

## CASE STUDY #6 by A. Laurent

# THE MURDER OF BERTA CACERES AND THE AGUA ZARCA DAM

In 2016, Berta Caceres was murdered due to her environmental advocacy. She was an indigenous woman in Honduras from the Lenca community and was a well-known activist. Berta dedicated her life to safeguarding the Lenca people and the environment which they have lived in for time immemorial (Justice for Berta Caceres, 2016). She was the founder of COPINH (Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras) and consistently opposed resource extraction projects, fought against the ongoing hardships of indigenous communities and challenged the patriarchal foundation of Honduran society. In 2016, Berta was also awarded with the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in large part due to her activism against the Agua Zarca Dam in the Gualcarque River, a sacred Lenca river (Berta Caceres, 2019). Four men have been imprisoned for her murder, but the intellectual authors remain

at large (COPINH, 2019). The men who have been imprisoned are either associated with the Honduran US trained military or DESA (one of the companies developing the dam) (Justice for Berta Caceres, 2016).

## Root cause analysis

The murder of Berta Caceres is not a stand-alone tragedy. It's the product of a systematic reproduction of inequalities rooted in racism, extractivism, misogyny, capitalism and anti-indigenous disposition. Her murder is the result of long-term and short-term history. Long term causes can be traced back to colonialism, which resulted in the absolute devastation of indigenous peoples and the forceful injection of governing systems that benefited white male settlers and their descendants. It's important to remember that colonialism is not an event of the past, but an ongoing system of oppression. One way to conceptualize systems of oppression is to view



