

# Felt power: Can Mexican Indigenous women finally be powerful?

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Too often, women from the Global South have been portrayed as victims of gender violence in need of empowerment. Yet in the rural south of Mexico City, many Indigenous women expressed feeling strong, even powerful, despite their varied experiences of violence. Based on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that their felt power was often rooted in their realities. Nahuatl-speaking communities have historically recognized certain kinds of power in women (including healing magic) and others in men (including political power). Women's narratives revealed complex interactions between women's and men's power. Women often represented themselves not as helpless victims but as having the power to change their circumstances, for better or worse. I introduce *felt power* as a conceptual tool for centering Indigenous women's experiential, embodied, and spiritual knowledge in addressing the gender-based violence they often experienced. Felt power is derived from Dian Million's framework of *felt theory*, which represents Indigenous people's narratives as feeling-based theory-making, rather than raw data to be theorized into abstraction by non-Indigenous thinkers. I suggest that considering and respecting Indigenous women's felt power in the face of violence will contribute to decolonizing the study of gender violence and development agencies' responses to it.

**Keywords** epistemic violence, gender violence, Indigenous women, Mexico, power

At sixty-four years of age, Leona<sup>1</sup> performed what she and other elders considered the ideal of Nahua femininity in Milpa Alta, a rural southeastern municipality of Mexico City. No taller than 5 feet, 3 inches, she wore a long braid, a checkered apron dress, and a sweet smile on her weathered face. Leona fulfilled an impressive range of roles: subsistence farmer, saleswoman, weaver, Nahuatl speaker and renowned storyteller, grandmother, wife, healer, and *lucha libre* (Mexican wrestling) fan. One thing she refused to be was a victim.

I don't agree that the government needs to help. Now there are programs to help single mothers, and women have no respect... I say that we must force men to be with one, force the woman to bear the man.

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Many of the women in Leona's neighborhood had experienced physical and emotional violence in their marriages, alongside other kinds of violence. Yet particularly older women often proudly identified as *mujeres fuertes*, "strong women," who overcame adversity and kept their families together. The vivacious, curly-haired, stylish, and unmarried forty-year-old blogger Yolotl, who sought to explain local traditions to children, described her mother's struggles to me and asserted, "Nobody feels like a victim. They feel strong and even proud of their role as guardians of the hearth."

Some of those working toward gender equality in the area viewed the notion of strong womanhood as preventing people from recognizing economic and political inequalities, which particularly disadvantage Indigenous women. This conflict of perspectives meant that most of the services at a local branch of a Mexican government-funded agency dedicated to empowering women were undersubscribed, according to Yolotl: "the deficiency of [the] program [is that it] universalizes the problem in a place where violence is perceived in an entirely different way." Yet agency workers consoled themselves with the knowledge that "even if we change only five women's lives, we've been successful," as one put it to me. I will not go into more detail on the agency, as my aim lies not in criticizing their work but rather in centering Milpaltense women's diverse perspectives. Some of the women I met would have welcomed development aid, but were not always receiving the kind of help they wanted in a language they could relate to. As my elderly, unmarried host mother and church choir mate Socorro declared in response to some monolingual Spanish-speaking Milpaltenses' criticisms of gender relations among Nahuatl speakers, "So they say [we're] more repressed—but they're wrong!"

Acknowledging alternative, Indigenous gender logics beyond globalizing feminist perspectives is potentially life-saving—not least because it makes services more accessible to Indigenous women. However, Indigenous women, like people of the Global South more broadly, are often constructed as a problem to be solved, and not acknowledged as powerful producers of knowledge and problem solvers in their own right (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Ways of knowing that were established during colonial rule often remain entrenched in postcolonial contexts, just as mutually reinforcing gendered and racialized power inequalities do (Lugones 2007). Thus, imposing a universalizing gender logic on women from the Global South constitutes epistemic violence (Spivak 1988).

In this article, I refer to the perceived strength and the cultural, caring, and spiritual practices that are central to many Indigenous women's stories<sup>2</sup> as ambiguous sources of *felt power*. This analytic concept draws on Tanana Athabascan theorist Dian Million's (2009, 2014) notion of *felt theory*, which recognizes emotion as an embodied and socially embedded knowledge. To make this more tangible, I will explain the concept shortly and give examples of Indigenous women's considerable power over social and affective life in Milpa Alta.

Felt power is itself a powerful concept. Not only does it help to make Indigenous women's strength and alternative forms of power legible in academic writing, but it also helps to render visible the ways Indigenous women have considerable impact in male-dominated economic and political arenas, which social analysts are perhaps more accustomed to thinking of as power. After introducing Milpa Alta, I will continue with the example of Leona in order to explain how it is possible for Milpaltenses to conceive of women's power and violence against women as separate issues. I will then describe a group of female *nahual* shaman's apprentices to show that magic is perceived as a typically feminine kind of power in Milpa Alta. Thus, I will look at how certain Milpaltense women reorient and shape the narrative about gender inequality. Yet practices of gendering and dividing spheres of power make some positions of power, such as that of the politician in my final example, difficult for women to claim.

