



# The porous state: Female mayors performing the state in Yucatecan Maya municipalities



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## ABSTRACT

Indigenous subjects in Latin America have historically not been recognised as part of the state. When indigenous women are elected as mayors they are positioned between two places. First, they are the state as they have been democratically elected. Second, they are categorised as female indigenous bodies. This interchange of power relations influences female mayors' decision-making. It will be argued that while some female mayors transform gender and racial norms in their municipalities, others reaffirm them. Whilst some mayors reproduce hierarchical racial-ethnic relations, others have found ways of confronting and utilising existing multicultural policies to create new relations between state and constituents such as incorporating the Maya language and customs in official municipal acts. These actions defy common multicultural practices of toleration and aim to counter the racism constituents have experienced in the past.

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## 1. Introduction

This article examines how female mayors in Yucatecan indigenous municipalities perform the state at a local level. Studies in Latin America have showed the impact of multicultural policies in dictating the type of 'indigeneity' accepted by the state (Hale, 2002; de la Peña, 2006). While cultural rights are encouraged from the state's perspective, land appropriation and political autonomy have been less successful. Although certain aspects of indigeneity are considered appropriate in particular scenarios, indigenous people are not seen as 'representatives' of the state. I argue that official attitudes have continued to reproduce racist and sexist practices that have constructed the Mexican state as a *mestizo*-male dominated space. Consequently, indigenous women elected as mayors are seen as representatives of the state (elected democratically) and not the state. Female mayors contest and resist these discourses by exposing how they are seen as racially sexualized bodies by other public servers and state offices. Female mayors' responses towards these practices generate a different relation with constituents as well as create new forms of viewing the Mexican state at a local level. This paper is based on ethnographic work and semi structured interviews with 18 female mayors, close collaborators, and informal conversations with constituents from September 2012 to

June 2013.

This article is divided into five sections. First, a theoretical framework is drawn to understand the viewing of the Mexican state as *mestizo*-male. This segment adds to performativity studies on the influence of the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity and space in local politics. The second part of this article is a contextualisation of politics in Mexico. This section examines how official state positions within multiculturalism are encoded within racism and sexism. The hierarchical relation between rural and urban spaces is explored to understand indigenous women's embodied experiences as mayors. This adds to literature on indigenous female political participation beyond social movements in Latin America (Gordillo, 2008, p. 336). It brings to light heterogeneous and complicated notions of gender and race in local politics as well as state forms of racism towards female indigenous mayors (Oehmichen, 2000).

The third section illustrates how female mayors embody the state from the intersectionality of gender, race and ethnicity. The state is seen from a poststructuralist perspective in which state institutions are personified by representatives and public servants accordingly to their gendered and racialised experiences. This viewpoint allows seeing the heterogeneity of the state. This section contributes to postcolonial feminist geography as it analyses to what extent the porosity of the state is shaped by hierarchical notions of power and how state institutions are geopolitically and racially organised (Robinson, 2003). Hence, this section adds to

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political geography as well as Latin American studies as it demonstrates the influence that racial notions of space and belonging have in local politics. This section also highlights the relationship between the centralised urban government and the rural local state. The fourth section studies female mayors' decision-making. It adds to political geography by demonstrating how notions of gender, race, ethnicity and rural-urban spaces influence how female mayors are perceived by government authorities and their constituency. Such perceptions impact female mayors' decision making and their relationship with local citizens; emphasising how this relationship is dynamic, negotiated and challenged in diverse ways both by mayors and their constituency. Finally, section five explores the way female mayors negotiate and/or confront multi-cultural policies. This section analyses the different relation between female mayors and their constituents as well as new forms of state governances at a local level. Concentrating in an often unexamined area, such as Yucatecan indigenous communities, sheds light on how political figures' decision making is influenced by local notions of gender, race, ethnicity and space.

## 2. Embodying the state to perform

The Mexican state has been constructed as a *mestizo*-male space. I argue that the performances of specific gendered-racialised notions create spaces and boundaries of what bodies belong in particular places and which do not. Hence, indigenous women are viewed as 'out of place' when they become mayors as they are now part of the *mestizo*-male state. In order to comprehend this view, three main theoretical concepts are explored: performativity, space and the state. Judith Butler's gender performativity comes into play as the unconscious attempt on the individual's behalf of being recognised by him/herself and society, being named within the regulatory regime of sex as bodies that matter, which exist and have a rightful place within their community (Butler, 2006). The repetitive nature of performativity is born out of the constant unaware compulsion of the individual to 'perform' gender and heterosexual expectations which he/she can never entirely become, hence the repetition of normative acts. Performativity is by no means a fixed process but is an ever changing way in which different bodies are produced. Gender performativity sheds light on how communities expected mayors to 'perform' according to their gender (being a mother and wife). At the same time, performativity theory is helpful in comprehending how female indigenous mayors mobilise gender notions differently than their male counterparts in specific places.