PACIFIC OCEAN

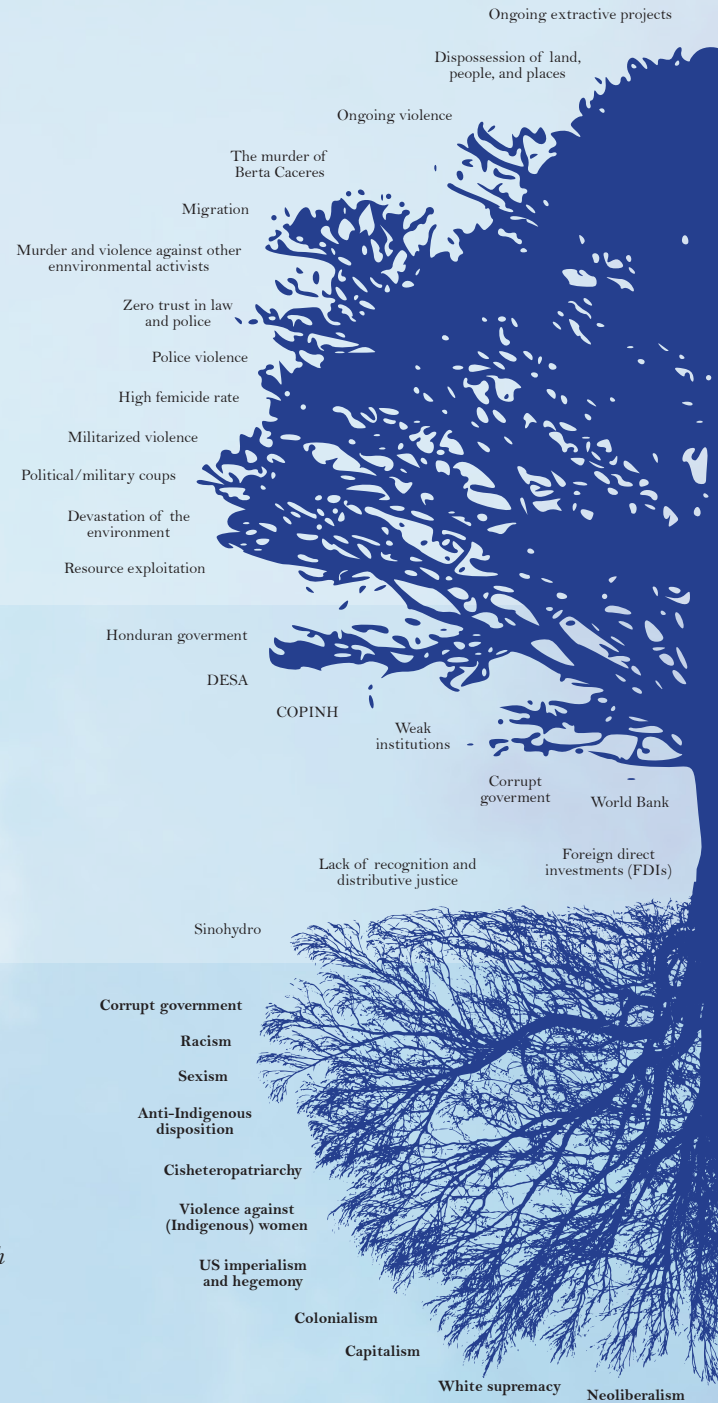
ATLANTIC OCEAN

approximate  
location of the  
Agua Zarca Dam

DAILY IMPACTS

STRUCTURES/INSTITUTIONS

ROOT CAUSE IDEOLOGIES



**ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS of the murder of Berta Caceres and the Agua Zarca dam**

*From Perera’s “Ineqaulitree,” used here with appreciation. Leaves represent daily impacts (Perera’s “everyday symptoms”), the trunk represents structure and institutions, and roots represent root cause ideologies.*

them through different justice lenses. There are 3 forms of justice: distributive, procedural and recognition justice (Abayami, 2015). Recognition justice is when the value of different cultures and indigenous ways of living are valued and perceived with the importance they deserve (Abayami, 2015). Colonialism has institutionalized the devaluation of indigenous ways of life.

One of the short-term connections can be traced back to the 2009 military coup. In 2009 Zelaya, who was a left-leaning president, was ousted in a US-backed military coup (a coup that Hillary Clinton was heavily involved in) (Mendez, 2018). Almost immediately after the coup, multiple right-winged laws and legislations were passed that the Zelaya administration had either opposed or stalled (Mendez, 2018). Some of these, laws/legislations included reduced access to contraception, decreased protection for labour rights, and looser environmental regulations on the extractive, energy and mining industries (Mendez, 2018). These laws and regulations created a platform for the creation of projects like the Agua Zarca dam (amongst others). The coup also led to an increase in militarization in the country and it’s no coincidence that the murder rate steadily increased after 2009 (UNODC

Homicide Statistics, 2013). The overall effect of the US-backed military coup was the weakening of institutions meant to protect people and environment and the reinforcement of US hegemony in the country.

When looking in more detail to the case of Berta Caceres and the Agua Zarca dam, some key players stand out. The dam had multiple investors, the most noteworthy are DESA (Honduran energy company), Sinohydro (Chinese company) and the International Finance Corporation (a private-sector branch of the World Bank) (Berta Caceres, 2019). When ideating the project, the Lenca community was not consulted, which is a direct violation of UNDRIP, of which Honduras is a signatory (Schachet, 2016). The lack of consultation is also an example of procedural injustice (Abayomi, 2015). The extractive and energy industry that support projects like these have a long-standing history of indigenous dispossession and contribution to climate change. The ongoing exploitation of resources that benefit the neoliberal agenda have devastated ecosystems and communities. This dam would have had detrimental effects on the local environment and people. It’s important to learn from the oppressive histories, both long term and

and short term, that have laid the foundation for indigenous dispossession, misogyny and extractive projects. In learning from the past and the present, we can create a more just and sustainable future for humans and non-humans alike.

**Decolonial climate futures**

A decolonial and climate resilient future in Honduras would require the overhaul of multiple and interlinking systems of oppression that have plagued the region for centuries. The Berta Caceres case study highlights what some of those interlinked systems are and how they often have mutually reinforcing relationships. When Berta was awarded with the Goldman Environmental prize, her acceptance speech highlighted 3 systems we must collectively dismantle: Capitalism, racism, and the patriarchy (Berta Caceres acceptance speech, 2015).

**Energy systems and climate adaptation**

It’s crucial for Honduras to create energy systems that are resilient, community based and climate friendly. Although the proposed Agua Zarca dam would have been a renewable energy source, the project was extractive in nature and wasn’t

based on community needs. When thinking about future energy systems, the reliance on renewable energy sources alone will not create more equitable communities. Instead we must couple energy production with community needs and localized stewardship networks while also creating non-capitalist economic systems. The investment in solar energy, along with the creation of decentralized energy grids seems like a promising option in tropical nations like Honduras. Lennon (2017), claims that renewable energy, like solar, allow for the decentralization of energy systems. Lennon draws connections between decentralized energy grids and Black Lives Matter (BLM) vision for self-determination. Lennon (2017), argues that decentralized energy grids would also disempower top-down, capitalist and extractive government systems which would in turn empower communities. Although the idea of decentralized energy grids seems appealing, it would most likely require marginalized and impoverished communities in Honduras to rely on foreign investments or financial support from wealthy local elites. This injection of external funds might maintain unequal power dynamics for the Lenca community and other Indigenous and black communities in the region.

