

**A SITUATED CRITIQUE OF ANGLO-NORTH AMERICAN
FEMINIST DISCOURSES ON MOTHERHOOD**

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*...en una danza salvaje
 que convoque a otras mujeres y éstas a otras más
 hasta que seamos un batallón
 o un ejército de amor
 que acabe con todas las miserias y opresiones
 estamos buscando, buscamos todavía una mujer,
 que mirando al sol
 no cierre los ojos.*

Fragmento del poema "Estamos buscando" de Julieta Paredes

*...in a wild dance
 that calls upon other women, and they upon others still
 until we become a battalion
 or an army of love
 that puts an end to all miseries and oppressions
 we are searching, we are still searching for a woman
 who, looking at the sun,
 does not close her eyes.*

Excerpt from the poem "We are searching" by Julieta Paredes

Abstract

Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism have been central to legitimizing motherhood as a site of feminist inquiry. Yet their theoretical frameworks remain shaped by specific historical, geopolitical, linguistic, and epistemic conditions that privilege Anglophone, Global North maternal experiences. This study advances a feminist decolonial critique of these frameworks by foregrounding coloniality as constitutive of feminist knowledge production on motherhood. Drawing on decolonial feminist thought from Abya Yala, it examines how universalizing claims obscure the racialized, colonial, and migratory conditions that shape maternal lives across the Global South. Through critical textual and discursive analysis, it demonstrates that the marginalization of Latin American and Caribbean feminist genealogies is not incidental but structural. The study calls for a hemispheric, plurilingual reorientation of the field that challenges epistemic authority and repositions Abya Yala feminist thought as central to the theorization of motherhood.

To Mateo, for transforming me into a mother.

To my Younger Self, for her indomitable courage.

To my sisters, Alejandra and Mariana, for our bravery and our grief.

To Tatjana, for always believing in me.

To the women of Abya Yala, for our resistance.

CONTENTS

Abstract

Dedication

Introduction

Epistemic Location and Project Grounding

Aims and Objectives

Aims

Objectives

1. Mapping the Literature: Feminist Engagements with Motherhood within Anglo-North America

Introduction

Rejection, Recovery, and Critique

Ambivalence and Internal Critiques

O'Reilly, Matricentric Feminism, and the Institutionalization of Motherhood Studies

Diversifying Maternal Theory

Takševa and the Epistemic Blind Spot

2. Theoretical Framework

Matricentric Feminism

Definition

Problem it Addresses

Core Principles

Key Distinctions and Theoretical Contributions

Decolonial Feminism

Definition

Problem it Addresses

Key Distinctions and Theoretical Contributions

Analytical Operationalization

Epistemic Asymmetries and Knowledge Circulation

Delimitations of the Framework

3. Methodology

Epistemological Positioning

Methodological Orientation

Decolonial Feminism as a Methodological Practice

Research Questions

Data Selection and Analytical Materials

Conditions of Knowledge Production

Scope and Limitations

4. A Feminist Decolonial Critique of Matricentric Feminism and Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies

Introduction

Revisiting the Theoretical Context

Limits and Blind Spots of Matricentric Feminism

The Hemispheric Epistemic Silencing of Abya Yala in Anglo-North

American Motherhood Studies

Not in Dialogue, but Not in Silence: Feminist Genealogies on Motherhood in Abya Yala

Towards a Decolonial Reorientation

Conclusions

Bibliography

INTRODUCTION

Feminist engagements with motherhood have long been marked by tension. While second-wave feminism famously positioned motherhood as a central site of women's oppression, subsequent feminist scholarship has sought to recover maternal experience as a legitimate and necessary object of analysis. From this recovery emerged Motherhood Studies as a distinct interdisciplinary field, alongside theoretical frameworks such as matricentric feminism, which insists on the need to centre mothers, mothering, and motherhood within feminist theory and politics. These interventions have been crucial in naming the structural marginalization of mothers under patriarchy and in challenging androcentric and child-centric biases within feminism.

My work intervenes at this juncture in the field by offering a feminist decolonial critique of Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism. This thesis argues that while these frameworks have been foundational in establishing motherhood as a legitimate site of feminist analysis, they remain shaped by Anglo-North American feminist genealogies that limit their capacity to account for maternal lives formed through colonial histories, racialized hierarchies, and migration, particularly as these are experienced across the Global South. Rather than questioning the legitimacy or significance of these fields, this thesis examines their limits when read from *Abya Yala*.

Abya Yala is a term in the language of the Kuna people, Indigenous to the territory currently known as Colombia and Panama, originally used to refer to the American continent prior to colonization (Cabnal, 2010, p. 11). In its

contemporary usage, the term has been reclaimed by Indigenous movements and decolonial scholars as a way of rejecting the colonial naming of the continent and affirming Indigenous epistemic sovereignty. In this thesis, I follow the usage adopted by decolonial feminists, employing the term to refer to the region currently known as Latin America and the Caribbean (Curiel, 2020, 4:19; Curiel, 2021, p. 78; p. 80). Abya Yala refers not only to a geographical region but to a historically and politically situated epistemic space shaped by colonial violence, racial hierarchization, dispossession, and resistance. Feminist knowledge emerging from Abya Yala has developed in relation to these conditions and therefore offers critical perspectives that cannot be fully captured within dominant Western European and Anglo-North American feminist frameworks.

Drawing on decolonial feminist thought from Abya Yala, this thesis argues that coloniality is constitutive of feminist knowledge production on motherhood. Coloniality shapes which maternal experiences are rendered visible, intelligible, and legitimate within academic discourse, often through the universalization of maternal experiences theorized in Anglo-North American feminist scholarship and the relative absence of maternal knowledges emerging from other geopolitical locations. While matricentric feminism has made significant contributions by foregrounding maternal subjectivity and well-being, it remains insufficient on its own for analysing motherhood in contexts marked by colonial histories and ongoing forms of epistemic and material domination. Decolonial feminism provides analytical tools to interrogate these limits by foregrounding

coloniality as constitutive of feminist knowledge production on motherhood and by centring embodied and situated maternal knowledges from Abya Yala.

The consolidation of Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism has taken place primarily within the Anglosphere. As a result, the field has been shaped by specific historical, geopolitical, linguistic, and epistemic conditions that are rarely made explicit. While Motherhood Studies has expanded its analytical scope to include diverse maternal experiences, these expansions have largely occurred within frameworks shaped by dominant feminist traditions in Anglo-North American and Western European academic contexts. Although these dominant frameworks have produced important insights, they have also generated epistemic blind spots, particularly regarding how colonial histories, racialized hierarchies, migration regimes, and global inequalities shape maternal lives beyond the Global North. The central concern of this thesis is therefore not whether Motherhood Studies has diversified, but rather how the geopolitical and epistemic boundaries of the field continue to shape what becomes visible, intelligible, and legitimate as feminist knowledge on motherhood.

The thesis is organized as follows. After outlining my positionality and research aims, Chapter 1 maps Anglo-North American feminist engagements with motherhood by situating the emergence of Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism within their historical and institutional contexts, tracing key feminist debates and diversifications of maternal theory, and identifying the epistemic limits that make decolonial feminism a necessary corrective. Chapter 2 elaborates the conceptual foundations of matricentric feminism and decolonial

feminism, clarifying their points of convergence and tension. Chapter 3 details what it means to do decolonial feminist analysis in this project. Finally, Chapter 4 offers a feminist decolonial critique of matricentric feminism and Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies, demonstrating how Abya Yala feminist frameworks reshape the analysis of maternal subjectivity and knowledge.

By foregrounding coloniality as constitutive of feminist knowledge on motherhood, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates within Motherhood Studies by critically examining the limits of Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism when read from Abya Yala, while calling for a hemispheric, plurilingual, and epistemically just reorientation of the field.

EPISTEMIC LOCATION AND PROJECT GROUNDING

This project is grounded in my positionality as a Mexican mother, a migrant, a feminist scholar from Abya Yala, and a researcher working within an Anglo-North American academic institution in Canada. My location is not incidental to the analysis but constitutive of it. As a migrant mother navigating academic, cultural, and linguistic borders, I occupy a position shaped by both proximity to and distance from the field I critique. This standpoint enables a critical reading of Motherhood Studies that is attentive to what becomes normalized within the field, as well as to what remains absent or unintelligible. Rather than claiming representational authority over Latin American and Caribbean feminisms, this thesis situates itself as a situated intervention that brings feminist frameworks from Abya Yala into dialogue with Anglo-North American motherhood scholarship.

My relationship to motherhood is inseparable from migration, coloniality, and survival. My family's migration from Mexico to Canada in 2021 was motivated primarily by concern for my child's safety and future, in the context of escalating violence against women and children in Mexico (Dalia Empower, 2022; REDIM, 2022; ECPAT International & EDIAC/ECPAT Mexico, 2021, p. 20). Rather than representing an isolated personal decision, migration can be understood as a response to broader histories of coloniality, inequality, and precarity that continue to shape life across the Global South. At the same time, migration profoundly transformed the way my body, identity, language, and

mothering practices came to be read and interpreted across different geopolitical contexts.

I am a Mexican woman of mixed Indigenous, Afro-Mexican, and Spanish ancestry. Growing up within a deeply colourist society, proximity to whiteness functioned as a source of relative privilege that I did not fully recognize until migration displaced my social location. In Canada I ceased to be read as *white* and became racialized as *Latin American*, revealing the contextual and relational nature of racialization. As Hall (2021) argues, race operates as a *floating signifier* whose meanings are socially produced rather than biologically fixed (p. 362). My own trajectory illustrates how racial categories shift across geopolitical contexts, exposing the instability of racialization and its dependence on historically situated relations of power.

While Critical Race Theory provides important tools for understanding these dynamics, this project is grounded primarily in decolonial feminist epistemologies from Abya Yala. From this perspective, race, gender, class, coloniality, language, and citizenship cannot be understood as separate systems but as entangled structures that shape both lived experience and knowledge production simultaneously (Espinosa Miñoso, 2020; Quijano, 2007, pp.1-2). This framework resonates with my own experience as a migrant mother navigating intersecting forms of racialization, gendered expectations, linguistic displacement, and class transformation across national borders.

Migration also transformed my class position and my experience of mothering. The transition from middle-class life in Mexico to low-income

temporary migrant status in Canada altered how my accent, my body, and my maternal practices were perceived within institutional settings. Navigating schools, public services, and academia as a non-native English speaker heightened my awareness of how motherhood is culturally regulated and how linguistic and cultural difference is frequently interpreted as deficiency (Takševa, 2026, p. 2). These experiences reinforced my sensitivity to the universalizing assumptions embedded within dominant feminist Anglo-North American feminist discourses on motherhood.

My experience as a migrant mother resonates with Takševa (2026) analysis of Yax-Fraser's concept of *cross-cultural mothering*. Takševa, a transnationally situated feminist scholar in Motherhood Studies originally from Yugoslavia and professionally based in Canada, argues that mothers who inhabit multiple cultural locations develop forms of border consciousness that enable critical reflection on dominant maternal ideologies across contexts (pp. 2-3).

Building on this insight, I argue that my position as an outsider, while challenging, ultimately benefits my research. It enables me to approach the feminist theorization of motherhood in Anglo-North America from a standpoint distinct from the one I occupied in my country of origin. I can now reflect on how motherhood is theorized within feminist discourse across two distinct social and geopolitical locations situated differently within global hierarchies of power and privilege.

This perspective aligns with Takševa's (2026) argument that, while mothers internalize the institution of Mothering in distinctive ways, grounded in

specific historical, cultural, and political realities and shaped by each mother's position within structural hierarchies, migrant mothers experience an additional layer of complexity because they are simultaneously shaped by more than one culture and by competing expectations surrounding motherhood across multiple contexts. Takševa argues that this dynamic experience involves complex processes of negotiation and agency. Being situated between contradictory norms from both their country of origin and the host country places migrant mothers in a liminal space, where they must learn to navigate different ideological frameworks that regulate motherhood (pp. 2-3).

The vantage point afforded by this position grants migrant mothers a particular kind of *border thinking* (Mignolo, as cited in Takševa, 2026), a mode of knowing that emerges from the margins and enables a critical interrogation of dominant norms. This border consciousness, combined with their outsider position, provides migrant mothers with a unique capacity to identify tensions, fractures, and continuities across maternal ideologies, positioning them as active agents in the production of more diverse and inclusive social values. For Takševa, the experiences of migrant mothers constitute a rich source of situated knowledge that not only illuminates the complexity of mothering while being a migrant but also exposes how the institution of motherhood is sustained by privileges of class, citizenship, and language (pp. 2–3).

Building on Takševa's insights, I further argue that mother scholars who are migrants from the Global South occupy a distinctive epistemic location from which to interrogate Anglo-North American feminist discourses on motherhood.

Their location enables them to identify how privileges of class, citizenship, language, and geopolitics shape which maternal voices become intelligible, legitimate, and authoritative within feminist scholarship.

I remain conscious that my own position is also shaped by forms of privilege, including relative proximity to whiteness and access to Global North academic institutions. Decolonial feminism demands that such privileges be acknowledged rather than disavowed. It is not light-skinned women who should occupy the central voice within decolonial feminist projects. Accordingly, this thesis does not claim representational authority over Abya Yala feminisms. Instead, it offers a situated intervention that seeks to place feminist thought from Abya Yala into critical dialogue with Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies while remaining accountable to the epistemic traditions from which it speaks.

This thesis emerges from an embodied and situated trajectory as a Mexican woman, a mother, a migrant, and a feminist scholar from Abya Yala building both a life and an academic career in the Global North. My forty-six years of life and eleven years of mothering have been, and will continue to be, deeply embedded in both my research process and the theoretical contributions that emerge from it. My lived experience is not mere anecdotal evidence, but a site of epistemic insight that informs how I read, question, and critique dominant feminist frameworks on motherhood. From this situated location, I seek not to universalize my own experience but to expose the limits of universalizing discourses themselves.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aims

The primary aim of this thesis is to develop a feminist decolonial critique of Anglo-North American feminist discourses on motherhood, with particular attention to matricentric feminism and the broader field of Motherhood Studies as sites of feminist knowledge production. From a standpoint grounded in Abya Yala feminisms, this research interrogates how specific historical, geopolitical, linguistic, and epistemic conditions shape what is theorized as *motherhood*, whose maternal experiences are rendered visible or legitimate, and which forms of maternal knowledge remain marginal, silenced, or unintelligible within the field.

