children of the earth, the man married the daughter of the waters, had children, and became an important member of the community of the encantados (Dorrigo 2019: 51).

This section is accompanied by drawings of figures that cannot be clearly identified as humans or plants. The text by Julie Dorrigo (re)constructs female inter-generational memory, which is neither limited to place nor time and includes mother earth as the creator of life:

In the times of creation, Mother Earth looked at Makunaima and the brothers playing in the fields and wanted to create another son, because she



liked to see the backyard full of people. [...] the mother is the trees, rivers and hills. Everything that is beyond inside the earth and beyond the sky (Dorrigo 2019: 35f.).

The female writers of the movement of contemporary indigenous literature in Brazil act on many different levels when it comes to conceptualizing and reconstructing the awareness of the earth relations, the relationship between all living beings on earth, which includes human and non-human life. The first mentioned level is the conceptualization on an intra-textual level as part of the narrational process and content of prose and lyric texts. On a second level, indigenous literature challenges the dominant literary canon. The third level is the metatext of these publications and the creation of valuable theory on indigenous literature, which discusses indigenous texts as well as those written by indigenous academics. For example, Julie Dorrigo fulfils the two roles within this movement, namely as a writer and a literary critic. On a broader level, indigenous literature, and theory form possibilities to create new standpoints and voices regarding the history about indigenous people and with it the opportunity to make their official version of history visible (Dorrigo 2018: 242) to a large audience that will also have an influence on political discourse. The social and political activism of the writers reaches another level during public workshops and lectures at cultural centers, institutions and the annual reunion of indigenous writers and artists at the fair of the Fundação Nacional do Livro Infantil e Juvenil. Since 2020, the number of online talks and courses has increased, and a true culture of online communication has emerged within the literary movement and towards the world.

As mentioned, literary and critical strategies of the movement deeply connect to the political movement and combine various decolonial practices to challenge dominant literary, social, historical and political fields and discourses, especially in terms of female resistance and feminist cultural recovery. In conclusion, it changes the understanding of western ideas of democracy and modernization: “And, by doing this, it brings new ontologies, ethics, aesthetics and utopias to the center of democratic life. We believe that indigenous thought can be the base for a new theoretical-practical perspective of criticism and reconstruction of modernization” (Dorrigo et al 2020: 10). The natural world (which includes human and non-human beings) and its resilience are generally essential in indigenous literature and female characters have strong voices in it. Literature and indigenous authorship incorporate the

autonomous and sometimes militant voice of marginalized subjects based on their own singularity (Dorrico et al 2020: 10).

## Ecofeminism

Another movement that is deeply rooted in Brazil has come a long way during the last 40 years. It has emerged from a theological movement in liberal theology and spread out to become many different movements with different political, social or literary anchors. One main concept is the idea that there are structural parallels between patriarchal and colonial oppression and the exploitation of natural resources. Brazilian Ecofeminism is a theological and philosophical way of thinking and a social movement that sees the ideological connection of exploitation of nature and exploitation of women within the patriarchal system. Ecofeminism intends to reinforce nature and women who have been oppressed and dominated by the patriarchal system thinking of modernity and reduced to being entities of reproduction for the growth of capital (Gebara 2000: 18).

An essay of the collective of investigation and action called *LaDanta LasCanta* from Venezuela mentions the most important voices of theological ecofeminism: Ivone Gebara in Brazil, Coca Trillini in Argentina, Fanny Geymonat Pantelís and Aleira Agreda in Bolivia, Agamedilza Sales de Oliveira, Sandra Duarte and Sandra Raquew in Brazil, Mareia Moya in Ecuador, Rosa Dominga Trapasso in Peru, Mary Judith Ress in Chile, Graciela Pujol in Uruguay, and Gladys Parentelli and Rosa Trujillo in Venezuela (LasCanta 2017: 36). The most important international ecofeminist collective and magazine (1992–2009) called *Con-spirando* was founded in 1991 and – for example – offered a historical perspective of indigenous peoples in Latin America (LasCanta 2017: 37). The first wave of ecofeminism has been criticized as essentialist, spiritualist and new age, although these interpretations did not take the complexity of the Latin American reality into account (LasCanta 2017: 35, 38). Some northern ecofeminists even ignored Brazilian ecofeminist theory due to their religious roots and do not mention Gebara's important role in current retrospectives. Ivone Gebara explained the original cause of her ecofeminist work as follows:

I try to be an ecologist in a feminist perspective and a feminist in an ecological perspective. I try to explain ecology as one of the deepest concerns

of feminism and ecology as having a deep resonance or a political and anthropological consequence from a feminist perspective. Both feminism and ecology want to understand human beings as female and male living in a complex web of different cultures and ecosystems (Gebara 2003: 94).