## Divergent Perspectives on Indigenous Women's Power

If we accept that “power manifests itself differently in different social contexts” (Muehlmann 2013, 140), why have many social scientists found it so difficult to imagine Indigenous women as powerful?

While this is not the first study to challenge the supposed powerlessness of Indigenous women and women from the Global South, previous research has often aligned Indigenous knowledge with Western scientific categories (Altamirano-Jiménez and Kermoal 2016), and has thus highlighted women's agentive power in intimate negotiations (Gilbert 2019; Mahmood 2001) or in political spheres (Bastian Duarte 2012; Speed, Hernández Castillo, and Stephen 2006). Felt power instead questions the terms of the debate. It is a well-trodden insight in gender violence studies that women, on average, are far more vulnerable to intimate physical violence than their male partners (e.g., Merry 2009), as is also the case in Milpa Alta. What causes this violence is complex, but previous studies have suggested a link with changing employment patterns, which undermine hegemonic gender roles in Mexico, leading to friction over unfulfilled expectations (e.g., González Montes 2012). This also applies to some Milpaltense Nahuatl-speaking families and is exacerbated by the way Indigenous gender roles have been competing, but also mixing, with hegemonic Hispanic models for centuries (Raby 2015). Rather than speculate on the elusive origins of violence, I will turn my attention to women's physically and spiritually felt power (*fuerza*) that some Milpaltenses referred to when they spoke of a “power balance” between men and women. Notably, *fuerza* should not be confused with another Spanish word for power, *poder*, which tends to denote political and economic power, which will not be discussed at length in this article for reasons of space. However, in Nahuatl, and, accordingly, for many Milpaltenses, this distinction is blurry: *fuerza* translates as *chichahualiztli*, whereas *huelitiyotl* denotes both *poder* and *fuerza*. This conceptual slippage is also apparent in Spanish-language Milpaltense discourse. How “powerful” specific Milpaltense women are depends on what kind of power one is speaking about, and who is doing the feeling-as-theorizing, as opposed to visioning-as-theorizing.

Non-Indigenous scholars often portray Latin American Indigenous women as victims of “multiple injustices,” whose only recourse to power is to “resist” oppressive power structures (Hernández Castillo 2015). Beyond colonial legacies, *machismo*, homophobia, and misogyny are often blamed for gender inequality in the Americas, while the dynamic diversity and fluidity of machismos and gender relations are not always acknowledged (but see Gutmann 2004; Raby 2015). Such analyses tend to implicitly vilify power as something that oppresses, while romanticizing resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990). In the rare cases where Indigenous women's power is acknowledged, this power is often questioned. For instance, Muehlmann suggested that, among Cuicapá people in northern Mexico, “current views of gender highlighting the power of women may well have developed relatively recently as a form of boundary-marking against ‘Mexican culture’” (Muehlmann 2013, 133). This kind of analysis points to an underlying notion of globalized and naturalized politico-economic structures of masculine domination (Moore 1994, 63), making it difficult to imagine women as anything but victims.

Arguably, then, Indigenous femininity in the Global South has been constructed as needing development and “empowerment” (Spivak 1988). Yet might it be that the insistence on representing and theorizing Indigenous women as powerless contributes to disempowering them? Million warns:

A theory that has started to prevail is that we have an illness, trauma, and that we must heal. What our “wounds” actually are and how we heal, we must consider carefully. We must consider

what this theory tells us about ourselves and what we might need to tell others about this theory. (2014, 39)

Million argues that Indigenous women often frame their collective experience not so much in terms of pathology and suffering, which they attribute “to political and economic hegemony,” but instead in terms “of survival and strength”: “These values exist, not in an unchanging oral tradition necessarily, or in an unchanging world, but *in change*, in the moment by moment struggle to live” (2014, 39).

Million emphasizes change because she considers the artificial fixing of concepts a colonialist move, which alienates these concepts from experience and in turn enables their normalization and universalization in academic and public discourse. She argues that concepts are necessarily mutable and flexible, as they can only be fully grasped in their application to particular lives through storytelling. Not despite but because of the emotional power of Indigenous storytelling, and the subjective, experience-based truth contained in it, Million considers storytelling a form of theorizing experience: “potent mobile fields of felt meaning making” (2014, 37).

## Felt Power

Stewart (2007) similarly drew on Foucauldian and Deleuzian conceptions of knowledge-power to develop a theory of powerful affects. However, where Stewart’s approach centers the analyst’s perception of events, Million centers collective Indigenous knowledge, which she refers to as felt theory—“an open-ended articulation of experience and identity [that] can be the foundation for the development of critical indigenous theory” (Simpson and Smith 2014, 19). While stories of anger and pain in the face of settler colonial violence cannot be “objective,” Million insists, much like Haraway (1988), this does not have to lessen their validity as knowledge. Nor do these stories (necessarily) constitute a form of self-victimization, but instead they “ground a present healing in a past properly understood, felt, and moved beyond” (Million 2009, 73). Recognized for its potential to support Indigenous sovereignty, felt theory has become a highly influential framework in current North American Native studies (Risling Baldy 2018; Simpson and Smith 2014).