Objectives

To achieve this aim, the thesis pursues the following objectives:

1. To situate matricentric feminism and Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies within their specific geopolitical and epistemic contexts, examining how their theoretical foundations are shaped by Global North locations, English-language dominance, and Western European feminist genealogies.
2. To critically examine the strengths and limitations of matricentric feminism, acknowledging its contributions to centring maternal subjectivity and politicizing motherhood, while identifying the epistemic blind spots that emerge when it is read from a decolonial feminist perspective rooted in Abya Yala.

3. To identify and analyze epistemic silences within Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood, particularly regarding the limited engagement with feminist genealogies, theoretical frameworks, and maternal knowledges produced in Abya Yala.
4. To bring decolonial feminist frameworks from Abya Yala into critical dialogue with Motherhood Studies, not as additive perspectives, but as analytical lenses that reframe how motherhood, maternal subjectivity, and feminist knowledge production are conceptualized.
5. To demonstrate how a decolonial feminist standpoint reshapes the analysis of motherhood, revealing the colonial assumptions embedded in universalizing feminist claims and highlighting the need for hemispheric, situated, and plurilingual approaches within feminist scholarship on motherhood.

CHAPTER 1

MAPPING THE LITERATURE: FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS WITH MOTHERHOOD WITHIN ANGLO-NORTH AMERICA

Introduction

This chapter examines the feminist scholarship that has shaped Anglo-North American theorization of motherhood, with particular attention to both its major contributions and its persistent epistemic limits. Rather than offering an exhaustive review of the field, this chapter reconstructs the intellectual genealogy through which motherhood progressively emerged as a legitimate object of feminist inquiry and through which Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism became established as distinctive areas of scholarship.

The chapter traces how feminist engagements with motherhood have evolved through successive moments of critique, recovery, reformulation, and institutionalization. Rather than presenting this trajectory as a linear progression, it examines debates, tensions, and internal critiques that have shaped the field, highlighting how feminist understandings of motherhood have been continually renegotiated in response to changing theoretical and political concerns. Particular attention is given to the emergence of matricentric feminism as a response to the historical marginalization of motherhood within Women's Studies, and the subsequent institutional consolidation of Motherhood Studies within Anglo-North American academia.

This genealogy also reveals the limits of the field. Although feminist scholarship has progressively expanded its engagement with motherhood by

incorporating perspectives attentive to race, sexuality, and diverse family formations, these developments have occurred predominantly within Anglo-North American intellectual traditions and institutional settings. Consequently, the conceptual categories, epistemic assumptions, and theoretical questions that organize the field continue to reflect the historical and geopolitical conditions from which they emerged.

By reconstructing the intellectual development of Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood, this chapter identifies the conceptual and epistemic terrain upon which this thesis intervenes. The genealogy presented here demonstrates that Motherhood Studies has developed through successive critiques of its own limitations while simultaneously revealing persistent exclusions that remain insufficiently addressed within the field. It is within this ongoing conversation that this thesis situates its intervention by examining the epistemic limits of the field when read from Abya Yala. By making visible the historical and epistemic boundaries of Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood, this chapter establishes why decolonial feminist thought provides a necessary analytical lens for interrogating the production of feminist knowledge on motherhood and for examining which maternal experiences become visible, legitimate, and intelligible within dominant academic discourse.

Rejection, Recovery, and Critique

Hansen's (1997) account of feminist engagements with motherhood provides a useful organizing framework for mapping the early development of Anglo-North American feminist thought on the maternal. She describes this

relationship as unfolding through three overlapping stages: rejection, recovery, and critique with attempts at recovery strategies. This framework is valuable for this thesis because it situates feminist debates on motherhood within a historically specific intellectual trajectory, rather than presenting them as universal theoretical developments (pp. 5-6).

In the first stage, early second-wave feminists such as de Beauvoir, Firestone, Millet, and Friedan challenged the naturalization of the maternal role by linking motherhood to women's oppression. While Hansen notes that these positions were often more ambivalent than later accounts suggest, she emphasizes a shared tendency within this period to view motherhood as incompatible with women's emancipation. This rejection was directed not necessarily at mothers themselves, but at the social, ideological, and institutional structures through which women were expected to find fulfilment primarily or exclusively through maternity (Hansen, 1997, pp. 5-6).

In the second stage, scholars such as Rich, Chodorow, and Ruddick began to re-examine motherhood by distinguishing between its oppressive institutional dimensions and the lived experience of mothering (Hansen, 1997, pp. 5-6). A foundational moment in this recovery of the maternal is Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and mothering as lived experience. In 1976 she first proposed the differentiation

between two meanings of Motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and children, and the *institution*—which aims at ensuring that that

potential—and all women—shall remain under male control (1986, p. 13, emphasis in original).

This conceptual differentiation enabled feminists to challenge the assumption that motherhood is inherently oppressive while directing critique toward the ideological, social, and political structures that regulate women through maternal norms. Rich's distinction became a cornerstone of Anglo-North American feminist debates on the maternal. As O'Reilly (2017) later summarized, motherhood came to designate the patriarchal institution that disciplines and constrains women, whereas mothering referred to women's own practices and experiences, defined by mothers themselves, and holding emancipatory potential once free from institutional control (p. 728). This theoretical move made it possible to reclaim maternal experience without abandoning feminist critique, and it continues to structure much feminist scholarship on motherhood in Anglo-North America. For this reason, Rich's distinction is central to the intellectual genealogy of the field that this thesis critically examines.

Hansen's (1997) third and ongoing stage is characterized by critiques of earlier feminist positions and by effort to develop alternative frameworks capable of accounting for both the burdens and the meanings of maternal experience. In this stage, feminist scholarship moves beyond the opposition between rejecting motherhood as oppression and recovering mothering as empowerment. Instead, it attempts to think through contradictions, ambivalences, and political possibilities of maternal experience without collapsing motherhood into either subordination or liberation. As Hansen observes, despite motherhood's

reintroduction as a legitimate object of feminist inquiry, there remains little consensus on how to redefine it. Many women, she argues, live with ambivalence: rejecting institutionalized motherhood while refusing to relinquish either the pleasures or responsibilities of childbearing and childrearing (pp. 5, 6).

Read from a decolonial feminist perspective, Hansen's genealogy helps illuminate how the central questions and conceptual tensions organizing feminist scholarship on motherhood were shaped by a particular Anglo-North American intellectual context. This does not diminish the importance of these interventions. Rather, it makes it possible to examine more critically which maternal experiences, histories, and epistemologies became central to the field, and which remained outside its dominant frameworks.

Ambivalence and Internal Critiques

The tensions identified by Hansen have been further developed by feminist scholars who emphasize the persistent ambivalence surrounding motherhood within feminist thought. Subsequent scholarship has continued to negotiate these competing understandings of motherhood as oppression and mothering as empowerment, highlighting the complexity and contextual nature of maternal experience.

Umansky (1996), examining Anglo-North American feminism between 1968 and 1982, identifies two dominant tendencies within feminist thought: one that framed motherhood primarily as an oppressive mandate threatening women's autonomy, and another that sought to recover mothering as a source of connection, self-knowledge, and social transformation once separated from

patriarchal control. Feminist discourse, she argues, oscillated between rejection and idealization of motherhood, yet consistently treated it as a politically charged site rather than a neutral or purely private experience (pp. 2-3). Her analysis reinforces the idea that motherhood has occupied an unstable position within feminist theory continually negotiated rather than definitively resolved.

Kinser (2010) similarly characterizes feminist engagements with motherhood as marked by celebration, critique, resistance, and reimagination. Rather than viewing these multiple positions as evidence of theoretical inconsistency, Kinser interprets them as reflecting the openness of feminist scholarship to ongoing debate and conceptual reformulation (pp. 1-2). The coexistence of these divergent perspectives illustrates that motherhood has remained a productive site of feminist contestation, generating successive attempts to rethink maternal subjectivity beyond essentialist or deterministic understandings.

While these interventions complicated earlier feminist understandings of motherhood, it was Black feminist scholarship which introduced a more fundamental critique by exposing the racialized assumptions embedded within dominant feminist theorization. Collins (1987) argues that white feminist critiques of motherhood often reflected the historical experience of white middle-class women while overlooking the distinct social and political meanings that motherhood has held for Black women. Collins distinguishes between white feminist perspectives on motherhood, often shaped by the protection afforded by hegemonic whiteness, and Black feminist understandings that frame motherhood

as historically tied to survival, community responsibility, and resistance to racialized oppression (pp. 154-161).

Collins' intervention represents a significant epistemic shift within feminist scholarship on motherhood. It demonstrates that maternal experience cannot be theorized independently of race and the historical conditions through which motherhood is lived. In doing so, Black feminist thought challenged the implicit universalization of white maternal experience and opened the field to more situated understandings of motherhood. However, while this critique was fundamental, the field still remains largely shaped by Anglo-North American feminist traditions, leaving broader questions of coloniality, geopolitics, and feminist knowledge production in the Global South largely unexplored.

O'Reilly, Matricentric Feminism, and the Institutionalization of Motherhood Studies

O'Reilly (2021b) argues that although the 1970s and 1980s generated significant feminist scholarship on motherhood, much of this work failed to become canonical within Women's Studies, contributing to the continued marginalization of motherhood as a serious area of inquiry (p. 219). The lack of theorization around motherhood in most second-wave feminist theory, not in terms of the oppressive potential of the maternal institution, but of women's actual maternal experiences, also led to the neglect of a crucial reality highlighted by O'Reilly: that mothers are oppressed within patriarchy not only as women but also as mothers. The categories of *mother* and *woman* are not interchangeable, as mothers face specific challenges across social, economic, political, cultural,

and psychological domains that are unique to their maternal identity and role (p. 42).

O'Reilly insists that maternity must be included in feminist analysis not only as a subset of women's issues but as a distinct axis of oppression and identity, comparable to race, class, or sexuality. Just as Black women inhabit this world not only as women but as racialized women, mothers inhabit this world not only as women but as mothers, with distinct needs and concerns. It is from this critique that O'Reilly proposes a matricentric feminism centred on women who are mothers and their concerns. By centring motherhood as a critical axis of identity, structural disadvantage, and political agency, matricentric feminism seeks to reclaim maternal subjectivity as a legitimate and necessary site of feminist theorization (2021b, pp. 225-226).

In this sense, matricentric feminism does not simply add motherhood to existing feminist concerns. Rather, it asks feminist theory to take mothers, mothering, and motherhood as central analytic and political categories. This move responds directly to the historical marginalization of motherhood within Women's Studies and challenges the assumption that feminist analysis can adequately account for maternal experience through the broader category of woman alone. As a theoretical articulation, matricentric feminism is therefore fundamental because it names mothers as a distinct social group and insists that their specific needs, experiences, and forms of marginalization require feminist analysis in their own right.

O'Reilly's work and leadership is also central to the institutional consolidation of Motherhood Studies within Anglo-North American feminism. From the mid-1990s onward, motherhood gradually gained institutional visibility through the organization of the first international conferences on motherhood, the establishment of the Association for Research on Mothering (later MIRCJ, now IAMAS), the founding of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, and the creation of Demeter Press as the first feminist publishing house devoted to maternal scholarship. These platforms offered visibility to maternal perspectives that mainstream feminism had overlooked, particularly those of racialized, queer, Indigenous, and marginalized mothers (O'Reilly, 2021b, pp. 216-218).

At the same time, the twenty-first-century Motherhood Movement emerged as a grassroots political formation that challenged the privatization of motherhood. Events like the Million Mom March (2000), the creation of *Mothers Movement Online* (2003), and publications such as Crittenden's *The Price of Motherhood* (2000) became catalysts for maternal activism. This movement not only reframed motherhood as a political matter but also reinforced the academic field by providing a lived, collective foundation for theorizing maternal subjectivity (O'Reilly, 2021b, pp. 135-141). Together, these trajectories show how feminist critiques, institutional developments, and activist movements converged to reposition motherhood within feminist discourse.

For this thesis, O'Reilly's work constitutes a central object of analysis. Matricentric feminism offers an indispensable framework for understanding the marginalization of mothers and for legitimizing motherhood as a serious object of

feminist inquiry. Likewise, the institutional development of Motherhood Studies demonstrates the importance of creating scholarly spaces dedicated to maternal experience, subjectivity, and politics. At the same time, the consolidation of Motherhood Studies made visible the need to both diversify maternal theory and interrogate the epistemic blind spots that continue to structure the field.

Diversifying Maternal Theory

The theoretical and institutional consolidation of Motherhood Studies created space for feminist scholars and activists to theorize maternal experiences that had been marginalized within dominant accounts of motherhood. Alongside O'Reilly's call to centre mothers as a distinct social group, scholars working from Black feminist, lesbian, queer, and trans perspectives have expanded maternal theory by challenging the assumption that motherhood can be understood through a universalized white, heterosexual, cisgender, and biologically defined maternal subject.

Black feminist scholarship has articulated distinctive maternal practices that counter dominant narratives of motherhood. Collins (1987) notes that while feminists often theorized motherhood as primarily oppressive, Black women have long located meaning, status, and power in mothering. For many Black women, mothering has functioned as a space of resistance against racist structures, as well as a locus of social activism and community care. Black mothers' roles extend beyond biological ties, often encompassing non-biological dependants and broader forms of collective responsibility. This theorization has generated a growing body of work that defines motherhood as a symbol of power and

resilience for Black women, emphasizing its significance in both family and community life (pp. 156-161).

One of the most significant challenges to institutional motherhood has also emerged through lesbian mothering. As Gabb (1999) argues, lesbian parenting directly contests heteronormativity and the gendered division of labour by decoupling family formation from the binary model of man – woman. Lesbian families disrupt patriarchal logics by creating spaces where care work is shared with greater flexibility, without the presumption that a father figure is central or that the mother is solely responsible. In doing so, lesbian mothering repudiates the patrilinear narrative of the family and opens the possibility for maternal practices grounded in equality, negotiation, and resistance to gendered hierarchies (pp. 127, 130).

