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Ancestral transplantation as a matter of gender:
Narrating us, Wigudun

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ABSTRACT

In this short essay, we want to revive some reflections reported to us by Yineth Muñoz, a person of Guna origin, an Indigenous people from Panama, to think with her what gives form to gender. We intend to critically imagine what happens to this concept – a technology, a somato-political fiction, and a material cutout – once the elaborations, concerns, and agency recalled and presented by Yineth's narratives traverse it. In this sense, the effort is not to explain Guna's gender, meaning to understand it as an object of ethnological elaboration. We would like to consider what comprises gender when it comes to metaphorizing – as an equivocal concept – the problems and reflections posed by Yineth. We will begin by going back to Yineth's considerations, which implicate gender in a series of other procedures and recursiveness that, we think, assist in raising questions to complicate some of the metaphors underlying mainstream descriptions concerned with matters of gender. Therefore, ours is an exercise concerned with a transfeminist engagement with the problem: to implicate oneself in it, not to explain it.

Keywords: Transfeminism; Critical Imagination; Gender.

In this short essay, we want to revive some reflections reported to us by Yineth Muñoz, a person of Guna origin, an Indigenous people from Panama, to think with her what gives form to gender. We intend to critically imagine (Hartman, 2019) what happens to this concept – a technology, a somato-political fiction, and a material cutout – once the elaborations, concerns, and agency recalled and presented by Yineth's narratives traverse it. In this sense, the effort is not to explain Guna's gender, meaning to understand it as an object of ethnological elaboration. We would like to consider what comprises gender when it comes to metaphorizing – as an equivocal concept – the problems and reflections posed by Yineth. We will begin by going back to Yineth's considerations, which implicate gender in a series of other procedures and recursiveness that, we think, assist in raising questions to complicate some of the metaphors underlying mainstream descriptions concerned with matters of gender. Therefore, ours is an exercise concerned with a transfeminist engagement with the problem: to implicate oneself in it, not to explain it.

In fact, it is from a wager on transfeminism that my reflection meets Yineth's. In December 2020, we gathered with other colleagues to create connections between transfeminisms and Indigenous philosophies, a space for experimentation that we called cross-fertilizations. On that occasion, Yineth

told us about the formation and naming of the organization of which she was then the president, "Wigudun Galu, Guna ancestral diversity community."

According to Yineth, about ten years ago, a prominent Guna activist and leader, Nandin Solís, traveled through the different communities of the Gunayala Country, the Guna territory on Panama's Caribbean coast, to conduct research. She intended to understand "where we come from and why we feel like women," said Yineth. On these journeys, talking with sages from different parts of Gunayala, Nandín learned the story of Wigudun, "the first transgender woman in the Country"; her name was Wigudun.

Upon telling Yineth about Wigudun, Nandín reportedly said: "Wigudun is you, Yineth. You are the indigenous trans-women. Just like you, she had long hair and felt like a woman. In the morning she went to the forest, did all the men's work... searched for bananas, manioc... in the afternoon, she did the women's tasks: embroidered the molas, did her hair... she always passed achiote on her face, to look like a woman." According to Yineth, Wigudun was a woman who liked organization: she always prepared the parties and collective activities in her community. And in 2020, she said, all the "trans-Indians" were still like that: united, festive, happy, and friendly. "We are always together, talking. This is what characterizes us as Wigudun. We are the offspring of Wigudun," she told us.

That's why the organization is called Wigudun Galu - not "indigenous trans-women's association," she said. It was created and named with the personal name of Wigudun because all Wigudun are her offspring and, like their ancestor, they also gather together to talk and take collective actions. Wigudun was the leader of her time, Yineth explained. Thus, the name of the organization refers to the Wigudun union. From the Guna language, the translation for Galu is housing, group, or set. Therefore, Wigudun Galu corresponds to the gathering of the Wigudun, their collective.

Yineth said that Wigudun was one of those responsible for establishing community life and teaching it to the Guna people. The arrival of Wigudun, Ibeorgun (her older brother), and Giggadiryai (her older sister) started the present time of Guna's life. If Ibeorgun and Giggadiryai are more readily associated with men's and women's occupations, Wigudun figures as an equivocal character: she leaves early to work with the men. She stays in the afternoon sewing with the women (Madi Dias, 2018: 30). Even though her brother and sister called Wigudun a "brother," the two realized that she was different, said Yineth, "she liked to have fun, organize, make molas, and keep her hair long." And they accepted her like that, being equivocal. And because of her descent, all the Wigudun are who they are and feel what they feel. This history is true even though, as Yineth rightly said, not all Guna people think alike, so not all communities accept the Wigudun people as Ibeorgun and Giggadiryai did with their sister/brother.