Emphasizing feeling frees Million’s approach from common feminist criticisms of Foucault’s relational power theory. While power had previously been theorized as oppressing and controlling certain people, Foucault conceptualized it as a less tangible, ubiquitous, and insidious presence in people’s lives, making it effectively impossible to resist (Kingsolver 1996, 447). But what if what matters most in life is not power, but felt power—a power that only manifests itself to the feeling person in specific, situated tensions, flows, and barriers?

Of course, it is one thing to speak of feeling power within or against oneself, and quite another to establish the actuality and effects of this feeling empirically. Leona lamented feeling her strength waning, struggling to do as much work as in younger years. To stay healthy, she said,

I give myself space in the morning and when I go to bed, I’m alone and I thank myself, I thank my little feet ... I thank God who takes care of my children, of humanity, and who allows me to be here.

Following this account, the felt power of Leona’s body and spirit flowed from God, which is beyond what I can show ethnographically. But observe how, by ritualizing her practice of gratitude and toiling in her cornfield, Leona cultivated both spiritual and physical strength. Her expressed feeling of being powerful was not an empty claim, but was rooted in her lived reality, although it did not prevent her from experiencing violence. Taking Milpaltense women’s stories of gender violence, local politics,

and magic at face value helps to critically rethink what it means to exercise and be subjected to power at the same time.

Distinct from more common totalizing, deceptively “objective” conceptualizations of power in social science writing, such as economic and political hegemony (Giddens 1981; Gramsci 1971), internalized bias (Bourdieu 1991; Wallace 1990), and complex, multidirectional power networks (Foucault 1980), felt power emerges as a complex, ever-changing, embodied, subjectively known force in Milpaltense life. As I will show later, women often perceived themselves and others as strong when fighting for what they considered the communal good, and this felt power was also manifested in embodied, ritual practices and verbally reaffirmed.

### A Dangerous Place to Be a Woman?

Milpa Alta is located in the Central Mexican Highlands in the rural south of Mexico City. The district is made up of 28,623 hectares of woodlands, *nopal* cactus fields, and twelve towns of different sizes, with a total population of 130,582 in 2010 (Delegación Milpa Alta 2011, 103). For my fifteen-month ethnographic research on local conceptualizations of violence against women (2014-2015), I lived in the southernmost Milpaltense town, Santa Ana Tlacotenco, which borders the states of Morelos and Estado de México. I combined participant observation with the “naturalistic” strategy of recording long conversations in order to gain more information about the context and everyday performance of narratives of violence and gender—frequently discussed topics—instead of merely relying on the elicitation of these themes during interviews (van Vleet 2008). Overall, I spoke to over a hundred individuals, and was more closely acquainted with approximately forty people. The data I collected includes spontaneous conversations, life history interviews, historical and mythic stories, as well as observations of religious practice and gendered work.

When I first arrived in Milpa Alta, as an unaccompanied, young white European woman, many women eyed me with suspicion, until I became an established member of several cultural revitalization groups, of which most members were married, divorced, or widowed women. Joining these groups inevitably affected my loyalties and analysis. While it did not blind me to the role they play in sustaining certain inequalities, it did allow me to organize my inquiry around local knowledge and experience priorities. Seeing key interlocutors several times a week built our mutual trust and led us to discuss sensitive topics.

Milpa Alta does not identify as an Indigenous community but as a community of *originarios*: as being “original inhabitants” of the place and thus having special rights to the land (López Caballero 2009). A few, mostly elderly, people were fluent in Nahuatl, which I was studying, so I conducted my interviews in Spanish while taking note of relevant concepts and sayings in Nahuatl. Nonetheless, on the basis of their phenotype, clothing, and cultural practices, Milpaltenses are often perceived and racialized as Indigenous by urban *mestizo* people (people of mixed ancestry; the majority population) and experience many forms of discrimination, as is the case for many Indigenous communities (Alberto 2017). Common examples included brown-skinned men not being offered retail jobs in the city or traditionally dressed women being ignored or ridiculed by mestizo officials. I write “Indigenous” to refer to this race-based discrimination while also denaturalizing the category through capitalized spelling.

I chose Milpa Alta as my research site because it had one of the highest rates of femicide in Mexico City at the time of my research. In addition, a previous study found that two-thirds of Milpaltense women had experienced some form of emotional or physical violence (Coloca Osorio 2013, 17-18).

Mexico has often been characterized as a dangerous place to be a woman because of the rise of gender violence alongside crime-related violence in recent decades. More than 6,000 femicides were registered between 1999 and 2005 (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2008, 219). I thus initially assumed that many Milpaltense women were victims. However, Mexico is also known as a country of powerful women and goddesses (e.g., Anzaldúa 1987; Behar 1993). Indeed, Milpaltenses often claimed that women were superior to men in strength, as did Leona.

## Strong Women

When Leona complained about younger women not being strong enough, I asked her what a woman should do if her husband becomes violent. At this, the otherwise forthright Leona hesitated, tears welling up, then spoke firmly: "I went through this. No doubt about that."