More recent contributions within maternal theory have further expanded critiques of heteronormative motherhood through analyses of queer and trans parenting. Parks' (2021) discussion of *queer possibilities* highlights the denaturalization of motherhood and the destabilization of normative familial roles, including challenges to gender binarism and biological essentialism (pp. 799-810). Similarly, Riggs et al. (2021) examine trans parenting as a site where cisgenderist assumptions about reproduction and parental identity are contested, positioning trans parenthood as an important expansion of maternal theory (pp. 823-831).

These interventions are crucial because they demonstrate how feminist scholarship has increasingly challenged the naturalization of heteronormative

motherhood and expanded the range of familial and caregiving practices considered within maternal theory. They contribute to broader, indispensable debates about the diversification of kinship, reproduction, and caregiving practices beyond heteronormative frameworks. At the same time, these expansions have largely taken place within Anglo-North American feminist frameworks. This does not diminish their significance, but it raises further questions about the epistemic and geopolitical boundaries of the field.

Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism have been transformed by internal critiques that contest dominant maternal norms and insist on the plurality of maternal subjects and practices. It is undeniable that the field has worked to address some of these exclusions by producing situated knowledge and incorporating into feminist theory the complexity and specificity of the experiences of Black, lesbian, queer, trans, gender non-conforming, and other marginalized mothers and parents. Nevertheless, I contend that important epistemologies from Abya Yala remain excluded.

Takševa and the Epistemic Blind Spot

Takševa's work is central to this mapping because it identifies a persistent blind spot within Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood. Her analysis clarifies how Motherhood Studies emerged in response to omissions within feminist theory, while also insisting on the diversity, complexity, and contextual nature of maternal experience. In this sense, her work helps explain both the conditions that made Motherhood Studies necessary and the limitations that continue to shape feminist theorization of the maternal.

Takševa (2018) describes the relationship between feminism and motherhood as ambivalent and complex (p. 177). She argues that feminist scholarship in Anglo-North America has shown limited interest in systematically theorizing the diversity of maternal experiences, resulting in the exclusion or underrepresentation of motherhood as both an institution and a lived reality (p. 178). Writing as an immigrant mother scholar working in Canada, Takševa identifies a persistent universalizing tendency within Anglo-North American feminist theory, whereby maternal experience is implicitly framed through specific cultural, racial, and geopolitical locations, most frequently white and located in the Global North, while being presented as universally applicable (pp. 181-182).

For Takševa, this blind spot can be traced back to second-wave radical feminist frameworks that foreground motherhood's oppressive dimensions while sidelining empowerment as an analytically significant aspect of maternal experience. Second-wave critiques of motherhood, such as Allen's call to "evacuate motherhood" in the early 1980s, omitted critical intersectional differences, including race, class, sexuality and context, that condition women's lives and maternal. Most problematically, Takševa argues, these critiques erased the love, pleasure, and empowerment that many women experience through their mothering practice, dimensions that non-white feminists have long theorized. As a result, perspectives of second-wave radical feminists such as Allen impacted Women's Studies much more than less dichotomous thinking, such as Rich's nuanced approach to motherhood, with her distinction between the patriarchal institution and the mothering experience with its antipatriarchal potential. For

Takševa, the dichotomous thinking of second-wave radical feminists caused Feminism to be founded with a blind spot, and it is precisely from this omission that Motherhood Studies emerged, as a response to that neglect of the life-affirming aspects of the maternal experience within dominant feminist theory in the Anglo-North American context (2018, pp. 181-182)

Rich's distinction, as Takševa (2018) points out, laid the theoretical ground from which Motherhood Studies emerged, enabling both the theorization of maternal subjectivity apart from patriarchal critiques of motherhood and the articulation of mothering in its diverse complexity (pp. 197-188). It further enabled the recognition of the conditions that result in maternal ambivalence and the validation of mothers' subjectivity as part of a broader resignification of the meaning of maternal love (Takševa, 2017, pp. 153-156).

Takševa defines Motherhood Studies as "the scholarly study of motherhood in its contradictions and complexities" (2018, p. 178). This definition insists on holding together the tensions between institutionalized motherhood and the lived practices of mothering, recognizing the need to study maternal experience in its diversity rather than as a monolithic category. As Chandler (2007, as cited in Takševa, 2018) underscores, even among mothers of similar backgrounds, practices vary greatly, which means that maternal identities and agencies are always contextual and relational. This insight legitimizes Motherhood Studies as a field precisely because it resists essentialist definitions and insists on plurality (2018, pp. 182-183).

Takševa's critique also points to the epistemic assumptions through which feminist theorization on motherhood has often been produced. Anglo-North American feminist theorizing on motherhood initially developed within a framework that reproduced the hierarchical and masculinist biases of traditional moral philosophy, disconnecting itself from the plurality of mothers' lived realities and adopting as universal the experiences of white women (2018, p. 182). This observation is crucial because it shows that the marginalization of motherhood within feminist theory was not only a matter of thematic omission, but also a problem of whose maternal experiences were rendered intelligible as theory.

Takševa's work therefore sharpens the trajectory mapped in the previous sections. Hansen helps periodize feminist engagements with motherhood through rejection, recovery, and critique; Umansky and Kinser illuminate the ambivalence that has marked feminist debates on the maternal; Collins exposes the racialized assumptions embedded within dominant feminist accounts of motherhood. Takševa brings these concerns together by naming the blind spot within Anglo-North American feminist theory and by showing how Motherhood Studies emerged in response to the failure to theorize motherhood in its contradictions, complexities, and diversity.

For this thesis, Takševa's intervention is especially important because it helps establish the need to interrogate the limits of Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood from within the field of Motherhood Studies itself. Her work identifies a central problem within the field: the tendency to universalize maternal experience from specific cultural, racial, and geopolitical

locations. It is from this already identified blind spot that my own intervention proceeds, asking what becomes visible or remains marginalized when Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism are read from Abya Yala.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Matricentric Feminism

Definition

Matricentric feminism, articulated and developed by Andrea O'Reilly, proposes a feminism centred specifically on mothers, arguing that motherhood must become the explicit business of feminism rather than a peripheral concern within Women's Studies. This approach recognizes the need for a feminism for and about mothers, in which their specific needs, experiences, and desires are taken as objects of study and representation (O'Reilly, 2021b, p. 9).

O'Reilly argues that the category of mother is analytically and politically distinct from the broader category of woman, as mothers experience specific forms of regulation, economic marginalization, cultural surveillance, and ideological discipline that derive from motherhood as a social institution. In this sense, matricentric feminism positions maternal identity not as a private role, but as a structurally produced social location that requires its own feminist framework (O'Reilly, 2021a, pp. 474-479). Furthermore, matricentric feminism is conceived as a matrifocal framework that deliberately begins from the figure of the mother and takes the work of mothering as a central analytic and political concern. It is not presented as a closed definition, but rather as a recent and developing feminist formation characterized by its theoretical openness and interdisciplinary nature (O'Reilly, 2019, pp. 16-17).

Problem it Addresses

Matricentric feminism emerges in response to the historical marginalization of motherhood within feminist thought and within Women's Studies. O'Reilly (2021b) identifies that, despite the significant production of feminist texts on motherhood between 1970 and 1985, much of this knowledge did not become consolidated as canon within academic programs, contributing to the disappearance of motherhood as a relevant topic in contemporary feminism (p. 219). This theoretical absence has implied not only a scarcity of analyses on the emancipatory potential of maternal experience, but also a failure to recognize that mothers are oppressed not only as women, but also as mothers, as mothers face specific challenges across social, economic, political, cultural, and psychological domains that derive from their maternal identity and role (p. 42). In this context, O'Reilly argues that mothers require a feminism of their own, given that motherhood is central to the lives of those who mother, and any analysis of their lives remains incomplete if it does not account for how maternal practice shapes their subjectivity, worldview, and relationship to themselves (O'Reilly, 2021a, p. 473; O'Reilly, 2021b, pp. 41-42). The marginalization of motherhood thus appears not merely as a thematic omission, but as a structural limitation in feminist knowledge production.

Matricentric feminism is also linked to the emergence of the twenty-first-century motherhood movement, which responded to the need for a politics and a theory centred on mothers, their experiences, and their struggles within a patriarchal system that has historically rendered maternal labour invisible, devalued, and exploited (O'Reilly, 2021b, p. 142). This movement has

contributed to demonstrating that motherhood is not a private or essentially feminine experience, but rather a political construction that demands a specific feminist response (O'Reilly, 2021b, p. 160).

Matricentric feminism, then, does not simply add motherhood as a topic within feminism, but proposes a reconfiguration of feminist analysis by arguing that motherhood constitutes a structural location from which the categories, priorities, and interpretive frameworks of feminism itself must be rethought.

Core Principles

Matricentric feminism is grounded in a set of guiding principles and core objectives that shape its theoretical and political framework (O'Reilly, 2021b). First, it asserts that the topics of mothers, mothering, and motherhood warrant rigorous, sustained scholarly attention. It regards mothering as socially meaningful and valuable work, while emphasizing that this essential task should not, and must not, be considered the sole responsibility or duty of mothers. Moreover, it critically challenges the patriarchal institution of motherhood, understood as normative and oppressive, and seeks to imagine and implement maternal identities and practices that are empowering for those who engage in them. This framework also aims to redress the child-centredness that has dominated much of the scholarship and activism on motherhood by prioritizing perspectives and knowledge rooted in mothers' lived experience. In addition, matricentric feminism is committed to social transformation and collective justice, conceptualizing mothering as a socially engaged and politically active practice through which mothers can, and indeed do, effect meaningful social change via

childrearing and activism. It further recognizes that both mothering and motherhood are culturally constructed and variable and is dedicated to examining the diversity of maternal experiences across axes of race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, age, and geographical location. Finally, matricentric feminism seeks to establish Motherhood Studies as an autonomous, independent, and legitimate academic field (2021b, pp. 46-47).

Key Distinctions and Theoretical Contributions

A fundamental distinction in matricentric feminism is that between motherhood as institution and mothering as practice. Following the differentiation proposed by Adrienne Rich (1986), O'Reilly (2021a) conceptualizes motherhood as a patriarchal institution that regulates women's reproductive labour, sexuality, and affect, while mothering can constitute a space of resistance, agency, and feminist praxis when redefined on women's own terms (pp. 477-478).

Matricentric feminism also distinguishes itself from other feminist approaches by insisting on the non-equivalence between the categories of mother and woman, emphasizing that mothers constitute a social group with specific conditions that cannot be subsumed under a universal category of woman (O'Reilly, 2021b, p. 42).

Another key distinction lies in the choice of the term *matricentric* over *maternal* feminism. O'Reilly adopts the former to avoid the ideological connotations of maternalism, which is grounded in an essentialist positioning of the maternal and associates motherhood with instinct, sacrifice, and child-centredness, and which has historically reinforced gender stereotypes. In

contrast, matricentric feminism advances a structural and cultural critique of motherhood as a socially constructed practice, rejecting its naturalization and its exclusive association with women (O'Reilly, 2021b, pp. 42-44).

One of the central contributions of matricentric feminism is its conceptualization of maternal subjectivity as a political identity that can be reclaimed, re-signified, and mobilized as a basis for feminist theory and action. Within this framework, motherhood ceases to be understood solely as a site of oppression and is also recognized as a potential space of agency and social transformation (O'Reilly, 2021a, pp. 477-478).

Matricentric feminism has also contributed to consolidating the study of motherhood as an autonomous academic field, with its own conceptual and methodological foundations, promoting the development of Motherhood Studies as a legitimate area of inquiry (O'Reilly, 2021a, pp. 477-478; O'Reilly, 2021b, pp. 46-47). It is further characterized by its matrifocal approach, which insists on beginning from the experience of the mother "in her own right, from her own perspective" (Daly, B.O. et al., 1991, as cited in O'Reilly, 2021b, p. 44), and by its multidisciplinary and multi-theoretical character, drawing on diverse feminist traditions including womanism, Black feminism, liberal feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, queer-lesbian feminism, cultural-difference feminism, socialist feminism, and third-wave feminism (O'Reilly, 2021b, p. 46).

Finally, matricentric feminism is presented not as a closed model, but as a project in formation. O'Reilly acknowledges that its principles and aims are neither exhaustive nor definitive, but rather a starting point for the collective

development of an emergent feminist field centred on mothers, mothering, and motherhood (2019, p. 18; 2021b, pp. 46-47). It is precisely within this logic that this thesis intervenes, engaging with matricentric feminism as a crucial contribution to feminist theory on motherhood, while examining its limits when read from a decolonial feminist perspective from Abya Yala.

O'Reilly's matricentric feminism has greatly contributed to reclaiming maternal subjectivity as a site of agency, recognizing the maternal subject as a political agent and offering a discursive space for mothers to articulate their lived experiences beyond patriarchal norms, an urgent need in any context. However, its articulation remains embedded in the sociocultural and academic context of Anglo-North American white feminism. While it incorporates the voices of individuals who lack privileges in the racial hierarchy, such as African American mothers, it does not explicitly engage with the realities of mothers from the Global South, such as mixed-race, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant women from Abya Yala, perhaps because they often lack the privilege of institutional presence, let alone recognition, within Anglo-North American academia. Nor does it draw explicitly from the epistemological and political tools of decolonial feminism, which emerge from the histories of colonial violence, invisibilization, resistance, and survival. This absence is not merely geographic but epistemic: it reflects the exclusion of ways of knowing, conceptual frameworks, and analytical categories through which motherhood and mothering are understood in relation to colonial histories. It is within this overlooked epistemic space that this thesis intervenes, to place matricentric feminism in dialogue with decolonial feminist

critiques that foreground coloniality as constitutive of feminist theorization of motherhood and the maternal.

Decolonial Feminism

Definition

Decolonial feminism constitutes a theoretical and political intervention that relocates the production of feminist knowledge by situating the embodied, historical, and epistemic experiences of racialized women engaged in anti-racist, anti-capitalist, Indigenous, and anti-heteronormative struggles (Espinosa Miñoso et al., 2022, p. xi). Emerging from broader decolonial thought in Abya Yala, and particularly from Maria Lugones' (2008) concept of the *coloniality of gender*, decolonial feminism examines how colonial power reorganized social relations, racial hierarchies, and gender systems. It also interrogates how these colonial formations continue to shape contemporary feminist knowledge and its institutional locations.