Honduras has one of the highest femicide rates in the world and indigenous and black women face even more violence (in the many forms that violence can take place). It's necessary for women, particularly women of colour, to be at the forefront of the decolonial movement and at the center of community based governing systems.

#### Race and gender

Honduras has one of the highest femicide rates in the world and indigenous and black women face even more violence (in the many forms that violence can take place). It's necessary for women, particularly women of colour, to be at the forefront of the decolonial movement and at the center of community based governing systems. When creating COPINH, Berta ensured that Lenca women were embedded in the governing system of the organization and were at the core of decision making (Barra, R. 2018). In a decolonial future, the region known as Honduras would have governance systems that are based on community needs aimed at ensuring that everyone has their needs met. One potential drawback for racialized women who are entering the decision-

making realm is the potential violence they may face as they enter the public scene. Women are twice as likely to receive psychological violence during election campaigns than male counterparts (OHCHR Report on Violence against Women in Politics, 2019). It's possible for racialized women who enter the decision-making arena to face increased violence due to cultural gender-based and racial inequities. Creating equitable and justice-centered governance systems are one way to address the issue, but a radical and transformative cultural shift is imperative.

Racialized women not only face violence at the hands of men and the state, but they are also disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change (UNFCCC, 2019). When thinking of ways to create decolonial

futures that are climate resilient the issue of food sovereignty and land stewardship cannot be forgotten. Many racialized communities in Honduras are currently food insecure and rely on a few crops for survival and have little to no land, making racialized women particularly vulnerable (DeWalt, B., Stonich, S., & Hamillton, S., 1993). In fact, Honduras has shockingly unequal land distribution, which can be traced back to colonialism. Most landowners in the region are elite families who are also involved in governing systems (DeWalt, B., Stonich, S., & Hamillton, S., 1993). A decolonial future would empower communities to steward their land and grow climate-resilient and diverse food. The food system would use local seeds, knowledge and foods that would create prosperous non-human ecosystems that are diverse and resilient to climate change. The food produced on the land would feed people instead of profit and greed (La Via Campesina, 2018).

#### Changing the system

Berta Caceres understood the deep connection between colonization, gender-based violence, racism and capitalism. Her life's work was dedicated to dismantling these interconnected systems and Honduras mourns her loss. She fought for a paradigm shift and radical

systems change. Systems change is necessary to achieve more equitable and climate resilient communities. Polanyi (1975) claims that the current market-based economic system is self-destructive, and that the system hasn't collapsed because of the counter-movements that protect communities from the ruthlessness of the system. In other words, he claims that the system itself relies on social movements to stay alive (Polanyi, 1975). So how do we change the system? Andreotti, V., Stein, S., Ahenakew, C., Hunt, D. (2015), mapped out decolonization and categorized 3 spheres: soft-reform space, radical-reform space and beyond-reform space. The soft-reform space calls for inclusion of marginalized communities where they have normally been erased and the radical-reform space recognizes the epistemological dominance over marginalized communities that are at the center of institutional inequalities. Beyond-reform space is the space where society understands that the system cannot be changed from within, but instead that a different system must be welcomed. In the article they describe how to reach the third sphere: System walk-out, system hacking or system hospice (Andreotti, V., Stein, S., Ahenakew, C., Hunt, D. 2015). System walk-out and system hacking often reproduce

similar violent systems they intend to dismantle. System hospice, on the other hand, suggests the natural death of a system, rather than destroying it before it's ready to go. They claim that system hospice would require us to learn from the failures and successes of the system, to let die the parts of us that internalized the system, and to finally 'clean up' after it (Andreotti, V., Stein, S., Ahenakew, C., Hunt, D. 2015). The natural death of a self-destructive system would open up space for a different system without reproducing previous forms of violence and inequality. A decolonial and climate-resilient future could allow human and non-human communities to thrive and prosper.

The Berta Caceres case and some of the leaves, trunks and roots are issues that also have an effect on me. I'm a young racialized woman from Honduras who is also an environmentalist. Growing up in Honduras I was exposed to a lot of gender-based violence and have been impacted by the machista culture. I also lived through the 2009 military coup and directly experienced the militarization of my home and the consequent violence. Although there are some aspects of the inequali-tree that have marked my experience, I've been exempt from others. My mixed-race ancestry (having a

white father) has granted me tremendous privilege. Although I am a racialized woman, my racial ambiguity and light skin have (often) shielded me from racialized violence in Honduras. My precise racialized heritage is unclear, but I have both black and indigenous roots on my mother's side (the depth and details of those roots remain elusive). I connect to the Berta Cáceres case because I hold similar values and share some experience growing up while being surrounded by violence. I am also privileged in other ways. Living in Vancouver for the last 5 years to obtain a bachelor's degree has distanced me from the direct impacts of ongoing colonialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchal violence (in Honduras). I've had the privilege of living a life with relative safety compared to other women and environmentalists in Honduras.