Leona said she managed to improve her situation through sacrifice and dedication to her marriage, leading her family by example. These were virtues that she learned from her mother. "But for advice, I received more from my father... . And I still draw on it." Her father told Leona to work alongside her husband and make him change: "The woman is more intelligent than the man... . Fix your problem." She eventually made her husband quit drinking, which she considered a weakness, but they still argued. "Everything that works in the family isn't the man, it's the woman."

A similar ideal of strong womanhood was evoked by Ámparo, a Nahuatl-speaking retired teacher from a high-status family who was also the leader of a folkloric dance group, in her poem "*Mujer y madre*" (Woman and mother), which she proudly displayed on her living room wall:

There is a woman. Who ... when old, works with youth's vigor; a woman who, if ignorant, discovers life's secrets with better judgment than a wise man... . A woman who, though strong, trembles at a child's cry, and though weak, at times summons a lion's fierceness. A woman who, while alive, is rarely appreciated because at her side, all pain is forgotten. (My translation.)

By speaking of female endurance and superiority, Leona, Ámparo, and many other Nahuatl-speaking women of their generation undermined the idea that domestic violence and exploitation necessarily coincide with felt powerlessness, such as when Ámparo stressed the vigor, better judgment, and fierceness of women. Following Bourdieu's (2001) definition of "symbolic violence," many European men and women subconsciously believe that women are inferior to men, so women accept being treated accordingly. By contrast, Wallace controversially argued that in the US Black Power movement, "precisely because of the myth of their inferiority, the black female stereotype had always portrayed [women] as oversexed, physically strong and warlike" (1990, xx). Both analyses are relevant to Milpaltense women's stories about "failed" and "strong" women.

Leona emphasized that she was not a passive, powerless victim of her husband's violence or her father's ideology, both of which she criticized and had resisted. However, she had seen herself as having a choice to either selfishly leave at the cost of her children's and husband's well-being, or to virtuously work on changing her husband's conduct for the good of her whole family. Leaving her husband would have disempowered Leona, insofar as single motherhood was, and largely continues to be, a stigmatized status among Milpaltenses, typically earning women the derogatory label of "*fracasadas*," failed women, from mostly older women. Single mothers occasionally referred to their critics as "*víboras*," vipers, but rarely argued back, often preferring to keep their distance. For example, thirty-year-old Magdalena worked hard to show her neighbors that even after leaving her partner, she was still a "strong woman" and good mother, whereas Sara, in her mid-twenties,

rejected this ideal and partied heavily to distract herself for a while before eventually settling into a new marriage.

By drawing on received knowledge, her faith, and her observations, Leona not only managed to slowly improve her situation but also earned respect from her neighbors and the reputation of being strong. She described her hard, physical work both as a sacrifice and as play, having found joy and satisfaction in her tangible achievements and trained, embodied, and spiritual ability to endure. "As a mother, I had to raise my children, and as a wife, I had to work with [my husband]. And working, we forgot the fight."

Many Milpaltense women evoked the local ideal of the *mujer fuerte*, who works hard, is wise, and is virtuous. One afternoon, two female community health students from the urban municipality of Iztapalapa organized a women-only workshop for Amparo's group as part of their degree requirements. They informed the attendees about their rights using posters that covered the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Indigenous peoples' rights, and women's rights. Then they encouraged the women to write or draw their ideas on "What is a woman?" The short answers, pinned to a board, focused on stereotypical women's roles as mothers, sisters, and daughters, their chores, and their prized quality as "*trabajadoras*," hard workers. While the women welcomed the information about rights as a potential tool for their personal and communal struggles, they did not use it to critique power imbalances in their families and everyday work.

Similarly, when I asked Milpaltense men and women to describe the typical qualities of a Milpaltense woman, commonly named items were "hard-working" (*trabajadora*), "fighter" (*luchadora*), "tenacious" (*aguantadora*), "head of the family" (*jefa de familia*), "mother" (*madre*), "grandmother" (*abuela*), and "cook" (*cocinera*). Thus, "strong womanhood" could express itself in many ways. For instance, when Conchita, an outspoken middle-aged catechist with a mischievous sense of humor, was given the choice by her mother-in-law, she chose to become a cook rather than a shopkeeper, because she believed cooking had the power to transform the bodies and souls of those she fed.

However, there were generational and class disagreements about what constitutes a *mujer fuerte*. Socorro and the other church choir ladies, older women from humble and middle-status backgrounds, remembered a time before they had access to electricity, water, household machinery, or kindergartens, and they criticized younger women, saying contemptuously, "*Estas flojas*" (these lazybones), or "*Estas huevonas*" (these good-for-nothings), suggesting these women do not fulfill their obligations as women. For Magdalena, "strong womanhood" was more about studying hard in order to help their families "get ahead" (*sacarlas adelante*). While most women viewed tenacity and grit as desirable qualities in a woman, younger women were less likely to agree that this also meant having to put up with a violent husband.

Confirming Joy Adapon's (2008) ethnographic observations of Milpaltense families, I observed that many women work all day, every day, and often significantly more than their husbands. Yet it was rare to hear older women complain of this. Conchita even reported that she refused to go on holiday with her late husband: "I had too much love for my work." Some women, both young and old, asserted that hard work strengthened their bodies, while repetitive work, such as sweeping, evened their emotions. Yolotl, who enthusiastically attended a backstrap loom weaving class, said that weaving felt "zen-like" and relaxing to her, although she also mentioned that this was not the case for her mother: as a child, she had been forced to weave by her grandfather and never wanted to weave again. For many, weaving was a delightful hobby, but as a profession, it could cause considerable

back and knee pain. While interpretations vary, becoming a *mujer fuerte* involves cultivating one's mind, body, and image.