As articulated by Abya Yala feminists of Indigenous and Afro descent, decolonial feminism constitutes both a theoretical intervention and a political practice. It functions as an internal critique of hegemonic feminist traditions that universalize the experiences of women located within Anglo-North American and Western European modernity while rendering other histories, epistemologies, and political struggles peripheral or invisible. Decolonial feminist scholarship therefore seeks to create space for voices emerging from historically colonized territories to articulate political thought grounded in lived experiences of racialization, dispossession, and epistemic silencing. In this sense, it is also an

effort to recover the intellectual and political legacies of rebellious women whose contributions have been erased or marginalized within dominant feminist narratives (Espinosa Miñoso et al., 2022, p. xi).

Curiel, citing Espinosa (2013), argues that Decolonial feminism emerges from two main sources: on the one hand, the critiques directed at hegemonic feminism for its universalization of the concept of woman and its racist, classist, and heteronormative bias, critiques that come from Black Feminism, Chicana feminists, grassroots women, autonomous Abya Yala feminists, Indigenous feminists, and French materialist feminism (Espinosa, as cited in Curiel, 2019, p. 48). On the other hand, from Decolonial Theory, also known as the decolonial project, developed by several Abya Yala thinkers, which arises from intellectuals and activists from the region dedicated to contemporary critical theory, mostly working in universities in the United States and Latin America (Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007, as cited in Curiel, 2019, p. 49).

Problem It Addresses

Curiel (2019) argues that decolonial feminism arises from the need to move beyond the tokenistic gestures within white feminism, where citing a few non-white feminists is deemed sufficient to support a universalizing framework. Instead, decolonial feminism emphasizes the need to situate oneself in contexts marked by colonialism to fully understand oppression as a central aspect of neo coloniality (p. 48). According to Espinosa Miñoso (2016) decolonial feminism opposes the salvific pretension of classical feminism and expose the perverse colonial legacy embedded within it. Feminist decolonial analyses, rooted primarily

in the reflections of Abya Yala feminists of African and Indigenous descent, emphasize that systems of oppression and domination cannot be explained by gender alone. Rather, they are also perpetuated through movements that present and perceive themselves as emancipatory, such as feminism (p. 145).

Decolonial feminism also denounces the resistance of those within the feminist movement who benefit from the privileges granted by its supposedly inclusive universality, as well as the role of academia in upholding and reproducing (despite the combative efforts, for instance, of Black feminism and lesbian feminism) the ideal of *unity of oppression* among women (Espinosa Miñoso, 2016, p. 145). It points to this ideal as a threat to the vast majority of women located at the lowest levels of the racial hierarchy, since it operates as a convenient token that ultimately legitimizes any agenda presented, often deceptively, as working toward the common good. This includes the celebrated *historical victories* of the feminist movement, which may indeed represent progress for certain sectors (primarily white bourgeois women) but operate to the detriment of the racialized majority (Espinosa Miñoso, 2016, p. 145).

Key Distinctions and Theoretical Contributions

Decolonial feminism draws from the decolonial project several key themes, primarily the very concept of decoloniality: with the end of colonialism as a geopolitical and geo-historical constitution of Western European modernity, neither the division of labour nor the ethno-racial hierarchies have been substantially transformed. On the contrary, we have transitioned from modern colonialism to global coloniality. In other words, forms of domination have

changed, but the structural relations between centre and periphery have remained (Curiel, 2019, p. 49). Decoloniality, therefore, implies a new understanding of global and local relations, based on the insight that “Eurocentric Western modernity, global capitalism, and colonialism are an inseparable trilogy” (Dussel, 1999, as cited in Curiel, 2019, p. 49). According to Dussel (2003), since 1492, Europe constructed America as its periphery in order to consolidate itself as the centre of the modern world-system, expanding capitalism through colonialism. In this context, *Europe* refers to the Western European colonial powers that spearheaded imperial expansion and capitalist consolidation. From this Eurocentric perspective, Western modernity presents itself as emancipatory and superior, justifying violence against peoples deemed barbaric or immature, and blaming them for their own oppression (as cited in Curiel, 2019, pp. 49–50).

From this relationship between modernity, colonialism, and capitalism emerges what Quijano (2000) calls the *coloniality of power*, a central concept for Decolonial feminism. This global pattern is based on systems of domination that operate through the control of labour, nature, sex, reproduction, and the production of subjectivities, including knowledge and authority. According to Quijano, race was the organizing principle of this system, establishing racial and geo-cultural hierarchies (as cited in Curiel, 2019, p. 50). Lugones (2008) expands on this view by arguing that not only race but also gender and heterosexuality structure the coloniality of power. She critiques Quijano’s biologically deterministic notion of sex, asserting that gender is a modern and colonial category imposed on colonized peoples through sexual dimorphism. Within this

framework, enslaved females were not considered women (as cited in Curiel, 2019, p. 50). This dehumanization connects to the *coloniality of being*, proposed by Maldonado (2007), who denounces the denial of humanity and the systematic inferiorization of colonized populations, particularly Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples (as cited in Curiel, 2019, pp. 50–51).

Eurocentric Western modernity, as articulated by Curiel in her reading of Lander (2000), also produced a *coloniality of knowledge*, established through the imposition of a techno-scientific rationality as the hegemonic mode of knowledge production, grounded in claims of neutrality, objectivity, and universality (as cited in Curiel, 2019, p. 51). This epistemology (Castro-Gómez, 2007) operates from an alleged *zero-point* of observation, which purports to faithfully represent external realities, as if a bodiless, contextless gaze could exist, as if it were endowed with divine authority. From this logic emerges a universal narrative that positions Northwestern capitalist Europe and the United States as the centre and pinnacle of knowledge, while the knowledges of peoples represented by the West as *subaltern* and *the Other* (those who do not embody the privileged subject: male, white, literate, heterosexual, Catholic, and middle or upper class, a category that nowadays also includes many women with those same privileges) are silenced or subordinated. These populations become objects of study, intervention, or development, even within current academic practices (as cited in Curiel, 2019, p. 51). It is important to note that, although decolonial critiques are frequently articulated through the analytical category of Eurocentrism, they do not always differentiate how the term is conceptualized. This thesis departs from this

tendency by treating Eurocentrism as a category requiring greater analytical precision, in line with Takševa's caution that its broad application can flatten internal differences and render less visible the uneven power relations and marginalized feminist traditions within Europe itself (2024b, pp. 4-5)

For Curiel (2019), the *colonialities of power, being, and knowledge* represent the dark side of Western modernity, the very modernity from which feminism emerged as an emancipatory project that, in theory, included all women. However, it has become clear that this was not the case: many women have been systematically excluded from that project (2019, p. 51). Espinosa Miñoso (2014) argues that the moment has come for a broad epistemic disobedience that dismantles the conceptual scaffolding through which the world has been understood, produced, and imposed by Western modernity. For her, it is imperative that Abya Yala feminists move beyond autoethnography and begin, once and for all, to produce and make visible our own interpretations of the world as a central task in the decolonization process. This task, according to Espinosa Miñoso, must be accompanied by efforts to recover knowledge traditions from Abya Yala that have resisted coloniality (p. 8).

Decolonial feminism, therefore, offers critical tools for analyzing how coloniality continues to structure feminist knowledge, including which experiences become legible within academic discourse and which remain marginalized or unintelligible. Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood is shaped by specific historical, geopolitical, and linguistic contexts that shape both its conceptual frameworks and its epistemic limits. To critically

examine these conditions, this thesis engages with decolonial feminist thought from Abya Yala as an epistemological lens, rather than as a framework to be applied or integrated into Anglo-North American debates on motherhood.

Analytical Operationalization

A delimited set of analytical concepts derived from decolonial feminism is central to this research. This thesis does not approach race, gender, and coloniality as separate analytical categories, but as co-constitutive and imbricated dimensions that simultaneously organize both the experience of motherhood and the conditions that determine what counts as valid feminist knowledge about motherhood in Anglo-North America. First, the critique of the universal subject *woman* is taken up in order to problematize the assumptions of universality that underpin feminist theorization in the Anglo-North American academic context, particularly the marginalization of the maternal experience of women from Abya Yala within these frameworks. Second, a critique of the coloniality of knowledge is foregrounded, enabling an examination of how feminist knowledge production on motherhood in Anglo-North America is configured through situated epistemic frameworks that delimit which experiences become intelligible and which remain marginal or invisibilized. Third, this study is situated through a politics of location that understands Abya Yala as a locus of enunciation and as a site of feminist knowledge production shaped by specific colonial histories, whose conditions of legitimation have been historically unequal within Anglo-North American academia, affirming the need to produce and make visible situated interpretations of the world as part of broader decolonizing

processes. Through the critique of the universal subject *woman*, the problematization of the colonality of knowledge, and the adoption of a politics of location in Abya Yala, this work shows how these co-constitutive dimensions operate in the production of intelligibility and exclusion within the Anglo-North American feminist canon.

Epistemic Asymmetries and Knowledge Circulation

The limited dialogue between feminist scholarship produced in Abya Yala and Anglo-North American academic traditions reflects enduring asymmetries in the circulation, translation, and recognition of knowledge across America, as it will be further discussed in Chapter 4. Much of this knowledge circulates primarily in Spanish and often emerges within activist, community-based, or movement-centred intellectual traditions rather than within the institutional structures of Anglo-North American academia. As a result, it remains largely inaccessible to English-speaking scholarly audiences and rarely enters canonical feminist debates about motherhood. This condition reflects not only a lack of perspective or situated awareness, but also the global dominance of English as a *lingua franca*, which structures what can be accessed, translated, and recognized as knowledge. While there is no simple resolution to this tension, delineating its contours is necessary for understanding the epistemic limits of Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood, and for situating this thesis as a contribution that seeks to render these bodies of thought more legible within an English-speaking academic context.

Delimitations of the Framework

As will be further elaborated in Chapter 4, while Abya Yala feminist thought on motherhood and the maternal has not been institutionalized as a formal academic field comparable to Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies, reflections on motherhood, reproduction, and communal forms of care have long been a consistent presence within feminist thought in the region. More specifically, feminist decolonial reflections on motherhood are articulated within broader analytical frameworks concerned with coloniality, racialization, territory, and communal life, and conceptualize motherhood not as a private or individualized experience but as deeply entangled with territory, collective survival, and colonial histories of violence and dispossession (see, for example, Cabnal, 2010; Curiel, 2013; Paredes, 2015). The aim of this thesis is not, however, to provide a comprehensive review of maternal thought within the diverse feminist traditions of Abya Yala, which would constitute a distinct and extensive research project in its own right. Instead, decolonial feminism is mobilized here as an epistemological standpoint from which to examine how Anglo-North American feminist discourses on motherhood are produced, which historical experiences they foreground, and what forms of knowledge remain outside their analytical horizon.

This positioning also requires acknowledging the limits of my own standpoint within the diverse feminist traditions of my region of origin. I do not claim to represent the voice of feminist mothers in Abya Yala. I also acknowledge that I am still in the early stages of engaging with and deepening my understanding of decolonial feminism, and I recognize that many Abya Yala

feminists, whose circumstances and backgrounds differ from mine, may not feel represented by this work and may rightfully critique my perspective. Still, I argue that the specificity of my standpoint offers a valuable and timely contribution to the field of Motherhood Studies in Anglo-North America. From this location, this thesis seeks to open space for the critical examination of how maternal narratives from the Global South are rendered marginal, partial, or unintelligible within dominant feminist frameworks, and to foreground them as forms of epistemic and political agency worthy of engagement within Anglo-North American academic discourse.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Epistemological Positioning

This research is epistemologically grounded in the recognition that dominant feminist theories often reflect the social locations, historical trajectories, and geopolitical positions of their producers, while simultaneously presenting themselves as universal or context-neutral. Decolonial feminist scholars from Abya Yala have demonstrated that race, gender, class, sexuality, and colonial histories are inseparable dimensions of power that shape both lived experience and the production of knowledge (Espinosa Miñoso, 2020; Lugones, 2008). Attending to these entangled dimensions is methodologically necessary for this study, which examines Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood as a situated body of knowledge rather than a universal theoretical framework. By foregrounding the conditions under which feminist knowledge about motherhood has been produced, this approach enables a critical reading of the assumptions, silences, and exclusions that structure the field, particularly regarding maternal experiences formed through colonial histories and racialized hierarchies beyond the Anglo-North American context.

While Critical Race Theory offers important insights into the social construction of race, this thesis privileges decolonial feminist epistemologies from Abya Yala, which explicitly foreground coloniality as a structuring force of feminist knowledge. From this standpoint, Anglo-North American feminist discourses are examined not only for what they articulate, but for what they leave unspoken.

Particular attention is paid to how English-language dominance, Global North citizenship, and Euro-Western feminist genealogies shape which maternal experiences are theorized, and which remain peripheral or unintelligible within the field.

This epistemological positioning allows for a critical engagement with Motherhood Studies that neither dismisses its contributions nor accepts its assumptions uncritically. Instead, it situates the field within broader geopolitics of knowledge, making visible the conditions under which feminist knowledge on motherhood is produced, circulated, and legitimized.

Methodological Orientation

This thesis is a theoretical, critical, and conceptual study grounded in decolonial feminist epistemologies and informed by Feminist Standpoint Theory. Its purpose is to critically interrogate the discursive and epistemic foundations of Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood. More specifically, it examines matricentric feminism and the broader field of Motherhood Studies as sites of feminist knowledge production shaped by particular historical, geopolitical, linguistic, and epistemic conditions. Methodologically, the study conducts a critical textual and discursive analysis of key theoretical works within Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism, examining which epistemologies are mobilized when conceptualizing motherhood, and whose maternal experiences are rendered visible or absent within the field. Particular attention is paid to citational practices, conceptual frameworks, and the silences that

structure the canon of Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood and the maternal.

My epistemological perspective is informed by Feminist Standpoint Theory, an approach to knowledge production that emphasizes the situated character of interpretation and the role of social location in shaping what can be known and how it is known (Hesse-Biber et al., 2007, p. 55). In this thesis, standpoint is not mobilized as a claim to epistemic authority or as a source of empirical insight, but as a critical analytic location from which to interrogate the universalizing tendencies of dominant feminist discourses on motherhood. My standpoint as a Mexican, Spanish-speaking, low-income migrant mother from Abya Yala, conducting research within a Global North academic institution, informs the questions I ask, the assumptions I problematize, and the limits I identify within Anglo-North American feminist frameworks.