## TIMELINE of the murder of Berta Cáceres and the Agua Zarca dam

*Events related to climate, race, and the murder of Berta Cáceres based on the opening activity of Conversations.*

### Time immemorial

The rise, fall and continued existence of powerful civilizations like the Maya. They created phenomenal pyramids, educational and governance systems, developed rich cultural lives, created an incredibly precise calendar and built cities with relatively large populations that were sustained from complex agricultural systems (Inomata, 2006). Although the Mayan civilization is the largest in Mesoamerica, they are in contact with other indigenous communities. One of the larger communities are the Lenca people in what now is Intibuca, Honduras. Elaborate and dynamic human communities and trade networks existed far before violent contact with Europeans (Inomata, 2006).

### (Colonization) 1502

Christopher Columbus arrived on the Bay Islands (Honduras Timeline, 2018).

### (Colonization) 1525-1539

Colonization begins (Honduras Timeline, 2018). This brought ceaseless violence, both physical and psychological, upon indigenous communities in the region. The atrocities committed during colonization devastate communities.

### (Colonization) 1539

Encomienda System is established in Honduras. The Encomienda System was created for conquistadores so that they could have: 1.) A 'tax' system that Indigenous people owed to the Spanish crown 2.) A way to distribute land and create a racial hierarchy 3.) As a way to reward conquistadores (Lacas, 1952). The encomienda system created racial power dynamics that isolated valuable resource in the hands of Spanish descendants (Lacas, 1952). The effect of power and resource distribution of this system can still be felt today given that most farmers don't own the land they farm.

### (Corporatization) 1962

Agrarian Land Reform is passed where 120,000 hectares of land were redistributed to farmers (FIAN and La Via Campesina, 2018).

### (Corporatization) 1932-1980

Decades of right-wing dictatorships, coup d'état, and land disputes (Honduras Timeline, 2018). Neoliberalism in on the rise on a local and global (Barra, 2018). Its land back using 'aid' from the US, displacing Indigenous people once more.

### (Corporatization) 1950

Companies like United Fruit Company and Chiquita Banana established themselves in the region (Forde, 2014). These large companies had great control over valuable resources and were deeply connected to the government and power. These companies further divide the gap in wealth and resources management and accelerate capitalism in the region (Forde, 2014). example by reclaiming land from the UFC (Kahn, 2006).

### (Colonization) 1821

Honduras fights for independence from Spain after centuries of violent colonial oppression (Honduras Timeline, 2018).

### (Corporatization) 1964

50% of the land that was distributed gets privatized again (FIAN and La Via Campesina, 2018).

### (Corporatization) 1980s

Left-wing movements from Honduras and Nicaragua (Sandinistas) are shut down by right-wing militarization (The Contreras) that is backed up by the US government (Honduras Timeline, 2018). This sets a precedent for ongoing US militarization that will shut down left-leaning or grassroots organizing.

### (Corporatization) 1993

COPINH is founded to fight for Indigenous sovereignty (Barra, 2018).

### (Corporatization) 1998

Hurricane Mitch devastates Honduras and increase poverty and instability (Honduras Timeline, 2018).

### (Militarization) 2009

Mel Zelaya, who is a democratically elected and slightly left-leaning president, is ousted in a US-backed military coup (Honduras Timeline, 2018). Violence rises dramatically and many right-winged and capitalist centered laws are passed that facilitate resource extraction and undermine indigenous rights (Mendez, 2018).

### (Militarization) Post-2009

Right-winged politicians that have accelerated neoliberalism and extractivist economies. The last decade has been marked by increased violence and human rights violations (Mendez, 2018).

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### (Militarization) 2011

Preliminary construction for the Agua Zarca dam began, despite vocal refusal from COPINH (Agua Zarca Project, 2016).

### (Militarization) 2013

Honduran soldiers opened fire on a peaceful protest led by COPINH (Agua Zarca Project, 2016).

### (Militarization) 2016

Berta Cáceres is murdered (Agua Zarca Project, 2016).

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