## Guerreras

As a subcategory of strong womanhood, some women proudly spoke of themselves as "*guerreras*" (warriors). In doing so, they drew on New Age-influenced images of Aztec warrior women and bellicose goddesses; feminine serpent symbolism; Old Testament warrior women like Deborah, Judith, and Yael; the famed seventeenth-century Nahuatl-speaking nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, an erudite poet and "warrior" of the Catholic faith (see Cañizares-Esguerra 2016); female combatants in the Mexican Revolution of 1910; female Red Army *guerrilleras* in the 1970s; and female Zapatistas fighting for Indigenous women's rights in Chiapas today. Among younger Milpaltense women, empowered Western feminist archetypes, such as the models provided by urban feminists, may also have influenced their understanding of warriorhood. Such a multiplicity of meanings evokes Turner's (1967, 50-51) usage of *polysemy*, according to which a dominant symbol—warrior womanhood—may stand for various entities and actions, and different meanings may come into play at different times.

Importantly, warrior womanhood was also popularized by a well-known local nahual shaman, who called his four female apprentices the "*guerreras*" (warrior women) and jokingly dubbed his male apprentice "*la quinta guerrera*" (the fifth warrior woman). In pop culture, shamans, or *nahuales* as they are called in central Mexico, are often depicted as sage repositories of obscure, ancient wisdom, rather than live human beings with an interest in politics, current trends, and foreign philosophies. At the same time, many Milpaltenses also perceived them as nefarious figures, rumored to be shape-shifters, thieves, seducers, and murderers. Yet contrary to this exoticized image of magic, the mundane and the mystical are often intertwined (Jöhncke and Steffen 2015, 9-35), as was the case for this nahual, who liked to joke and reference popular music.

A large part of the *guerreras*' training consisted of expanding their imagination, seen as key to recognizing all the connections between the things of the universe and to accessing its power. The tools used for this creative part of the training were mainly a specific questioning style, generating curiosity, and drugs such as peyote. They also took "Nahuatl culture" classes, which the nahual described as encompassing celestial mathematics, cosmic geometry, herbal medicine, and poetry. In those classes, they often discussed the meanings of dreams and natural omens, identified medicinal plants, described the hidden meanings of Nahuatl words and legends, and discussed past experiences and feelings.

Ahead of the 2015 municipal elections, the nahual was hired to accompany campaign rallies, as other cultural groups did for the competing parties. The *guerreras* blew conch shells, ritually cleansed politicians, banged the *huehuetl* drum, and exclaimed "*itenchicahuac—fuerza guerrera!*" (warrior power/force), marching and dancing to all the town's hilly corners. "Warrior power!" became the party's slogan in Milpa Alta, featured on banners and chanted collectively. Given the general unpopularity of politicians, who were often accused of abusing power to enrich themselves, it was not unusual for them to seek the magical support and protection of *nahuales*. The nahual confidently declared that his candidate would win the election—and he did.

In one of many talks the nahual gave to his followers on Saturdays at his airy, makeshift acrylic-glass-walled and wood-framed hut, welcoming the sunlight in, he explained what *tenchicahuac* means: it refers to the strength (*chichualiztli*) of stone (*tetl*) being pressed together like gritted teeth (*tentli*) to then be released, like a coiled serpent jumping upward. He demonstrated the motion



with his own body: first, he crouched down on the balls of his feet, fists tight, arms pressed against his chest in the mode of a weight lifter, biting his lower lip, tensing and drawing his body earthward, as he said, to channel telluric energy. Then he released the combined energy of his body tension and the earth, jumping upward, opening, straightening his body, arms, fingers, shooting into the air, bellowing, "Tenchicahuac!" He instructed the group to imitate him, and we collectively exclaimed and embodied, indeed, became tenchicahuac. I found it impossible not to feel momentarily uplifted and empowered by this psychosomatic speech act. And so, "warrior power" is a power pose that moves between the political arena of humans to a spiritual and affective frame.

To summarize, the nahual and the guerreras' practice involves accessing many different kinds of felt power, including healing magic, political influence, affective boosts, and telluric and cosmic energies. The nahual himself additionally introduced the notion of "feminine power/strength," as the next section illustrates. Earning them criticism from some local feminists, the nahual and the guerreras invoked this notion to explain how women might prevent sexual harassment.

### Fuerza Femenina

One Saturday afternoon in May, at another of the nahual's weekend lectures, his cheerful forty-year-old apprentice, Soledad, politely inquired whether she might speak about something she had on her mind. The nahual assented, and so she explained that a man had been behaving strangely toward her: "he passes by and hugs me, and he puts those hands of his on my bottom ... this made me feel really uncomfortable." Rather than refer to her experience as harassment, Soledad spoke of her embodied memory of discomfort.