Decolonial feminism extends this standpoint approach by situating feminist knowledge production within the colonality of power (Quijano, 2000), understood as the enduring global structure that organizes race, gender, class, language, and epistemic hierarchies beyond the formal end of colonialism. From this perspective, feminist theorization around motherhood in Anglo-North America is not neutral or universal applicable, but embedded in specific contexts that shape whose experiences, languages, and epistemologies are rendered visible, legitimate, or marginal within the field.

Decolonial Feminism as a Methodological Practice

In this thesis, decolonial feminism is mobilized as a critical methodological orientation, rather than as an applied empirical or participatory research framework. While decolonial feminist constitutes a theoretical and political project rooted in the epistemic, historical, and embodied experiences of racialized women engaged in antiracist, anti-capitalist, Indigenous, and anti-heteronormative struggles (Espinosa Miñoso et al., 2022, p. xi), my use of this framework is situated at the level of epistemic critique and discursive analysis.

Decolonial feminism demands epistemic disobedience, understood here as a critical reorientation of the terms through which knowledge is produced, authorized, and validated within academia (Espinosa Miñoso, 2014, p. 8). In this thesis, epistemic disobedience does not take the form of empirical engagement with communities or the direct recovery of subaltern knowledges, but rather of a systematic interrogation of dominant feminist frameworks and the epistemic assumptions that sustain them.

For an analysis of the maternal to be grounded in a decolonial feminist methodology situated in Abya Yala, the following must be enacted:

1. Reading canonical feminist texts on motherhood critically, which means approaching them as discursive formations that articulate particular assumptions about maternal subjectivity, agency, and political relevance within Anglo-North American contexts.
2. Tracing theoretical genealogies within feminist scholarship on motherhood, which entails situating contemporary frameworks within their intellectual lineages and delineating their conceptual limits.

3. Identifying and documenting epistemic silences and omissions through bibliographic and database analysis, particularly regarding feminist scholarship on motherhood produced in Abya Yala, understood here as the limited or absent citation, translation, or theoretical engagement with this body of work within the canonical literature of Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies.
4. Contextualizing feminist theories of motherhood within their historical, linguistic, and geopolitical locations, including the dominance of English and the privileging of Global North citizenship in academic knowledge production.
5. Re-reading dominant feminist frameworks through decolonial feminist categories, such as coloniality of power, coloniality of gender, and Abya Yala, understood as critical lenses rather than as fully deployed alternative models.

Taken together, these operations function as an integrated analytical practice rather than as a linear sequence of steps. The critical reading of canonical texts provides the primary material for analysis, while the tracing of theoretical genealogies situates these frameworks within the intellectual histories that shaped them. The identification of bibliographic silences and absences makes visible the epistemic boundaries of the field, and the contextualization of feminist theories within their geopolitical and linguistic locations allows these boundaries to be interpreted in relation to broader structures of academic knowledge production. Finally, the re-reading of these frameworks through

decolonial feminist categories enables a critical interpretation of how Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood constructs its objects of knowledge and how certain maternal experiences are rendered peripheral or unintelligible. Rather than seeking to replace existing frameworks or to construct a unified alternative model, this methodological orientation aims to denaturalize epistemic authority and to expose the limits of universalizing feminist claims when read from Abya Yala.

Research Questions

1. How do Anglo-North American feminist discourses on motherhood, particularly those articulated within matricentric feminism and Motherhood Studies, produce and legitimize specific forms of maternal knowledge while marginalizing or rendering unintelligible others, especially those emerging from Abya Yala?
2. What does a feminist decolonial reading from Abya Yala reveal about the epistemic assumptions, silences, and universalizing claims embedded in Anglo-North American feminist theorization of motherhood?

Data Selection and Analytical Materials

The analytical materials of this thesis are discursive and epistemic, rather than empirical. This research does not generate new empirical data on maternal practices, nor does it rely on interviews, ethnography, or participatory methods.

The data consists of:

- Canonical and influential theoretical texts within Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies.

- Foundational and contemporary articulations of matricentric feminism, particularly those authored or edited by Andrea O'Reilly.
- Scholarly articles, edited volumes, and bibliographic overviews that have contributed to the consolidation of Motherhood Studies as a formal academic field.
- Academic databases and catalogues (including JSTOR, ProQuest, Scielo, Redalyc, Dialnet, Latindex, WorldCat, and Novanet), used to document patterns of presence and absence in feminist scholarship on motherhood.
- The documentable marginalization or absence of feminist genealogies on motherhood from Abya Yala within the Anglo-North American canon.
- My own situated knowledge as a feminist scholar from Abya Yala, which functions as an epistemic lens guiding interpretation, rather than as empirical evidence or testimonia data.

These materials are treated as discursive artifacts that both reflect and reproduce specific understandings of motherhood, maternal subjectivity, and feminist politics. The aim is not to apply these frameworks to lived experience, but to examine how they are constructed, what assumptions they rely upon, and what epistemic borders they sustain.

Conditions of Knowledge Production

This research was produced within a Global North academic institution under conditions shaped by migration, linguistic asymmetry, and material precarity. Writing in English as a second language and conducting research within a predominantly Anglophone feminist academic context have shaped

access to texts, participation in scholarly debates, and the circulation of knowledge. The limited availability of feminist scholarship from Latin America and the Caribbean in English translation, as well as its marginal presence in Canadian university libraries and curricula, constitutes a material manifestation of epistemic inequality, one that directly affects citation practices and contributes to the formation of a scholarly canon in which the feminist production of Abya Yala remains largely absent or peripheral.

Rather than treating these conditions as external constraints, this methodology recognizes them as constitutive of the research process itself. Attending to language, access, and institutional structures is therefore integral to a decolonial feminist critique that seeks to make visible how colonial power operates within feminist knowledge production.

Scope and Limitations

This thesis does not claim to offer an exhaustive account of motherhood in Abya Yala, nor does it seek to empirically document maternal practices or experiences in the region or its diasporas. Its scope is deliberately critical and diagnostic. The contribution of this research lies in exposing the epistemic limits of Anglo-North American feminist discourses on motherhood when they are treated as universal and demonstrating the necessity of decolonial feminist frameworks for analyzing motherhood across contexts marked by colonial difference.

By foregrounding discursive analysis, epistemic location, and decolonial critique, this methodology prioritizes analytical precision over empirical breadth.

Its aim is not to close debates within Motherhood Studies, but to unsettle their foundational assumptions and to open space for more hemispheric, plurilingual, and situated feminist engagements with the maternal.

CHAPTER 4

A FEMINIST DECOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF MATRICENTRIC FEMINISM AND ANGLO-NORTH AMERICAN MOTHERHOOD STUDIES

Introduction

This chapter undertakes a feminist decolonial critique of O'Reilly's matricentric feminism and, more broadly, of Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies. O'Reilly's project has been a seminal contribution in naming and theorizing the structural marginalization of mothers within patriarchal societies, and in insisting that mothering requires its own feminist theory and politics. Yet, her framework emerges primarily from Anglo-North American contexts and, as such, it remains entangled with the colonial legacies of feminism in the Global North.

A decolonial feminist critique allows for an examination of how matricentric feminism, while positioning itself as a corrective to androcentric and child-centric biases in feminist theory, continues to reproduce certain colonial logics of knowledge production that centre Euro-Western epistemologies. Read from Abya Yala, these epistemological assumptions reveal important limits in how maternal experience is theorized, recognized, and rendered intelligible within the field.

Accordingly, this chapter situates my analysis as an immanent critique of matricentric feminism and Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies, one that engages their theoretical and political contributions while also exposing their epistemic boundaries. By foregrounding coloniality as constitutive of feminist knowledge production on motherhood, this chapter demonstrates how dominant

frameworks remain insufficient for accounting for the historical, geopolitical, and racialized conditions that shape maternal lives beyond the Global North.

It is important to note that during the initial stages of this research, the analysis was conceived as a comparative study of feminist models of non-normative mothering produced in Anglo-North American contexts and in the Spanish-speaking sphere. Within this framework, the figure of the *Mother Outlaws* (O'Reilly, 2004a) was incorporated as a possible counterpart within English-language theoretical production, alongside other figures of dissident feminist mothering developed in Spanish, such as the *Mamá Desobediente* [Disobedient Mom] (Vivas, 2019), the *Madres Arrepentidas* [Regretful Mothers] (Donath, 2016), and the *Maternidades Subversivas* [Subversive Motherhoods] (Llopis, 2015). This inclusion responded to the initial intention of establishing a comparative analysis among different feminist conceptualizations on noncompliant mothering.

The initial attempt to establish a comparison between models revealed a significant asymmetry in the circulation, recognition, and articulation of feminist knowledge on motherhood and mothering between Anglo-North American contexts and those produced in Abya Yala. Rather than merely evidencing differences and similarities among conceptualizations of dissident motherhood, this process decisively brought into view a structural inequality in the ways feminist knowledge produced in Abya Yala is incorporated, cited, or even recognized within Anglo-North American feminist theoretical frameworks. This observation led to a reformulation of the object of study. Rather than sustaining a

comparative analysis of specific models of non-normative motherhood, the research shifts toward a critical examination of the academic field that produces and organizes these categories in Anglo-North America. In this sense, the decision to centre the analysis on matricentric feminism and Motherhood Studies responds to their character as theoretical and disciplinary frameworks that configure the conditions of intelligibility, circulation, and legitimation of knowledge on motherhood and the maternal within the Anglo-North American feminist context. As the scope of the research was redefined and the systematic analysis of these models was set aside, the centrality of the Mother Outlaws ceased to have analytical justification, and the focus moves away toward the broader discursive and epistemological structures that determine which forms of mothering are theorized, recognized, or remain absent within the field, a reorientation that gives rise to the critique developed in this chapter.

Revisiting the Theoretical Context

Rich's seminal text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986) represents a decisive turning point in feminist theorization on motherhood. In this text, Rich draws her now classic distinction between motherhood as an experience, that is, women's potential bond with their reproductive capacity and with their children, and motherhood as institution, the apparatus designed to keep that potential under patriarchal control (p. 13). By disentangling motherhood as a patriarchal institution from mothering as a women's lived experience, Rich laid the groundwork for questioning dominant cultural myths about maternal love, while also opening the possibility of

envisioning mothering as a space for empowerment and resistance (O'Reilly, 2017, pp. 728-729). This distinction, as Takševa (2018) points out, laid the theoretical ground from which Motherhood Studies emerged, enabling both the theorization of maternal subjectivity apart from patriarchal critiques of motherhood and the articulation of mothering in its diverse complexity (pp. 187-188). It further enabled the recognition of the conditions that result in maternal ambivalence and the validation of mothers' subjectivity as part of a broader resignification of the meaning of *maternal love* (Takševa, 2017, pp. 153-156).

Drawing on years of reflection and scholarship on motherhood, O'Reilly (2021a) identified that mothers needed a feminism of their own, since motherhood is central to the lives of those who mother, and any account of mothers' lives remained incomplete without serious consideration of how our maternal practice impacts our lives, our worldviews, and our relationship with ourselves (p. 473). Building on Rich's insights, O'Reilly developed matricentric feminism, a framework that asserts that mothers, motherhood, and mothering deserve sustained and serious treatment within scholarly inquiry. Matricentric feminism foregrounds the structural marginalization of mothers within patriarchal societies and calls for critical attention to the material and ideological conditions that define their oppression (O'Reilly, 2021a, p. 46).

Rooted in Rich's reflections, such as her description of a brief period during a Vermont vacation when she and her sons became, in her words, "conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood" (1986, pp. 194, 195), O'Reilly further developed the notion of the *Mother Outlaws* as a counternarrative

to oppressive maternal norms and a way of conceptualizing mothering beyond patriarchal scripts. Often intermixing the terms *mother outlaws*, *outlaw mothering*, and *empowered mothering*, this framework understands mothering as potentially empowering when defined by women themselves, rather than constrained by institutional archetypes. Within this perspective, mothering becomes a site where agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity can be reclaimed, directly contesting the patriarchal denial of maternal power. O'Reilly's edited volume *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (2004), inspired by Rich's insight, further extended this approach by incorporating diverse perspectives, including feminist, lesbian, and African American mothering, as well as by exploring maternal relationships, such as those between mothers and daughters or sons, as locations for social change (2004a, pp. 1-28).

While these contributions significantly expanded the conceptual space for theorizing maternal agency within Anglo-North American feminist scholarship, they remain grounded in the epistemic and geopolitical contexts from which they emerge. This grounding becomes evident in the ways key matricentric texts centre the category of *mother* while engaging only minimally with colonial histories, racialized hierarchies, or the specific conditions shaping maternal lives beyond the Global North.

To better understand how these limitations operate at the level of discourse, it is necessary to turn to the textual formulations through which the field defines its scope and objects of analysis. It is precisely in these moments of definition, where categories appear most self-evident and comprehensive, that

the boundaries of the field become visible. Formulations such as the claim that matricentric feminism centres the experience of mothers (O'Reilly, 2019, p. 14), present the field as already encompassing *the experience of mothers* without specifying their geopolitical, linguistic, or historical boundaries. When read from Abya Yala, such statements invite a critical question: *which* mothers are being centred, and under what conditions of intelligibility? The absence of any substantive engagement with feminist maternal thought from Abya Yala suggests that the category is not as expansive as it aims to be. Rather than a simple gap of representation, this absence reflects a broader pattern in which universalizing frameworks render certain genealogies of feminist thought peripheral or unintelligible within the field. This insight emerges not from isolated instances of exclusion, but from a sustained encounter with the limits of Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood, where engagement with Abya Yala rarely extends beyond the occasional and scattered inclusion of Chicana or U.S.-based English-speaking scholars of Latina descent, whose work, while relevant, cannot be taken as representative of our distinct feminist genealogies and lived realities.

A similar dynamic can be observed in how matricentric feminism delineates its governing principles, one of which is that it “understands mothering and motherhood to be culturally determined and variable and is committed to exploring the diversity of maternal experience across race, class, culture, ethnicity, [...] and geographical location” (O'Reilly, 2016, p. 7). Read from Abya Yala, however, this formulation raises questions about the scope of that diversity

and the terms under which it is recognized, particularly given the absence of any explicit attention to language as a structuring condition of knowledge production and circulation, as well as the limited engagement with non-Anglophone feminist scholarship on motherhood produced in Latin America and the Caribbean. In this context, a familiar pattern becomes evident once again: claims to inclusivity coexist with forms of selective recognition that leave certain genealogies outside the field's frame of intelligibility.

