

"The future is in the past"

Adriana González Burgos, indigenous activist

María González Reyes

You would really like to meet her. Her name is Adriana González Burgos, I was told. "It's not the same reading an interview with her as listening to her live."

We arranged to meet at a venue in the city centre. A few hours later, in the early morning hours, her flight back to Argentina was leaving. "Thank you for taking the time to meet us. If you feel like it, we'd better go to a café," I suggested, and she smiled. She smiled, "Yes, much better. I'm in the mood for coffee."

Her straight hair and fringes are escaping from under her hat. Nobody wears a hat like that here. It's cold. As if by arrangement, we head for the most intimate corner of the café. There are four of us women sitting around a table.

She begins by saying that her voice is that of a Kolla activist, a community member, a peasant, and a popular feminist. She comes from a family originally from the aboriginal community of Rodero-Humahuaca. The land to which she is intimately linked is in the north of Argentina, in the province of Jujuy.

When I contacted her, I told her that I didn't want to do an interview and that the idea was to get together for a chat. She was fine with that. Afterwards, writing and reviewing the notes, I realised that some words were central to what Adriana was telling us and that those words gave meaning to everything else.



Adriana González Burgos, indigenous activist from Jujuy, during her visit to Madrid.

Orality

She talks about things she has told us many times before. You can tell when you talk about something you have repeated on other occasions. But her words are full of conviction and enthusiasm. As if orally transmitting the message she brings is essential for our skin to feel the convulsion of what is happening in her land, thousands of kilometres away.

"I defend the oral tradition that the word be respected," she says. Adriana is also a professor at a university in Jujuy.

We work to defend the body and the territory from a political spirituality.

She says that the academy does not take up her oral tradition and that the university has a Western hegemony, a white episteme. She says that when they name indigenous peoples, it is to appropriate their words that it is often other people who speak for them. That is why she carries the voice of her people wherever she goes. They defend their territories, cosmovision, and sense of the world so that their voice is respected. "We work to defend the body and the territory from a political spirituality. This way of standing in the world is embraced by many women and dissidents. An activism in defence of life and territory that has to do with our way of being as daughters and women".

She says that her journey has to do with denouncing what is happening. "From there, they don't listen to you, and no one echoes you; you have to come because when you are already here, it is more difficult to silence our voice". She adds: "The conquest and colonisation of Abya Yala happened without the knowledge of the European people, but today colonisation is well-known to Europe. If the people remain silent, they are complicit. Mining has always motivated the conquest and colonisation of our territories. Gold, silver, and lithium are now in our villages.

Communal lands

She says that in June 2023, they mobilised to protest against the reform of the provincial constitution promoted by Gerardo Morales, the governor at the time. The aim of the reform was the appropriation of the lithium in the area. They were not consulted. They thought they didn't have to; many communities don't have title to the land. "These are communal lands. If the land is yours, you don't have to certify it; it belongs to us by ancestral right.

She pauses. "The problem with this reform is that it is illegitimate and illegal because we have not been consulted

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as established in ILO Convention 169, National Law 24071, and it also attacks communal property and criminalises social protest. If they take away our right to our communal lands, they also take away the possibility of caring for nature. It is a racist, colonialist and patriarchal reform. And she clarifies, "When I talk about community, I mean the way of life that organises us".

She says that communities today are choosing to resist lithium extraction. One problem of extractivism is that it involves the use of a lot of water. "If there is no water, there is no life; that's why we take care of it. Our struggle is not only against lithium mining; it is also a defence of water and our territories. We are criminalised for taking care of water and life.

Spirituality

We asked her if she could talk about spirituality. She looks at us. "We are people holistically; we are not fragmented. We have been persecuted for our beliefs, but our rituals are of oral tradition; that's why they have not been able to disappear. Spirituality is part of our struggle, a struggle that is inherited and ancestral.

Taking another sip of coffee, She continues. "When we hold a roadblock in the struggles, we give space to the grandfather fire and ritualise that space. There is music; we sing slogans; we dance, and there are communal food and soup kitchens. There is joy in the struggle. All of that contains a way of teaching how to resist for centuries. There is an us that is part of the cosmos in horizontality. If there is any verticality, it is nature that is always above. Pachamama, the moon, the sun, the rivers... are divinities. Extracting lithium is an attack on all of this".

She says they believe it is possible to recover the relationship with the earth from a political spirituality, giving importance to ethics and aesthetics and taking care of the way of doing things.

She points to her hat, which is still on her head in this corner of the café. "My hat is ritualised and is an expression of struggle, a way of making it visible", she says, "this way of doing has been part of me since I have had any notion of the world; that's why I carry ceremonies and contact with the earth wherever I am. Here in Europe, there is a deep wound of separation from Mother Earth, they are spiritually separated from nature".

She says that with her message, she tries to heal the link with the earth wherever it is broken.

Future

"The future is in the past. If we are here, it is because our ancestors took care of the earth for us to be here. Capitalism does not understand this. In our cosmovision, there is no place for the here and now, and capitalism is just that, this "presentism." They don't think about a "transition" with lithium; they think about using it all up now.

She says that values mark the way of being in the world—values such as complementarity and reciprocity, among others. "This is not only between people but also with Pachamama. If we acted from an ethic of reciprocity on our terms, this world would be very different. Indigenous peoples, communities, peasants, and popular feminists have a lot to contribute to making this happen.

She says that thinking about the future means trying to recover the millenary culture, that all peoples, in all places, have had a relationship with nature, and that this ancestral knowledge must be recovered. "And after recovering it, it has to be healed. The earth is suffering; perhaps that is why there is so much sadness in the looks here in Europe. People are serious and accelerated; they have something broken inside. Our way of life is a political and spiritual alternative to the world.

She says that it is the time of women, of the indigenous, peasant, and popular peoples, and that this is where the future lies.

Defenders of the land

We talked about the role of women as defenders of the land. "If there are struggles and resistance, it is because we are there. We are the ones who cook at the roadblocks, who put our bodies when the police want to take a comrade away, who confront the gendarmerie,". She continues. "The grandmothers accompany us and open the way for us. The dead women are there, our ancestors, they are in their collective and their community, they give us strength".

They do not define themselves as ecofeminists; they say they are defenders of the earth because it is an intrinsic way of "being" in the world.

"Many women are killed for defending the territory in which they live, for caring for life, for caring for Pachamama. We do it in a different way to other white epistemic feminisms, we include caring for ourselves, for others, but also for nature".

Reciprocity

We would continue asking her questions, but the coffee was long gone. We said goodbye in a nearby bookshop. On the wall, there is a poster of an International Meeting of Community, Peasant, and Popular Feminisms that took place in her region. It shows her drawing. She runs her fingers over the pictures. She touches the pot for the communal meal. She touches the coloured hills. She touches the cut road. She touches the women who died but are there. Touch the moon.

I keep thinking about all that their community is doing to sustain life. What can we do here to apply that principle of reciprocity?

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❖ **About the author: María González Reyes** is a writer, activist with Ecologistas en Acción and secondary school teacher.



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