Citlalcoatl, the nahual's flamboyant, spiky-haired and glitter-eye-shaded partner, remarked, "Some are very daring."

The nahual launched into his lecture, first drawing a circular face on the whiteboard, then pointing at the forehead, ears, and chin, which he assigned to the four lunar phases. "There are different types of lips. There are types which invite you to kiss them." He continued drawing lines over the moon face on the whiteboard. "Nature is so wise that she placed all these lines like a shield. What is the purpose of a shield?"

The middle-aged Elena said, "To protect. *Chimalli*," and Citlalcoatl added, "To reject whomever passes in front." "Exactly," the nahual responded and covered the face circle with a grid of lines.

Always in the history of mankind there has been more *fuerza femenina* because feminine power is ... infinite. A man's power is limited... . These lines that we have in our faces ... they're more sensitive in women than in men... . What's a woman's best curve?

His apprentices answered in unison, "The smile," and the nahual confirmed: "To smile, not to laugh." Soledad pondered this.

This was where I think I made my mistake. No? At first we got along well, and I smiled and everything, and then he said something that made me laugh. And this is where I saw that he probably thought, "She's easy."

"So you have to know *how* to smile," the nahual replied. "*Moxayacatzin motequiti*—you have to work your face," he said, because facial lines extend into the infinite, thus accessing cosmic energies. "You need to ... activate a point of defense. The powerful, loving power. So, you need to show yourself loving, but forceful... . You can generate authority over others."

Cassandra volunteered:

One time ... a guy comes over, and says, "Can you tell me the time?" ... But he grabs my hand, so it wasn't about knowing the time. And I turn toward him, as if to tell him, "Go away, don't touch me!" And he left me alone and went. But I didn't have to say anything.

"You generated an attitude," the nahual confirmed.

To summarize, the nahual's and Cassandra's discourse reframed Soledad's question about responding to sexual harassment, and instead discussed how they might prevent themselves from being in that position to begin with. According to his discourse, Soledad should seek to become the kind of woman who is not victimized but instead controls men's actions by harnessing seven cosmic energies (power, love, creativity, magic, fantasy, harmony, and infinity) in order to generate "infinite feminine power/strength," which he described as superior to masculine power/strength.

According to the nahual, feminine magic involved knowledge of "the libido, the soft, the sensual, and the erotic." Having chosen not to become an apprentice myself, I only had access to learning the basics of this art, which was accessible to both men and women. The guerreras, on the other hand, were taught the "five mysteries of the woman" by higher-level female nahuales, with no men present.

The nahual viewed women as having greater access to power than men in terms of their reproductive and creative capacities. Thus, despite witnessing sexism and male violence, the guerreras did not perceive women as disadvantaged vis-à-vis men, as they had developed an understanding of power that was not limited to secular political power (typically held by men) but also included spiritual, creative power (more closely associated with women). One could argue, of course, that the nahual's concept of gendered power was convenient for male elders like himself—it did not threaten his male privilege. Moreover, his authority as a Nahuatl-speaking male elder and his dazzling rituals may have contributed to making the nahual's approach more compelling to his followers than the feminist counter-narratives and unglamorous group therapy sessions offered by young female gender-equality agency workers, several of whom were not originally from Milpa Alta. Yet as gendered inequalities were often acknowledged by the nahual and other male leaders, it did not appear that they were seeking to mask these—although their warrior discourse may also have had that (unintended) effect in certain instances. Much like in Senegal, where women often cultivated their erotic abilities "to use sex and submission as tools of negotiation, manipulation, and control over men," which allowed them to "benefit from a system that subjugates them" (Gilbert 2019, 381), Milpaltense warrior womanhood might be viewed as a simultaneously empowering and disempowering subject position.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, the nahual taught the guerreras how to *feel* powerful in multiple ways, for example, by practicing the tenchicahuac power pose and by harnessing feminine erotic magic. Soledad said that joining the shaman's group radically changed her life from being in a constant state of anxiety, being very organized, and disregarding her needs, as well as rejecting her Indigenous looks, to letting go. Before, she had dyed her hair red and forced her feet into stilettos; now she opted for a natural and, to her, more comfortable, less sexualized look. The cinnamon skin she once resented, she now treasured. By contrast, the gender-equality agency's promotional materials often featured light-skinned women. Although the nahual did not challenge patriarchal structures as such, he fostered an upbeat, conciliatory fighting spirit among his apprentices by speaking directly to their embodied experiences. The guerreras' felt power lay not only in their political influence but also in their spiritual and embodied power as Indigenous women and ritual specialists.