Despite its usefulness, Butler's theory lacks an understanding of how individuals are intersected by racial, ethnic and geographical power regimes (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 1991; Smith, 2000). Indigenous women are not only subjected to gender power relations but their lives are intertwined by hierarchical structures regarding race, ethnicity and the geography that their bodies occupy. Performativity from Butler's view is not enough to understand the Mexican state as a space of white privilege. Latin American academics have criticised Butler's lack of inclusion of race and ethnicity in her theory (Curiel, 2005). Yuderky Espinosa Miñoso (2007) argues that in a Latin American context Butler's performativity theory fails to properly acknowledge subaltern realities. Particularly due to the long colonial-racial past and present and in which 'minorities,' such as indigenous, afro-descendent and non-heteronormative individuals, have had to integrate within the *mestizo* heterosexual myth. Nonetheless, other studies have taken these criticisms into account and have expanded Butler's work beyond its original intention. Diane Nelson's (1999, 2001) work in Guatemala and Carolin Schurr's (2013) research in Ecuador have used Butler's theory to examine the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity and

politics. Nelson uses Butler's performativity theory to analyse indigenous political mobilisation after the civil war and its relation to the state. Schurr examined the role emotions play in Ecuadorian local electoral politics. Both these studies understand race and ethnicity as a set of normalising repetitive roles that the individual can never fulfil. Nelson's and Schurr's research helps this article analyse the particular forms in which gender, race and ethnic identities change from the urban capital of Mérida to female mayors' places of origin.

Corporeal appropriations of space depend on how bodies are perceived not only by themselves but by other subjects. This point is important as it contributes to understanding the role space has in articulating bodies as racially gendered. These notions are challenged when certain bodies (indigenous women) penetrate specific spaces (government). Hence, bodies modify notions of boundaries in multiple ways. Feminist geographers have demonstrated that gender plays a pivotal role in how spaces are conceived and understood (Christie, 2006; Davis & Walker, 2010; Zanotti, 2013). Some have argued that the consideration of public space as masculine can be a plausible factor to why women's presence in public arenas is considered to be intrusive (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004; Staeheli, Kofman and Peake, 2004). In the Mexican context, Margarita Dalton (2003, 2010) has examined how space regulates the behaviour of local female politicians in indigenous municipalities in Oaxaca. She shows how the main-square market becomes a patrolling centre from where rumours and gossip are spread in town to disciplining women's bodies. This coincides with the findings of Oehmichen (2000) regarding female politicians in Guerrero, who move through public space with female chaperons. Lise Nelson examined indigenous women's political participation in the 1980's with the purpose to 'further the efforts of feminist political geographers to chart the "mundane" and subjective geography of everyday life and link those geographies to broader political dynamics and conceptual categories' (Nelson, 2006, p. 369).

Studies carried out in Latin America have proven that race and ethnicity also play a role in delimitating and creating spaces. For example, urban spaces in Latin America have traditionally been linked to concepts of whiteness (Winders, Jones, & Higgins, 2005). Moving from the country to the city can be linked to a change in how bodies are racially read. Bodies that were previously linked to ethnic 'minorities,' in part because of their association with rural spaces, are considered to be more 'white' when they move to the city (Radcliffe, 1999). Armstrong-Fumero (2009a, 2009b) argues that in Yucatán, the fluidity between whiteness and indigeneity is also expressed in the mobility of rural bodies into urban settings and that this dynamic has been accentuated by the Mexican government's multicultural rhetoric.

Despite official discourses that promote 'racial and ethnic' diversity in Mexico, indigenous people are still viewed as not being worthy of representing the state. In this sense, the state is neither fixed nor secure but rather consists of a series of acts that are reiterated through state employees and elected politicians in everyday politics. Representatives of the state carry their own gendered, racial and ethnic performances that influence their embodiment of the state. Such interplay of performances from the state to its representatives exposes the slippages, confrontations, negotiations and changes that the state goes through. Hence, the description of the state as porous reflects the fluidity and instability of performances that encompass the state. In the case of this study, the Mexican state is seen as *mestizo*-male.

After the Mexican Revolution in 1910, indigenous women in Mexico were seen as the 'procreators' of the *mestizo* (a person of mixed indigenous and European blood). Under this paradigm, indigenous women were subjected to violent rape in order to

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