The citational field itself also reflects this orientation, remaining largely intra-Anglo-North American, with minimal sustained engagement with feminist scholarship from Abya Yala. An example of this citational pattern can be found in Kawash's canonical *New Directions in Motherhood Studies* (2011). Despite presenting a comprehensive overview of scholarship on motherhood and the maternal, and including more than one hundred references, the work makes no mention of Latina, Latin American or Caribbean motherhood. This absence functions as an early index of the invisibilization of Abya Yala's contributions within Anglo-North American academic work on motherhood.

Further examples of this citational pattern, which effectively renders maternal experience and theory produced in Abya Yala absent, can be identified in foundational anthologies such as *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* (2021a) and *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* (2021b), both edited by O'Reilly. While both volumes include a few perspectives from activists and theorists of Hispanic origin based in the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean are not substantively engaged in either collection. References to the

region are minimal and largely incidental. In both anthologies, the Argentine activists *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* are mentioned only briefly, as part of a broader list of maternal activists in the chapter “Maternal Activism,” without sustained engagement with their historical or theoretical contributions. Similarly, Latin America appears only in passing in the chapter “Mothering in a Neoliberal World,” where it is referenced in relation to its use as a testing ground for neoliberal theories by Chicago School economists. Beyond these limited mentions, neither volume includes a single chapter authored by a feminist activist or theorist from Abya Yala, nor do they offer analysis, or even cursory engagement, with maternal experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean or with feminist thought on motherhood produced in the region.

Read in relation to the colonality of knowledge critiqued by decolonial feminism, these examples reflect an epistemic configuration in which certain regions are rendered legible primarily as objects of study, intervention, or development, while their own knowledge production remains unrecognized or subordinated (Castro-Gómez, 2007, as cited in Curiel, 2019, p. 51). In this sense, the limited presence of Abya Yala underscores the asymmetric pattern through which Latin America and the Caribbean is incorporated into Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on the maternal: as an empirical referent, but not as a locus of feminist theorization. From this vantage point, these frameworks remain limited in their capacity to engage maternal theory and experience outside the Global North, a limitation that becomes central when they are read from Abya Yala.

Limits and Blind Spots of Matricentric Feminism

Despite its groundbreaking contributions, matricentric feminism is not without limits.

Feminist epistemologies emerging from the Global South, and specifically from Abya Yala, are still absent in matricentric feminism. The experiences of mothers from Abya Yala who immigrate to the United States and Canada, many of whom are racialized and lack citizenship status, as well as those of mothers residing in Abya Yala itself, continue to be excluded from the field of Motherhood Studies in Anglo-North American academia. Strikingly, despite the geographical proximity of Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States and Canada, the very places where Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism originated, the neighbouring voices of Abya Yala feminists remain markedly absent from the scholarship produced in this part of the continent. By continuing to centre primarily the realities of mothers in Anglo-North America, even when expanding beyond the figure of the white, middle-class, heterosexual mother to include Black and Indigenous maternal experiences that nevertheless remain grounded within Anglo-North American contexts, and still privileging English-speaking, Global North subjects, both matricentric feminism and Motherhood Studies risk reproducing the very Northwestern Eurocentric logics that decolonial feminists have long sought to dismantle.

The Hemispheric Epistemic Silencing of Abya Yala in Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies

In examining the presence (and absence) of Abya Yala feminist thought within Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies, one immediately encounters a striking silence. Despite decades of vibrant feminist scholarship in Abya Yala on motherhood, encompassing critical analyses of reproduction, social organization, and maternal life within broader frameworks of coloniality, race, territory, and communal existence (as will be further elaborated in this chapter), these contributions remain largely unacknowledged or marginally incorporated in the formalized field of Motherhood Studies.

My systematic review of major academic databases, conducted as an exploratory mapping of disciplinary visibility rather than as an exhaustive empirical study, followed a defined search strategy. Searches conducted in August 2025 across Scielo, Redalyc, Dialnet, Latindex, Novanet, JSTOR, ProQuest and Google Scholar. The search terms included *Motherhood Studies in Latin America* and *matricentric feminism in Latin America*, both in English and Spanish. The temporal scope covered publications from 1970 to 2025. Inclusion criteria focused on works that explicitly engaged with motherhood as a feminist analytical category within Latin America and Caribbean contexts, or that directly referenced Motherhood Studies or matricentric feminism. Searches yielded only a handful of explicit references. These included Smith Silva's book (2011); a chapter by Smith Silva (2014) included in the volume edited by O'Reilly's (2014); an article by Esnard (2019); and a Portuguese-language article by Oliveira-Cruz and Conrad (2022).

The few works identified nonetheless show that there have been important, though dispersed, efforts. Oliveira-Cruz and Conrad (2022) analyse the re-signification of maternal roles in digital social networks from a matricentric feminist perspective in Brazil. Esnard (2019), for her part, proposes a matricentric feminist perspective in the Caribbean to make Afro-Caribbean mothers visible in the face of the pathologization of matrifocality. Smith Silva (2014) examines how United States-based Latina and Chicana mothers confront historical pressures and re-signify cultural symbols; and her anthology *Latina/Chicana Mothering* (2011) constitutes a diverse prism that makes marginalized experiences visible, although it focuses primarily on Chicana, Mexican-American, Cuban-American, and Puerto Rican mothers, with a couple of chapters devoted to Mexican, Chilean and Salvadoran mothers.

A complementary search in WorldCat with the terms *Motherhood*, *Feminism*, *Latin America* yielded a few relevant titles. Although these works do not directly employ the frameworks of Motherhood Studies or matricentric feminism, they demonstrate scattered efforts that have reached Anglo-North American academia while examining motherhood in Abya Yala from feminist perspectives. Examples include: *Motherhood, Social Policies and Women's Activism in Latin America* (Ramm and Gideon, 2020), which explores how social policies have shaped maternal experiences and grassroots organizing; *Mothers Making Latin America: Gender, Households, and Politics Since 1825* (O'Connor, 2014), which reconstructs historically the role of mothers in politics and households; *Supermadre: Women in Politics in Latin America* (Chaney, 1979), a

classic analysis of maternal imagery as a legitimating force for women's political participation; *Motherhood and Sexuality* (Langer, 1992), which interrogates the relationship between motherhood and sexuality from feminist and psychoanalytical perspectives in Argentina; and *Engendering Revolution: Women, Unpaid Labor, and Maternalism in Bolivarian Venezuela* (Elfenbein, 2019), which examines the tensions between maternalism, unpaid labour, and Chavista ¹discourse.

The scarcity of such titles (a mere handful within a sea of global academic production) makes visible the epistemic asymmetry of the field. What these searches demonstrate is that the formal frameworks developed in the Global North do not meaningfully enter sustained dialogue with the feminist production on motherhood emerging from Abya Yala. The few works that do exist are valuable yet remain isolated and without consolidation into a recognizable field that could, for example, take shape as *Latin American and Caribbean Motherhood Studies* within the broader scope of Motherhood Studies. Oliveira-Cruz and Conrad in Brazil introduce the notion of matricentric feminism, Esnard calls for it in the Caribbean, and Smith Silva applies it to Latina/Chicana mothers, primarily in the diaspora. This shows that the work is present, but fragmented, without mutual recognition or disciplinary accumulation. The WorldCat search further confirms the imbalance: feminist studies on motherhood in Abya Yala translated into English are extremely few compared to the vast global academic

¹ *Chavista* refers to political discourses, practices, and ideological frameworks associated with the Bolivarian Revolution led by Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013).

production. Moreover, when they do enter Anglo-North American academia, they are more often framed as historical, political, or policy studies rather than explicitly positioned within Motherhood Studies. This reinforces my central critique: it is not that feminist scholarship in Abya Yala has neglected motherhood, but that Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies have shown little interest in engaging with, translating, and integrating these contributions into the formal field.

Not in Dialogue, but Not in Silence: Feminist Genealogies on Motherhood in Abya Yala

The limited number of English-language works explicitly labeled as Motherhood Studies, matricentric feminism, or feminist motherhood in connection to Latin America and the Caribbean should not be taken to mean that feminisms and Women's Studies in Abya Yala have neglected the maternal. On the contrary, while the region has not produced a consolidated academic field equivalent to Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies, for decades Abya Yala feminists and activists have interrogated motherhood as a key site of gender oppression, political struggle, and social reproduction. Likewise, although decolonial feminist theory has not developed a specific field dedicated to the study of the maternal, reflections on reproduction, communal forms of care, and mothering as a site of political resistance to structures of oppression inherited from colonialism have long been present within decolonial feminist thought in Abya Yala.

The region has produced a rich body of scholarship that engages critically with maternal experience. Classic critiques of compulsory motherhood, such as Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos' seminal *Los Cautiverios de las Mujeres: Madresposas, Monjas, Putas, Presas y Locas* [The Captivities of Women: Wives-Mothers, Nuns, Whores, Prisoners, and Madwomen] (2011, original work published in 1990), develop an anthropological interpretation of the condition of women centred on the concept of *cautiverio* [captivity], understood as the set of cultural structures that produce and sustain women's oppression, including motherhood as a socially organized site of subordination. Along axes such as sex and power, Lagarde y de los Ríos demonstrates how the expropriation of the body, sexuality, and capacity for decision-making produces dependent female subjects whose identities are constituted in relation to others, a condition that shapes maternal subjectivity as relational, constrained, and socially prescribed. These forms of captivity do not operate solely as external impositions but are also internalized and lived as modes of fulfilment, thereby ensuring their reproduction.

Another example is Marta Lamas's *Feminismo y Maternidad* [Feminism and Motherhood] (1985), where the author critiques the approaches to the maternal advanced by Rich and Chodorow. While Lamas acknowledges the continued relevance and importance of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* in prompting feminists to reflect on the effects of the institution of motherhood on women and to reclaim the pleasure of maternal experience, she argues that Rich's proposal falls into essentialist positions that contradict her own anti-

biologism. Lamas further critiques Rich's ahistorical use of the concept of patriarchy, as well what she considers a superficial engagement with psychoanalytic theory. In the case of Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering, Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Lamas recognizes the importance of some of its insights; however, she contends that its reliance on the psychoanalytic framework of object relations theory is insufficient, and indeed inaccurate, for addressing the complexity of the structuring of maternal desire. Lamas also argues that Chodorow's work lacks rigour and treats several issues superficially. In particular, she points to what she identifies as a contradictory stance: on the one hand, Chodorow suggests that sexually differentiated roles are the effect of the organization of production and can therefore only be transformed through changes to that organization; on the other hand, she ultimately proposes that such roles can be altered at the individual level by persuading men to participate more equally in childrearing. For Lamas, this voluntarist stance contradicts Chodorow's Marxist framework and is further challenged by psychoanalytic theory. With this text, Lamas proposes a distinction between *maternidad* (motherhood) and *maternazgo* (mothering) by differentiating two dimensions of the phenomenon, reserving *maternidad* to refer specifically to the biological processes of gestation and childbirth, and *maternazgo* to designate the set of practices of childrearing, care, and affective responsibility toward children. For Lamas, while *maternidad* refers to biological reproduction and has been understood as a female experience, *maternazgo* refers to non-biological functions that are not intrinsically feminine, although they have historically been

associated with women. The author's invitation in this work is to analyze and further develop the propositions of Rich and Chodorow, while pointing to the relative scarcity of feminist reflection on motherhood at the time, particularly when compared to the more extensive feminist theorization on issues such as domestic labour, sexuality, abortion, and violence against women.

In her book *Cuerpo, Diferencia Sexual y Género* [Body, Sexual Difference, and Gender], Lamas (2002) further develops this perspective by problematizing the symbolic and cultural constructions that organize sexual difference, emphasizing how meanings attached to women's bodies and reproductive capacities are historically produced rather than naturally given. While not centred on motherhood per se, this collection examines, from an anthropological perspective, how reproductive difference has been mobilized to justify gendered roles and inequalities within broader social structures.

In *La Invención de la Naturaleza: Familia, Sexo y Género en la Tradición Religiosa Afrobrasileña* [The Invention of Nature: Family, Sex, and Gender in the Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition], Rita Segato (2003, original work published in 1986) offers one of the earliest contributions of her intellectual trajectory by examining the ways in which the Xangô de Recife religion, rooted in the Nagô/Yoruba tradition, organizes kinship, gender, sexuality, and communal life according to a logic profoundly different from that of the West. Drawing on her ethnographic research, Segato shows that within this religious universe personality does not derive automatically from anatomical sex or from any supposedly biological nature, but rather from each person's relationship to the

orixá (deity) who governs their head. In this way, attributes conventionally understood as masculine or feminine cease to appear as fixed essences and are instead understood as symbolic, ritual, and relational configurations. One of the essay's most important contributions lies in its questioning of the centrality of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family as universal principles of social organization. In place of these forms, Segato describes the importance of the *familia de santo* (saint family), a ritual network of filiation, care, authority, and belonging in which bonds of initiation and child-rearing acquire decisive weight. Within this framework, consanguinity loses its monopoly over kinship, and the care of children and dependent persons is constructed communally.

Another example is Julieta Kirkwood's *Ser Política en Chile: Las Feministas y los Partidos* [Being a Politician in Chile: Feminists and Political Parties] (1986). While not addressing motherhood as a central theme, the work offers a critique of the sexual division of labour, approaching motherhood consistently as an axis through which women's political participation is both made visible and constrained. The figure of the mother appears as a socially accepted mediation that allows for the recognition of women's presence in the political sphere, while simultaneously reducing their action to traditional roles and obscuring their condition as autonomous political subjects, thereby configuring maternal subjectivity as politically mediated, constrained, and instrumentalized. In this sense, motherhood functions simultaneously as a mechanism of legitimization, control, and depoliticization, deeply imbricated with the ways in which women have been incorporated into history and politics.