According to Yineth, before Nandín's research, not even they knew of Wigudun's existence. She explained that people don't talk much about it in the communities. So, Nandín's quest allowed her not only to learn about her ancestry but to adopt a new way of naming herself. A name that, we can say, does other things because it inserts other differences into play. Before Nandín began to disseminate the

results of her research, and the companions were called Wigudun, another term was used, a derogatory and discriminatory way, Yineth told us, of referring to them as those who "want to be women." Nowadays, the term is virtually in disuse, and the Wigudun have been striving to "make it oblivious," she says. So it was not only mobilized by the Wigudun and their families but also by the traditional authorities.

Yineth told us about the grand surprise she once had when visiting a Zaila, a sage and highest authority in her community. Every time a person leaves the GunaYala Country, even one who already resides elsewhere, such as Yineth, the person must report to the Zaila and ask his permission. This time, in doing so, Yineth was addressed by the Zaila as Wigudun. "You are Wigudun, Yineth. Wigudun is like you; she has long hair. I know your story," the Zaila said. Yineth told us that she felt thrilled after that because she knew that the Zaila was not lying, that she was Wigudun and that Wigudun was like her. And that's not all: all Wigudun are happy, she said. Even though they didn't know of the first transgender Guna person's existence, they are glad to have found their name. "We came back. We found our land, our origin, because we are from Wigudun. We came from her," she said.

Yineth said she always wondered why she was different and felt like a woman and why others misunderstood her. She learned that other people felt and were like her by meeting her companions and talking with them. However, they could not understand where this was coming from. They had no idea that there was, before them, a person who created them; someone who existed when she and her companions didn't even live, she recounts. "Wigudun, a trans-Indigenous person...so I tell my companions that they are Wigudun and must explain to their families and friends who they are...and that we are from her."

"There was a Guna trans person. No one talked about her existence. They don't talk. But I will continue to make sure that they see us. We exist. We are part of the ancestral diversity, and we will always exist. We will always exist. It doesn't matter what anyone else says. We are women, and that's how we identify ourselves. And we are Wigudun. The term will keep cropping up among other generations because my companions love to be told, 'here come the Wigudun.' They love it."

The statement "we are Wigudun" seems to express a set of distinct operations. On the one hand, Wigudun is an ancestral character that locates the experience of Yineth and her companions in an extended temporality. On the other hand, Wigudun also operates a way of naming bodily alterations and features (wearing big hair, being a trans-woman, etc.) and collectively being together in Wigudun Galu's activism. If we imagine that Wigudun tells us something about gender, what do we have to make with gender to imagine other stories accompanied by Yineth?

In Euro-American knowledge practices, the concept of gender has several competing histories. From its operationalization in John Money's clinic with intersex children in the USA in the 1950s, as a way to name the social-hormonal plasticity of bodies, to the feminist invention in the 1970s, in which gender appears as a way to politicize women's experiences of oppression, a particular binarism residue

persists in this concept. Related to an equally binary notion of sexual difference (Oyewumi, 2021 [1997]), this concept makes gender a powerful idiom for talking not only about what men and women are, assuming them as given, but about what men and women do (Strathern, 2016).

The binarity insidiousness that runs through the trajectory of gender as a concept becomes a field of attention and dispute with transfeminism, other trans movements' emergency, and the coloniality of gender critique. Marquis Bey points to the ability of "*transness*" (intensified gender non-normativity) to disrupt the ontology of gender by connecting it as a paraontological issue. In posing paraontology as a way of thinking and living the gender issue, Bey explores the dual meaning of the prefix *para-*: "denoting paraontology [...] as a 'standing beside' that causes gaps in the production of ontological and ontic meaning, *and* a protection against the regime of ontology, that is to say, defended from the tyranny of stabilizing and hegemonic subjectivation" (Bey, 2020: 18).