Note that despite the guerreras' training being aimed at acquiring greater power than average married women have by accessing a partially occult system of knowledge, this knowledge and associated abilities were not categorically different from those of ordinary women. Many expressed that all women, particularly mothers, were endowed with ambiguous, potentially creative and destructive powers. For example, faced with an unrepentantly violent husband, a woman may opt to use *toloache* (*Datura innoxia* Miller, angel's trumpet), an herb widely known in Mexico as a proverbial love drug. Conchita told me about a woman who was known as "Ana la bruja" (Ana the witch) for having married "a la malagueña" (through black magic) by putting toloache in a man's drink. According to some women, toloache makes an aggressive man easier to handle, but dosed in excess, it turns him into an imbecile (see also Zaragoza Campos 2009). For Conchita's friend Lizbeth, a retired teacher, this was the defense of weak, desperate, and evil women. She declared, "[The woman] should have been braver, in the sense that she should have stood up for herself (*no se hubiera dejado*) from the start. But this drugging him, well, from that point she did wrong." Although rarely used, this kind of magic was associated more with women than with men, as they were usually the ones preparing food for their families. As cooks, women also held the power to shape their family's bodies in a positive sense, to make them stronger, happier, and healthier (Adapon 2008).

### Women in Politics

Not all women employ feminized routes to power, such as sexual seduction, nor were such forms of power appropriate for resolving every kind of situation. During an extensive interview at her house around New Year's, the short-haired, middle-aged Carmen told me how she became a strong, independent woman and, eventually, a politician in order to defend vulnerable Milpaltense women from abusive male power holders. She explained that she and her sister had to throw their father out against their mother's will because he was a violent drunkard. She then showed me the bullet holes where he shot at the front door after they locked him out. However, their mother remained financially dependent on their father.

So, we were fighting for my mother's pension. We went to the authorities and unions so they would support us. And I knew how to read and write, so I took the steps and I knew how to defend my mother. And this is what led me to defend other citizens ... I cannot forget the image of a thin lady with a thin *rebozo* (shawl) and a small bag with a small child of eight or ten years. And she says to the lawyer, "How are you, *licenciado* (graduate)? Will you help me get my pension?" And the lawyer quips, as always, "I told you, if you don't bring me this document, I won't help you." And the woman starts to cry.

In her words, Carmen became a feminist politician out of a strongly felt obligation—like in the earlier "warrior force" example, we can observe the strong role of emotions in Milpaltense politics. Her educational privilege and youthful self-assurance protected her and her mother from having the same experience as the other woman. Carmen's narrative contained common elements of Milpaltense discourse by emphasizing her ability to "defend" herself, her family, and her people. But it also significantly diverged, as Carmen frequently highlighted women's rights and openly identified as a feminist. Therefore, she redefined the notion of "strong womanhood" and "warriorhood" along feminist lines, rejecting the common sexual division of labor and instead making demands of her husband:

When [my sister and I] got married, [our mother] saw that we were being bossy, and we say [to our husbands], "You know what? Give your baby a bottle! Change the diaper!" ... And my mom said,

"No, this isn't right." "And why isn't it okay?" "Because you are women and they are men." ... Then I say, "For me to have a child, I need a man. In order to take care of my son, I will also need my partner. And then the chores are for both."

Carmen insisted that times were changing and women no longer had to be "submissive." She had many faithful supporters, such as Bety, the elderly, stout, and mirthful illiterate Nahuatl speaker who followed her everywhere. Yet her feminism, outspokenness, and independence were viewed critically by some elders. As was the case for another female Milpaltense politician, Carmen's marriage was strained by her political ambitions, as her former husband complained that she was not fulfilling her duties. While this could give the impression that women are only allowed to be strong up to a point, it is important to remember that Carmen mixed both female- and male-dominated domains of power. The pushback female politicians often faced from "strong women" like Ámparo, who accused Carmen of "evil" ways, was not typically occasioned by a perceived excess of strength, but specifically by their intrusion into a typically male field of power. While many Milpaltenses felt that women's and men's power were equal, this feeling was based on comparing largely separate, gendered spheres of power.

## Rethinking Indigenous Women's Power

Following Million's concept of felt power, what animates Milpaltense worlds is not just political and economic power. Nahuatl-speaking married women's stories suggest that many kinds of power flow from supernatural and natural sources and from within their own bodies, which elders train the young and willing to perceive through storytelling and through bodily and spiritual techniques. Similarly, Durkheim taught us, inspired by Polynesian more-than-human notions of power, "There is no moment in our life without some rush of energy coming to us from the outside" ([1912] 2001, 159). Many anthropologists have since continued to conceptualize power as "at once a physical force and a moral power" (Mazzarella 2017, 1). Yet the social sciences have also often treated "power as something that is limiting and which is interchangeable with control" (Fernandes 2003, 17). For instance, the secular, rational Foucauldian understanding of power provides us with the bleak prospect of never being able to escape unequal power structures, as agency "does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located" (Mahmood 2001, 32). The guerreras', Conchita's, and other Milpaltense women's stories about visceral, affectively laden experiences of dealing with violence often pointed to a particular, gendered understanding of power, which was not primarily defined by hierarchy but emphasized women's love, generosity, creativity, and resilience.