In *Género y Violencias en América Latina* [Gender and Violences in Latin America], edited by Miranda Juárez et al. (2024), motherhood is examined across multiple contexts, showing how it is shaped by social expectations, institutional practices, and political dynamics. The volume highlights how gender norms that position women as mothers, wives, and workers, structure their lived experiences, while also foregrounding mothers as key actors in activism, particularly in struggles for justice, thereby configuring maternal subjectivity as both socially regulated and politically mobilized. At the same time, it examines the emotional dimensions of motherhood in contexts such as femicide and sex work, as well as its mobilization within antifeminist discourses that reinforce traditional roles. Institutional settings further reveal discriminatory practices that frame maternity as a privilege rather than a right, and migration contexts expose the intensified burdens placed on women who sustain family life across distance. Together, these perspectives underscore the complexity of motherhood as a social, political, and cultural formation.

A further illustration of the diversity of feminist approaches to motherhood in Abya Yala is found in *Discurso de Hebe de Bonafini en la Ceremonia de Entrega del Premio UNESCO 1999 de “Educación para la Paz” a la Asociación de Plaza de Mayo* [Speech by Hebe de Bonafini at the 1999 UNESCO Award Ceremony for “Education for Peace” Awarded to the Madres de Plaza de Mayo Association] (Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 1999, as cited in Santiago Guzmán et al., 2017, pp. 49-52), where motherhood is resignified as a collective and political practice that transcends the biological relationship to become an ethic of struggle

and solidarity. In response to the disappearance of their children during dictatorship, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo transform maternal grief into political action, proposing the socialization of motherhood as a process through which they cease to be individual mothers and instead come to understand themselves as mothers of all oppressed children. In this way, motherhood becomes a site of denunciation, resistance, and the construction of the common, articulated against state violence, impunity, and the inequalities produced by the system.

Analyses of motherhood under conditions of poverty can be found in works such as Elizabeth Jelin's *Las Familias Latinoamericanas en el Marco de las Transformaciones Globales* [Latin American Families in the Context of Global Transformations] (1994), which examines motherhood across multiple dimensions within broader social transformations in Latin America and the Caribbean and situates it within a patriarchal family model that defined women as mothers and wives, reinforcing dependency. At the same time, Jelin notes shifts in reproductive behavior, where motherhood remains a strong social value but no longer exclusively defines women's identities as they gain greater control over reproduction, thereby configuring maternal subjectivity as both socially prescribed and increasingly negotiated. The author addresses teenage pregnancy as a factor in intergenerational poverty and highlights the need for education to prevent unintended early pregnancies. In contexts of violence, the work underscores the vulnerability of mothers, particularly widows, facing economic and social precarity. It also explores changing family dynamics under migration, where mothers often bear primary responsibility for caregiving and

maintaining family ties across distances, revealing the evolving complexity of motherhood.

A different but equally significant line of analysis can be found in Sonia Montecino Aguirre's *Madres y Huachos: Alegorías del Mestizaje Chileno* [Mothers and Huachos: Allegories of Chilean Mestizaje] (2017, original work published in 1991), which examines, through the category of the *huacho* (bastard), motherhood as a central symbolic matrix in the construction of Chilean mestizaje (understood as a colonial process of racial and cultural mixture produced through colonial rule that structures national identity), articulated around the figure of the mother as a dominant presence in relation to the structural absence of the father. Motherhood here appears as a cultural principle that organizes forms of filiation, identity, and belonging, where the mother-child relationship produces subjects marked by illegitimacy and uprootedness, thereby configuring maternal subjectivity as historically and symbolically structured. At the same time, this form of motherhood is inscribed within a colonial context that produces family models centred on the mother and her children, configuring a matrifocal society traversed by patriarchal hierarchies and historical inequalities.

Motherhood in neoliberal contexts has also been the subject of analysis. In *Motherhood, Social Policies and Women's Activism in Latin America*, Alejandra Ramm and Jasmine Gideon (2020) critically examine maternalism by analyzing its articulation through state policies and women's demands for social rights from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Using Chile as a case study, this work situates these dynamics within a context of economic growth and poverty

reduction alongside persistent gender, class, and income inequalities. The work further expands the analysis to less explored arenas, including environmental activism, women's participation in miners' unions, and non-heterosexual forms of maternalism, thereby configuring maternal subjectivity as shaped by both state regulation and collective political action.

Another example in this line of thought is *Mujeres y Resistencia en la Globalización Neoliberal* [Women and Resistance in Neoliberal Globalization], edited by Irene León (2004), in which twenty-two authors from different regions of Abya Yala examine the situation of women's rights and resistance to globalization in the region. Motherhood is approached as a traditional social role assigned to women and considered their primary role within a patriarchal and misogynistic culture, linked to stereotypes that define women as sensitive, caregiving, and responsible for domestic labour, thereby producing a maternal subjectivity structured through normative expectations of care and gendered responsibility. Several essays in this volume critique the state of women's rights related to pregnancy and childrearing in Latin America and the Caribbean and highlight reproductive health as a decisive factor for women's participation in society, identifying how pregnancy, childbirth, and sexual health directly impact women's ability to exercise their rights and participate actively in other spheres of life.

Indigenous, Afro descendant, and decolonial feminists have further expanded these analyses, situating motherhood and the maternal within broader struggles for autonomy, collective survival, and resistance to coloniality. Within

these perspectives, motherhood is approached not as an isolated object of analysis, but as embedded within wider analyses of coloniality, race, territory, and community, where the maternal emerges as a critical site for understanding the reproduction of power as well as the conditions of life and resistance. The following examples illustrate how some of these perspectives conceptualize the maternal in situated and context-specific ways.

In her *Acercamiento a la Construcción de la Propuesta de Pensamiento Epistémico de las Mujeres Indígenas Feministas Comunitarias de Abya Yala* [Approach to the Construction of the Epistemic Thought Proposal of Indigenous Communitarian Feminist Women of Abya Yala], Lorena Cabnal (2010) presents the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* [body-territory], which emerges as an indigenous communitarian feminist proposal that positions the body as the primary territory to be reclaimed. This process involves recognizing how women's bodies have been historically shaped by intersecting patriarchal and colonial forms of oppression. Defending the body thus becomes an everyday practice of resistance and a means of challenging the patriarchal arrangements that regulate it. At the same time, this framework articulates the defense of the body with that of the land, understanding both as inseparable sites of struggle, life, and dignity. In this line of thought, Cabnal articulates the maternal as a structurally assigned position within a heteronormative and cosmogonic order that organizes social, cultural, and spiritual life. Within this order, Indigenous women are positioned as custodians of culture, protectors, reproducers, and transmitters of an ancestral patriarchal system, a role through which heterosexuality and compulsory

motherhood are inscribed onto their bodies as part of a broader masculine pact that sustains patriarchal continuity across generations. This structuring of the maternal also extends to the symbolic realm, where the figure of the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) is situated within a heterosexual cosmological order as a life-giving feminine entity, whose generative capacity is framed in relation to a masculine principle of fertilization, often associated with the sun. In this configuration, hierarchical relations of power are encoded through spatial and symbolic arrangements that position the masculine as dominant and the feminine as receptive, raising critical questions about the gendered assumptions embedded in this cosmological representation. Motherhood thus operates as a mandate embedded in collective and cosmogonic arrangements, rather than as an individualized site of identity, agency, or self-definition.

Similarly, in *Hilando Fino Desde el Feminismo Comunitario* [Hilando Fino from Communitarian Feminism] (2015), Julieta Paredes proposes communitarian feminism as situated alternative emerging from the bodies of Indigenous women to eradicate all forms of oppression, not only patriarchy but also colonization, heterosexuality, machismo, classism, and racism. The author advances a critique of neoliberal policies directed at women, as well as of the co-optation and institutionalization of feminism and of women's social organizations and outlines the epistemological rupture that communitarian feminism establishes with Western feminism (of which communitarian feminism does *not* consider itself a branch). Paredes introduces *el Buen Vivir* ["Living Well" or "Collective Well-Being"], a decolonial and anti-capitalist approach in which the interdependence of

life, harmony with the environment, and communitarian reciprocity are central, and where collective flourishing is prioritized over individual prosperity. El Buen Vivir is not about living better at the expense of others, as neoliberal policies have enabled some middle- and upper-class women to do through the exploitation of Indigenous and other impoverished women's care labour, but about living well in community, including Pachamama as a living subject. Within el Buen Vivir, the care and reproduction of life, and particularly of *wawas* (the Aymara term for small children or babies), is a shared community responsibility rather than the individual responsibility of the mother, especially during periods of struggle or social mobilization. *Wawas* are understood as part of the *territorio-cuerpo* [territory-body] (Paredes, 2023), (a concept that inversely relates to *cuerpo-territorio* and emphasizes the inseparable relationship between the understanding of land and territory as a living body and the defence of the body as the primary territory), which must be defended against capitalism and colonization. In this framework, motherhood is reconfigured from a private task into a collective practice, thereby departing from individualist narratives.

Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar's *reproducción de la vida* [reproduction of life] offers a critical lens for understanding how communities collectively sustain life beyond state and market logics. In her book *Horizontes Comunitario-Populares: Producción de lo Común más Allá de las Políticas Estado-Céntricas* [Communitarian-Popular Horizons: The Production of the Common Beyond State-Centered Politics] (2017), writing from her trajectory as a militant involved in Indigenous and popular struggles in Bolivia, she situates these processes

within broader critiques of capitalist dispossession and the limits of state-centred politics. The reproduction of life is understood as the organizing axis of *política en femenino* [politics in the feminine], a form of the political articulated around a collective commitment to sustaining and reproducing life as a whole, both human and non-human. Within this framework, it is not confined to the domestic sphere or to procreation but rather refers to the guarantee of the material conditions that make collective existence possible, enacted through everyday practices of care, self-protection, and the production of the common. These dynamics, often rendered invisible, operate in a terrain not subordinated to capital or to state regulation, from which communal assemblages emerge that prioritize the defense, renewal, and expansion of life in the face of logics of dispossession. In this sense, the reproduction of life constitutes not only a material foundation of existence, but also a political horizon from which social relations are reorganized and processes of transformation that exceed the state-capitalist order are set in motion.

A similarly relevant approach can be found in the essay *El Feminismo no Puede Ser Uno Porque las Mujeres Somos Diversas: Aportes de un Feminismo Negro Decolonial Desde la Experiencia de las Mujeres Negras del Pacífico Colombiano* [Feminism Cannot Be One Because Women Are Diverse: Contributions of a Decolonial Black Feminism from the Experience of Black Women in the Colombian Pacific], in which Betty Ruth Lozano Lerma (2010), writing from a Colombian Black feminist perspective, describes motherhood as a situated experience within contexts of coloniality, racism, and dispossession,

linked both to communal practices of care and to processes of political resistance. Motherhood here is shown to be shaped by the history of slavery, in which maternity and paternity were instrumentalized for the reproduction of labour, as well as by material conditions that position Black women as primary sustainers of family and community life. At the same time, motherhood emerges as a site of political enunciation from which women articulate leadership and struggles for territory and life, while remaining rooted in their collective identity as a people.

In *Feminismo Afrodiaspórico. Una Agenda Emergente del Feminismo Negro en Colombia* [Afro-diasporic Feminism: An Emerging Agenda of Black Feminism in Colombia], Aurora Vergara Figueroa and Katherine Arboleda Hurtado (2014) revisit the legacy of Black feminism to propose Afro-diasporic feminism as an integral process that brings together a research agenda, a strategy for social mobilization, a practice of solidarity, and a demand for reparative and restorative justice for Afro-descendant communities. They conceptualize it as a diverse, conflictual, and internally heterogeneous field, yet oriented toward a shared objective: confronting the marginalization and multiple forms of oppression experienced by Black women in the diaspora. In dialogue with African Black feminist thought, this perspective rejects the idea of liberation as individual or exclusive centred on women, instead framing it as a collective process involving Afro-descendant women, men, and children, insofar as they share a common history, experience, and cultural inheritance. Within this framework, and in accordance with African ways of being and knowing,

motherhood is not reduced to a burden but as a potential source of strength and power for women. Afro-diasporic feminist thought, produced both by African women and by women of African descent, seeks to distance itself from white, middle-class Western feminism, in order to develop its own analytical frameworks capable of transforming the historically position assigned to women of the African diaspora. A central axis of Afro-diasporic feminist thought is their rejection of the excessive burden of care and domestic labour imposed on Black women in their roles as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, or partners, even when such labour is sustained through networks of familial solidarity. While these relationships can provide support, they may also limit women's possibilities to develop as autonomous and creative subjects in order spheres. In this sense, Afro-diasporic feminist thought simultaneously recognizes motherhood as a potential source of strength and cultural continuity while rejecting the unequal burdens placed on Black women within families and communities. As a result, motherhood and care are understood as contested terrains, shaped by colonial histories, racialized gender norms, and heteronormative expectations, but also as sites from which collective resistance, redefinition of kinship, and emancipatory social transformation can emerge.

This dispersed yet vibrant body of work, of which the foregoing examples constitute only a fragment, demonstrates that the problem lies not in an absence of thought but in its lack of visibility and recognition within Anglo-North America academia. By overlooking Abya Yala feminist contributions on motherhood, Motherhood Studies risk rendering them invisible, thereby diminishing decades of

intellectual labour and political praxis. Moreover, failing to acknowledge and engage with the absence of epistemic dialogue between Anglo-North American and Abya Yala feminisms perpetuates the production of knowledge through universalizing categories, a tendency that marked the early stages of feminism but one that the field has since sought, and continues to strive, to overcome.

From my standpoint as a feminist scholar from Abya Yala based in Canada, this lack of hemispheric exchange is evident. It is accompanied by the limited institutional interest of Women's Studies programs (such as the one I belong to) and of Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism, in fostering sustained dialogue. The language barrier, compounded by the neo-colonial practice of treating English as the unquestioned *lingua franca* (even within Women's Studies spaces) has contributed significantly to the marginalization of knowledge produced in other languages and contexts. As outlined in my Aims and Objectives section, as a Latin American feminist in a Canadian graduate program, I feel compelled to critically examine the program I belong to and the academic field it represents. It is imperative to challenge the unidirectional flow of feminist theory across America. Feminists in Abya Yala are constant consumers of Anglo-North American feminist theory in both academic and activist spaces, while the reverse appears not to be the case. Nor does there seem to be much interest among Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies scholars in listening to our experiences and insights. *The exchange must go both ways.* Women's Studies and Motherhood Studies in this region cannot continue to assume Anglo-North American thought as dominant and superior. This, I argue, is the root of the

problem, as it perpetuates epistemic hierarchies and renders Abya Yala feminist contributions on motherhood invisible.