In Bey's company, bringing paraontology to think about the problem of gender helps us to avoid converting our effort at critical creation into a description that pretends to explain the ontology of Wigudun through a set of propositions about what/who Wigudun is and/or is not. What paraontology offers us is a language of pulsation and resonance. Wigudun may indicate a resistance to the ontologizing question, "what is Wigudun?"; not because Wigudun is not definable, but because its definition is perhaps the least exciting way to wonder about what Wigudun does with gender.

When Yineth alternates between the statements "I am Wigudun" and "I am *from* Wigudun," we can think that "being Wigudun" is less a generic identity than a way of transplanting herself into a story that is "from Wigudun," which places her as a plot possibility. Among other things, doing so would allow us to create a new existential territory: it is as if, in the words of Antonio Caliban Catrileo, talking about Wigudun was a way of "planting seeds for the future in the past" or even of pointing to another dynamic of time. Unlike the term by which people previously called them, Wigudun establishes an ancestry connection that reconfigures how Yineth and her companions relate to each other while also demanding from others a specific way of relating (other than through the discriminatory way). To some extent, Wigudun enables methods of intervention and creation that other forms of naming did not allow.

Thinking of the surroundings of gender, we can conceive Wigudun as the transplantation (*sensu* Wynter, sd) of a field of possibilities capable of remaking the relational terrain narrated through the very existence of ancestral Wigudun. However, it is a transplantation that reconfigures the whole story: what is transplanted resists the easy delimitation and the establishment of unidirectional causal relationships inscribed in linear time. Is Wigudun summoned to the time of Yineth and her companions, or is this a deployment from that one? Are they times that come and go or allow one to cross them, forming another disposition of time? In fact, it makes little sense to determine who or what alters whom: Wigudun's time to Yineth and her colleagues or the other way around. Immersed in a question about time, perhaps this indeterminability enables Yineth and her companions to formulate a "memory of self-determination and freedom" as a gender inflection or in the surroundings of it.

In these terms, gender as a memory of self-determination and freedom rehabilitates us with our own stories of trans-ancestry, making it possible for us to escape the accusations of anachronism or non-historicity that some associate with the created times through which we fabricate our stories. What is at stake is not the production of memory of identities (trans, non-binary, or any other) but remembrance as a gesture that beckons to forms of engagement that bet for self-determination. In other terms, we evoke a relational mode of being-in-itself, so to speak, that depends on a multiple "us." Wigudun are many: ancestral, those self-called Wigudun, and those gathered in an organization. Among them, they are not the same, although they are. Among them, they seem neither to be nor not to be because the 'us' that connects them exceeds the idea of a "we, Wigundun" that our European languages seem to assume when translating it. For us, translating is a danger, as Castiel Vitorino Brasileiro used to say. Yineth's reflection, which points to how people are like Wigudun, are her, are hers, her descendants, establishes a complexity of the "us" that escapes the ordinary "we." This escapism, challenging to put into words, seems to allow ancestral Wigudun, Yineth, and her colleagues to connect as "We, Wigudun," "the ones who have always existed." An "us" and an "always" that requires neither Time nor Being, despite being harassed by them - and by the translation that presumes them. It seems that a place of connections is established, besides the possibility of Being: para-ontology.

What makes these creations an indication of forms of existence that, as Castiel Vitorino Brasileiro says, are taken by "passions for freedom." After all, among an ancestor, organization, way of naming itself, body practice, and more, Wigudun resists the definition to the same extent that it opens up the field of the possible through its indiscernibleness. So, asking what Wigudun is would limit her to stable properties that she crosses without stopping.

Then, the question is not whether to dock the queer ships in the ports of the Guna stories or our own. We also hesitate to think that what is present in Wigudun's (or gender's) indeterminacy is a form of fluidity at best or trickery at worst. What we try to compose is a way of reporting problems that tell other stories about them, unfolding new matters. In characterizing her year 2020 and the challenges brought on by the pandemic, Yineth called herself "imprisoned in love," indicating the importance of the friendly relationships between her and her fellow Wigudun women. Being imprisoned in love should not be taken as a restriction of freedom but as another way of moving together (com|motion) and committing to the movement. Implicating oneself in gender and not explaining it, as we said, is perhaps a way to experience what happens when we recognize that we are prisoners in it.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Both authors performed equally all the contributor roles.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No conflicts.

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