While in contemporary indigenous literature the lines between human and natural lives are erased, the definition of Gebara's quote shows that lines exist but everything is connected. Elaine Nogueira-Godsey (2013) argues that Brazilian theological ecofeminism by Ivone Gebara has always been "on the move" because it was "grounded in the changing needs of the marginalized in her own environment, and by her engagement and dialogues with global realities that intersect with local concerns" (90). Ecofeminism never stopped being on the move and it is always changing depending on the social and ecological context of its theorists. One of the most important ideas of ecofeminist thinkers is the connection between theory and practice. Even Ivone Gebara highlighted that while theorists are arguing about theory details, human and non-human beings are dying due to a capitalist-caused ecological crisis (Gebara 2003: 94f.). She essentially argues that ecofeminist action is not purely theoretical but that rather it must be combined with concrete social actions. This is where the indigenous and ecofeminist movements come together.

In recent years, extractive industries and projects have demanded that depatriarchalizing, decolonizing struggles and fights for collective rights have found their way onto the agenda of worldwide ecofeminist concerns, especially in Latin America. Therefore collectives like the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* develop new methodologies of fieldwork and participative investigation action-taking within and outside of academia with a strong protagonism of indigenous women's organizations (LasCanta 2017: 39f.).

Climate change, extractivism, forced displacement and many other factors are producing a new wave of transdisciplinary ecofeminism in cultural and literary studies worldwide and demand a change of perspective and academic culture. This ecological and ecofeminist turn in scientific work directly depends on the force of social movements from the so-called global south, which are increasingly represented by strong female voices who at all times reflect the interlocking dimensions of different axes of oppression and inequality in their daily political activism. The postcolonial challenge for hegemonic literary and cultural studies in the 21st century is to delink criticism and discourse from the colonial matrix of power and internalize the knowledge and strategies of

the ecofeminist and indigenous movements described in this essay without falling into the trap of theoretical appropriation.

## References

- Da Costa, Helene Rosa (2020): *Identidades e ancestralidades das mulheres indígenas na poética de Eliane Potiguara, Uberlândia*: Universidade Federal de Uberlândia.
- Dorrigo, Julie (2019): *Eu sou macuxi e outras histórias*, Nova Lima: Editora Caos & Letras.
- Dorrigo, Julie (2018): “Uma literatura militante: sobre a correlação de movimento indígena e literatura indígena brasileira contemporânea.” In: *Aletria* 28/3, pp. 163–181.
- Dorrigo, Julie (2017): “Literatura indígena e seus intelectuais no Brasil: da autoafirmação e da autoexpressão como minoria à resistência e à luta político-cultural.” In: *Revista de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre as Américas* 11/3, pp. 114–136.
- Dorrigo, Julie/Danner, Fernando/Danner, Leno Francisco (eds.) (2020): *Literatura indígena brasileira contemporânea: autoria, autonomia, ativismo*, Porto Alegre: Editora Fi.
- Dorrigo, Julie/Danner, Leno Francisco/Correia, Heloisa/Danner, Fernando (eds.) (2018): *Literatura indígena brasileira contemporânea: criação, crítica e recepção*, Porto Alegre: Editora Fi.
- Gebara, Ivone (2003): “Ecofeminism: A Latin American Perspective.” In: *Cross-Currents* 53/1, pp. 93–103.
- Gebara, Ivone (2000): *Intuiciones ecofeministas. Ensayo para repensar el conocimiento y la religión*, Madrid: Trotta.
- Graúna, Graça (2013): *Contrapontos da literatura indígena contemporânea no Brasil*, Belo Horizonte: Maza Edições.
- LasCanta, LaDanta (2017): “De la teología al antiextractivismo: Ecofeminismos en Abya Yala.” In: *Ecología Política: Cuadernos de debate internacional*, 54, p. 35.
- Nogueira-Godsey, Elaine (2013): “A History of Resistance: Ivone Gebara’s Transformative Feminist Liberation Theology.” In: *Journal for the Study of Religion* 26/2, pp. 89–106.
- Potiguara, Eliane (1989): *A terra é a mãe do índio*, Rio de Janeiro: GRUMIN.
- Potiguara, Eliane (2004): *Metade cara, metade máscara*, São Paulo: Global.