Recognizing this disjunction and the asymmetry in the circulation of knowledge is crucial. The present tension (between the lack of dialogue across America and the fragmented but persistent Latin American and Caribbean presences) calls for a decolonial reorientation of Motherhood Studies. Rather than continuing to privilege frameworks from the Global North, it is urgent that Motherhood scholars across America weave a hemispheric, plurilingual, and situated dialogue that both makes visible and legitimizes the genealogies of Abya Yala, and incorporates them into syllabi, research agendas, and editorial circuits within Anglo-North American academia.

Towards a Decolonial Reorientation

Without a decolonial feminist grounding, matricentric feminism risks reproducing epistemic coloniality. Thus, a decolonial reorientation within the field of Motherhood Studies in Anglo-North America requires first recognizing that the persistent absence of Abya Yala voices is not accidental but reflects what Quijano (2000) has called the *coloniality of power*: the ongoing structuring of knowledge and social life through Eurocentric hierarchies that universalize Northern experiences and marginalize those of the Global South. A decolonial reorientation therefore requires confronting what Segato (2015) identifies as *epistemic racism*: the organization of knowledge through which Northern categories appear as universal and theoretically authoritative, while knowledges produced elsewhere are rendered secondary, particular, or epistemically

deficient (pp. 47-48). This has been repeatedly reinforced by feminist scholarship that, even when critical of androcentric or child-centric biases, continues to privilege English-speaking mothers with citizenship in the Global North. As Mohanty (1984, as cited in Curiel, 2009) warned decades ago, Third World women have often been represented as passive victims rather than theorists of their own lives, a discursive move that excludes their situated knowledges and reduces them to the *outside* of history (p. 3).

Building on O'Reilly's (2016) argument that "matricentric feminism has largely been ignored by feminist scholars and has yet to be incorporated into the field of academic feminism" and that it "remains peripheral to academic feminism" (p. 185), this study advances a related but distinct claim. It argues that feminist maternal thought emerging from Abya Yala and its diasporas has likewise remained largely unacknowledged within Motherhood Studies. Despite the field's stated commitment to theorizing maternal experience, the body of work produced by Abya Yala feminists is rarely engaged as a site of theoretical production and instead positioned as external to the field's core epistemic frameworks. Just as matricentric feminism proposes a reorientation of feminist inquiry by centring mothers as subjects of knowledge, arguing that motherhood must become the explicit concern of feminism rather than a peripheral topic within Women's Studies, and recognizes the need for "a feminism for and about mothers," in which their specific needs, experiences, and desires are taken as objects of study and representation (O'Reilly, 2021b, p. 9), this project advances a parallel intervention. It calls for the inclusion and centralization of feminist maternal

thought emerging from Abya Yala within matricentric feminism, arguing that it must be engaged not as peripheral but as constitutive of the field. In doing so, it underscores the need for feminist maternal theory *by, for and about* Latin American and Caribbean women and their diasporas, in which their specific needs, experiences, and desires are likewise taken as objects of study and representation.

A decolonial reorientation must therefore move beyond the limitations of intersectionality as it has been predominantly practiced in Anglo-North American feminist scholarship. As Lugones (2008) has argued, intersectionality remains insufficient, not as a concept in itself but in forms and usages that, particularly within dominant strands of Anglo-North American feminist scholarship (often shaped by white academic norms), fail to account for the colonality of gender, that is, the ways in which race, sexuality, labour, and reproduction were reconstituted through colonial domination (pp. 81-82). Extending this analysis to mothering means acknowledging that categories such as linguistic location, transnational belonging, and migration or citizenship status are not secondary, but constitutive of maternal subjectivities in Abya Yala and its diasporas. Mothers who inhabit these crossings do not simply add another *axis of difference* to existing models; they expose the epistemic limits of frameworks that universalize Northern maternal experience.

Espinosa Miñoso (2020) warns that intersectionality, as it has been appropriated in academia and in sectors of hegemonic feminism, risks becoming a nominative category rather than a radical political tool. Its widespread use, she

argues, often leaves intact the white feminist analysis it was originally meant to confront, reducing it to the application of hegemonic feminist maxims onto racialized or subaltern subjects without transforming the interpretive frameworks themselves. This distortion also reinforces the misleading impression that gender, race, and class exist as independent entities that merely *intersect*, when in fact, as Lugones (2008, as cited in Espinosa Miñoso, 2020) argues, gender itself is a historically racialized and colonized construction. Building on this critique, Espinosa Miñoso (2014) further reminds us that “the feminist episteme produced by white bourgeois women in central countries could not recognize how its own practice reproduced the same problems it criticized in the sciences... [as it] produced the category of gender and applied it universally to all societies and cultures” (p. 9). Such universalization risks erasing the epistemic specificities of Abya Yala mothers, leaving their realities outside the interpretive frameworks that claim to account for maternal subjectivities.

Decolonial antiracist feminists have shown that classical feminist theories “do not serve to interpret the reality and oppression of the racialized women whose origins are in colonized territories” (Espinosa Miñoso, 2014, p. 8). The persistence of this limitation can also be observed in Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies and in matricentric feminism, which, despite incorporating the experiences of Black, lesbian, Chicana, U.S.-based Latina, or migrant mothers in the North, still universalize categories elaborated from white, bourgeois women in the global centres. Indeed, Anglo-North American academia has often tended to conflate the experiences of Chicanas with those of Latin

American and Caribbean mothers, portraying them as a more homogeneous group than we in fact are. This conflation overlooks key distinctions that are not only geographical but also linguistic and tied to citizenship status in the Global South versus the Global North. While their inclusion in Motherhood Studies and Matricentric Feminist is partly explained by their proximity as English-speaking U.S. citizens, their experiences cannot be taken as representative of Spanish-speaking mothers from the Global South, even if we may share certain ethnic origins, or even when some Abya Yala mothers, through migration, come to share their same geographic location in the Global North.

Methodologically, a decolonial feminist reorientation of Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism demands hemispheric practices of knowledge production. This entails conducting literature reviews that extend beyond Northern databases to include Scielo, Redalyc, Latindex, Dialnet, and other regional repositories, making visible the abundant theorization on motherhood produced within Abya Yala. It also calls for protocols of co-authorship and co-translation with scholars and activists in the region, guided by an ethic of relational accountability and mutuality rather than extractivism. Plurilingual engagement is essential here: not only translating texts into English but also sustain dialogues in Spanish, Portuguese, and Indigenous languages as valid epistemic sites. This could involve, for instance, designing course syllabi in Women's Studies programs that include feminist scholarship on motherhood produced in Spanish and Portuguese alongside Anglo-North American texts, or structuring research projects that engage directly with scholars based in Abya

Yala through collaborative authorship rather than one-directional citation practices. It may also entail citing and engaging with untranslated texts as legitimate sources of theory, rather than limiting scholarly dialogue to English-language productions. Only by embracing this pluriversality can Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism escape their Anglo-centric borders and begin to foster genuine hemispheric exchange.

Following Segato (2016), a decolonial reorientation also requires *reciprocity*, not simply as an ethical ideal but as an epistemic principle, a mode of relational life through which communities are built and sustained, resources circulate, and forms of belonging remain rooted in concrete webs of obligation, care, and interlocution (pp. 28, 30-31, 99, 106). From this perspective, reciprocity calls for practices of knowledge grounded in relation, mutual care, and sustained interlocution rather than extraction, accumulation or the unilateral appropriation of concepts. It invites the field to cultivate forms of reading, citation, and theorization that remain accountable to the communities, histories, and struggles from which knowledge emerges; to value the everyday, local, and relational forms of intelligence through which life is reproduced; and to privilege processes of collective intelligibility over the isolated production of academic authority.

At the conceptual level, a decolonial reorientation involves re-reading dominant categories through the frameworks emerging from Abya Yala. For example, notions of maternal agency and empowerment can be re-read through the lens of *cuerpo-territorio* (Cabnal, 2010), the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008), the reproduction of life (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2017), and communal maternal

practices in Afro-Latina and Indigenous contexts. In this sense, maternal agency shifts from being understood primarily as individual autonomy or empowerment within existing social structures to being conceptualized as a relational and territorially embedded practice shaped by collective survival, resistance, and the defense of life in contexts marked by colonial dispossession.

Taken together, these proposals name the absence of Abya Yala mothers within matricentric feminism and Motherhood Studies as an epistemic border sustained by coloniality, while simultaneously charting a path toward its undoing. Rather than rejecting prior contributions, a decolonial feminist reorientation reframes them through hemispheric dialogue, citational justice, and methodological commitments that make Abya Yala feminist genealogies central. In this way, the limits of matricentric feminism become not an endpoint but a bridge that invites their re-reading along these lines.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis set out to examine Anglo-North American feminist scholarship on motherhood through a decolonial feminist lens grounded in Abya Yala. By situating Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism within their historical, geopolitical, linguistic, and epistemic conditions of emergence, the analysis has demonstrated that these frameworks, while foundational and politically significant, remain shaped by Euro-North American feminist genealogies that limit their capacity to account for maternal lives formed through colonial histories, racialized hierarchies, migration, and structural precarity beyond the Global North.

By mobilizing decolonial feminism as an epistemological lens rather than as an additive framework, this thesis has foregrounded coloniality as constitutive of feminist knowledge production on motherhood in Anglo-North America. This shift has enabled a critical interrogation of how feminist discourses in the region render certain maternal experiences intelligible while obscuring others. Read from Abya Yala, these silences emerge not as incidental gaps but as patterned exclusions that expose the limits of universalizing feminist claims.

This thesis contributes to Women's and Gender Studies by advancing a decolonial feminist critique of Motherhood Studies that foregrounds coloniality as constitutive of feminist knowledge production on motherhood and the maternal and calls for a hemispheric and epistemically plural reconfiguration of the field. It has argued that the marginal presence of Abya Yala feminist thought within Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies does not reflect an absence of

theorization on motherhood in Latin America and the Caribbean, but rather an epistemic asymmetry in the circulation, recognition, and legitimization of feminist knowledge. Feminists in Abya Yala have long engaged motherhood as a central site of gendered oppression, political struggle, social reproduction, and collective survival, producing a rich and diverse body of scholarship grounded in specific historical, colonial, and geopolitical conditions. The persistent exclusion of these genealogies from the formal field of Motherhood Studies reveals a structural limitation that continues to privilege Northern epistemologies, English-language scholarship, and Global North citizenship as implicit criteria of theoretical legitimacy.

My positionality as a Mexican feminist scholar working within an Anglo-North American academic institution has been central to this analysis. This location has shaped both the questions I ask and the epistemic tensions I encounter, particularly the asymmetry through which feminists in Abya Yala are expected to engage extensively with Anglo-North American theory, while the reverse remains rare. Bringing this standpoint into the introduction, methodology, and analysis has not been an exercise in personal narrative, but an epistemological commitment to situated knowledge as a site of critical insight.

Building on this diagnosis, the thesis advances the need for a decolonial feminist reorientation of Motherhood Studies and matricentric feminism, one that does not seek to replace existing frameworks but to critically re-read them through epistemologies emerging from Abya Yala. Decolonial feminist theory offers analytical tools that foreground coloniality as constitutive of feminist

knowledge production, challenge the universalization of Northern maternal experiences, and insist on the centrality of linguistic location, migration, citizenship, and colonial history in shaping maternal subjectivities. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, such a reorientation requires methodological shifts, including hemispheric and plurilingual research practices, citational justice, and sustained engagement with feminist scholarship produced in Abya Yala.

In practical terms, this entails that scholars expand their literature reviews beyond Global North databases to include regional repositories and engage with untranslated texts as legitimate sources of theory rather than as merely contextual evidence. While the linguistic barriers that structure access to this body of work cannot be overlooked as it is neither realistic nor methodologically sufficient to expect scholars in the Global North to acquire fluency in multiple languages to access these traditions, these constraints point to the need for sustained reflexive engagement. This involves explicitly recognizing one's work as situated knowledge, shaped by particular linguistic and socio-cultural conditions, rather than presenting it as universal or authoritative accounts of the maternal. From this perspective, what transnational feminist scholarship has described as *cultural humility* (Zerbe Enns et al., 2021) becomes an essential epistemic orientation, one that unsettles enduring assumptions of neutrality within Anglo-North American academic frameworks. Such a stance also necessitates revisiting citational practices in order to trace patterned exclusions and resist the reproduction of canons that privilege Anglophone scholarship. In parallel, it encourages the development of research grounded in reciprocal, non-extractive

collaboration with scholars and activists in the region. Initiatives oriented toward the selection and translation of key feminist texts from Abya Yala into English, including the possibility of edited collections, may offer one avenue for expanding access while remaining attentive to the ethical and epistemic stakes involved.

In the realm of teaching, such a reorientation calls for the design of curricula and syllabi that substantively integrate feminist scholarship on motherhood produced in Spanish, Portuguese, and Indigenous languages from Abya Yala as central theoretical frameworks rather than merely supplementary and tokenistic content. It further requires moving away from presenting Anglo-North American Motherhood Studies as universal referents and instead situating them as localized productions to be read in relation to other feminist genealogies. For students, this means cultivating a critical awareness of epistemic silences, developing questions around which knowledges are excluded from dominant frameworks and why, and recognizing non-Anglophone feminist production as constitutive of the field rather than peripheral to it.

At the conceptual level, this reorientation demands revisiting dominant categories of maternal agency and empowerment through frameworks such as the colonality of gender, *cuerpo-territorio*, *el Buen Vivir*, reciprocity, and the reproduction of life, which emerge from Indigenous, Afro-Latina, and communitarian feminist traditions, and which shift the understanding of agency away from individualist frameworks toward relational, territorial, and collective practices of sustaining life itself.

Taken together, these interventions position the limits of matricentric feminism and Motherhood Studies not as an endpoint, but as a productive site from which to rethink the field. By making Abya Yala genealogies epistemically central rather than supplementary, this thesis contributes to reshaping Motherhood Studies as a hemispheric, situated, and decolonially attuned field of feminist inquiry.

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