Yet because of a propensity for hierarchic thinking among social scientists, previous analyses of violence against Indigenous women in Latin America have left women's power underexplored. According to Mayblin, "Catholic gender imagery and the prevalence of patriarchal structures has long focused gender theorists on the supposed tyranny of *machista* men and their oppression of women" (2011, 136). For example, Melhuus (1996) argued that rural Mexican women's status depended on their virtuous, virgin-like conduct, whereas men's status depended on defending their honor, which in turn hinged on their ability to control their wives. Analyses like this emphasize competing agendas, power imbalances, and violent antagonism between genders. Conversely, Mayblin suggests that her interlocutors in northeastern Brazil "downplay[ed] the difference between men and women," although conjugal violence was common and "systematic political, economic, and legal advantage ... privilege men" (2011, 148). Similarly, Milpaltenses were aware of certain power

imbalances between genders but discursively focused more on similarity than difference. As a result, they rarely spoke about machos and patriarchy as such; however, few disputed their presence when asked directly. While many Milpaltenses attributed different kinds of power to married men and women, they often considered both genders to be capable of violence, differentiating between strong women, whom they perceived as fighting for their family's and the communal good, and feminists and politicians, whom they viewed as selfishly working for their own benefit. While men seemed to be welcomed into formerly feminine spaces, women often seemed to be rejected when entering masculine spaces. This was particularly accentuated in the example of female politicians, who were rarely selected for top positions and faced more negative gossip than their male colleagues.

Contradicting theories of an emerging global "hegemonic masculinity," in which males occupy a dominant, antagonistic position vis-à-vis females (Moore 1994, 62), I have recorded discourses both of "feminine power," such as that of the nahual, and of "hegemonic masculinity," such as that of the gender-equality agency, indicating the contested nature of gender equality in the Milpaltense context. Complicating matters further, there is a certain level of cross-fertilization between different models of gender equality: the gender-equality agency occasionally drew on the warrior woman trope in its publications, while Conchita, in many respects a traditional "strong woman," was trained in a feminist leadership program in the city center. In addition, the same event may at once be empowering and disempowering for the women involved, as in the example of the nahual's talk on managing sexual harassment. Therefore, Milpaltense women's felt power is in dialogue with local gender and Indigeneity politics, which portrays men and women as different but equal, as well as with feminist notions of masculine domination, which portrays them as basically the same but unequally positioned. Just as it seems unfair to characterize feminists' struggle for collective empowerment as "selfish" (although many Milpaltenses do exactly that), it would be equally incorrect to interpret Nahuatl speakers' emphasis on feeling as individualistic. By regularly participating in collective activities like dance, ritual, and sharing food, as well as in communal struggles, women's felt power is at once individual and collective.

Across different ages and levels of class privilege, relationship status, and education, many Milpaltense women reported having experienced violence in their lives. Most did not easily accept mistreatment. Similar to other Nahuatl-speaking women in Milpa Alta, as well as other parts of Mexico (Raby 2012), Conchita affirmed, "*Nunca me dejé*" (I always stood up for myself). By collectively and individually constructing themselves as "strong women" and "warriors," women did not deny the existence of certain gender inequalities in their community, including in the spheres of politics, education, and inheritance, but chose to emphasize their resilience and women's own potential for violence.

As experiencing violence at home typically has an adverse impact on women's resilience (Tsirigotis and Luczak 2018), the "strong woman" narrative likely has benefits in maintaining or rebuilding their resilience and may thus help women to cope with individual and collective challenges in creative and productive ways (Le Masson et al. 2018). Yet while women's psychological, physical, and spiritual resilience allows them to bounce back from adversity, it does not prevent violence and may enhance women's vulnerability in some cases if it encourages them to stay with violent partners. Rather than being opposites, vulnerability and resilience are often interdependent (Barrios 2016), given that resilience potentially allows larger structures of violence to remain unaddressed (Roberts 2017).

Hence, Milpaltenses' stories of women's power may influence women's decisions in the face of violence, but not predictably so. Carmen's mother's experience of "strong womanhood" may

have her caused to stay in her violent marriage, while Carmen's feminist attitudes caused her to refuse bad treatment from her ex-husband. We can see then that "strong womanhood" and "warrior womanhood" are highly dynamic subjectivities that may be stretched in opposite directions.

Finally, centering Indigenous women's power as they feel and narrate it is a powerful act, in multiple ways. A woman may be powerful in some respects and not in others, without this necessarily being recognizable to (cultural) outsiders. How much certain kinds of power matter in relation to gender violence depends on who is feeling its effects. Interventions against gender violence might be more effective if they built on the diverse ways in which women's groups are cultivating felt power. Privileging politics in the strict sense when assessing questions of gender violence fails to acknowledge the important, transformative potential of shared work, sex, and love. Just like monolithic visions of theory that dichotomize Indigenous experience and its theorization (Simpson and Smith 2014, 19), the diffusion of a monolithic, detached vision of power renders Indigenous women's felt power invisible. We may address this epistemic violence through conceptual flexibility and disobedience—a refusal to divorce fact from feeling. As Carmen said, "For women to be heard, they have to have the guts to face this group of men who impose and want the woman to be ... always obeying. Not anymore."

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## Notes

- 1 All interviewees' names have been anonymized.
- 2 Here, "storytelling" refers to the often fragmented way that people share about their lives in conversation, rather than long narratives or folk tales only.
- 3 Indigenous women's sexual power has often been misrepresented, as in the case of Malintzin (whom the Mexican writer Octavio Paz immortalized as "*la chingada*," the fucked one), who, as an interpreter and diplomat, was instrumental to the Spanish conquest of Mexico (Jager 2015).

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