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Spatial crossings: Gender, race and politics in Yucatecan Maya municipalities

Challenging conventional understandings of Mexican politics, this article focuses on how bodily and spatial understandings of gender, race and ethnicity effected how female indigenous mayors were perceived by constituents once elected and how these women responded to those reactions. I argue that public municipal spaces in rural Yucatán are key components in articulating notions of gender, race and ethnicity. Female indigenous mayors challenge discourses of power in Mexico that place female and indigenous bodies as inadequate to occupy city hall. The material changes female mayors made in their municipalities are subtle yet important ways to trace new democratic changes at a local level. Through the case study of female indigenous mayors, I wish to bring together theoretical arguments about racial and ethnic performances and the corporeality of the body in politics outside Western democracies. Understanding ‘the body’ in relation to the space it occupies allows us to see municipal public places such as city hall and the main square as performative spaces embedded in multiple power relations. In this sense, this article aids in comprehending how newly elected female indigenous mayors alter notions concerning the space specific gendered, ethnically racialised bodies occupy.

Keywords: space, politics, gender, race, Yucatán

This article analyses how power functions in symbolically important municipal locations -like city hall and the main square- to reinforce and/or confront gender, racial and ethnic spatial notions. Specifically, I focus on 18 female mayors and their administration in the Mexican state of Yucatán, for the 2012-2015 electoral period. Through this work, I emphasise how indigenous political mobilisation outside social

movements in Latin America, particularly indigenous female mayors, influence everyday life in their communities at the same time they are restricted by particular socio-historical gendered notions of who has the right to occupy city hall. In doing so, I wish to add to feminist political geography beyond the study of elections and an Anglophone sphere (Brown and Staeheli, 2003; Dixon and Marston, 2011; Dowler and Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004; Staeheli and Kofman, 2004).

Studies regarding Mexican women's political participation in municipal politics has been carried out since the 1990s (Barrera, 1998, 2003; Barrera and Aguirre, 2003; Sam, 2002; among others). Some of these studies have argued that the consideration of public space as masculine can be a plausible contribution to why women's presence in public arenas is considered to be intrusive. In the Mexican context, Margarita Dalton (2010) studied the importance of space in indigenous municipalities in Oaxaca in regulating women's behaviour, particularly the behaviour of women who participate in local politics. In this context, the mercado (market) in the main square serves as a patrolling mechanism as rumours and gossip are spread in the town square thereby disciplining female mayors' bodies. This view coincides with the findings of Oehmichen (2000) regarding female politicians in Guerrero, who move through public space with female chaperones. Despite their relevance, these studies do not analyse how 'the body' plays a pivotal role in the articulation of power relations in local spaces. I wish to add to these studies and feminist geography by exploring how municipal spaces construct indigenous female political subjects. I consider the geographical space that 'the body' occupies to be a fundamental component of the articulation of political identities. I will demonstrate how female mayors in Maya municipalities enter into various forms of negotiation with their constituents regarding the concepts of body and space.

The first section of this article describes the field site, the women that participated in the research as well as a description of the municipalities involved. It also includes a brief reflexion on the power relations that were involved during fieldwork. This is with the purpose of situating myself as the researcher in the context of this study. The second part is the theoretical framework which explores three key concepts analysed in the rest of the article: the body, space and the racialization of space. The third section analyses the way in which female mayors' bodies are perceived by constituents once elected and how this affects gendered and racial spatial boundaries. The last section examines how female mayors appropriate municipal spaces during their administrations.

Research site: The Mexican municipality

In 2010, the state of Yucatán, Mexico had 1, 955,577 residents (INEGI, 2014). Yucatán's indigenous population is 985,549 (50.39%) (CDI, 2014), representing the sixth highest indigenous population in Mexico. Yucatán is divided into 106 municipalities, which are the political administrative entities that have the most impact on the daily lives of Mexicans. Each municipality consists of a cabecera municipal (where the town council's headquarters is located) and, when there is an extensive rural area, of comisarías. The municipality is governed by an elected mayor every 3 years. For the 2012-2015 period, 21 women were elected as mayors in Yucatán. Eighteen of these women agreed to be part of this research (see Table 1 for more details on their personal and political trajectories).

Table 1 Characteristics of female mayors for the 2012-2015 period in Yucatán

Female Mayor	Political party	Married	Children	Education/ occupation	Maya surname	Speaks Maya	Identifies as Maya	1 st woman candidate	Previous relatives as mayor
A	PAN	Yes	2	Accountant	No	No	No	Yes	Yes, husband

B	PAN	Yes	2	Secondary school/ housewife	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
C	PAN	Yes	2	Secondary school/ small business owner	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
D	PAN	Yes	2	Secondary school/ housewife	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, husband
E	PAN	Yes	4	BA indigenous education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, husband
F	PAN	Yes	2	Lawyer	No	No	No	Yes	Yes, husband
G	PAN	Yes	2	Secondary school/ housewife	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
H	PAN	Yes	3	BA indigenous education	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
I	PAN	Yes	2	Secondary school/ housewife	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
J	PRD	Yes	3	Accountant	No	No	No	No	Yes, grandfather
K	PRI	Divorced	3	BA teaching	No	Yes	No	No	No
L	PRI	Yes	3	Secondary school/ housewife	Yes	Yes	Yes	No,	Yes, father
M	PRI	Yes	3	Secondary school/ housewife	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, father
N	PRI	Yes	3	High school/ business owner	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
O	PRI	Yes	NA	Secondary school/ housewife	No	No	No	Yes	No
P	PRI	Yes	3	BA teaching	Yes	No	No	No	No
Q	PRI	No	No	BA indigenous education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
R	PRI	Yes	2	Lawyer	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes, husband

As it will be discussed in the following section, multicultural policies in Yucatán have had an impact in determining ‘who is indigenous.’ From this perspective, they count someone with a Maya surname (Mexico registers two surname in all legal documentation) or that speak Maya fluently as ‘indigenous.’ Under this scope, over half of the interviewees had at least one Maya surname and spoke Maya fluently. However, increasingly more people identify as indigenous in Mexico regardless of these highly

controversial government ‘parameters.’ As the rest of the article will show, ‘being Maya’ is not about language but also about how bodies are read and the spaces it occupies, among other things. Rural spaces in Yucatán have traditionally been linked to ‘indigeneity’ (Castañeda, 2004). The municipalities of this study are small rural municipalities with high percentages of indigenous population. They are in a socioeconomic disadvantage compared to the state capital of Merida (See Table 2).

Table 2 Characteristics of municipalities in study

Municipality	Total population	Indigenous population	% indigenous population	Non indigenous illiterate population	Indigenous illiterate population	Non indigenous population without drinking water	Indigenous population without drinking water	Non indigenous population without electricity	Indigenous population without electricity
A	3, 701	2, 509	67.79%	15.6%	18.7%	2.8%	2.7%	5.1%	5.5%
B	3, 782	3, 747	99.07%	22.1%	22.2%	4.6%	4.7%	5.5%	5.5%
C	3, 464	2, 925	84.43%	18%	19.7%	5.1%	5%	7%	7.4%
D	3, 071	962	31.32%	6.5%	12.4%	5.5%	7.1%	2.6%	3.7%
E	4, 589	4, 396	95.79%	13.7%	14%	0.9%	0.9%	3.6%	3.7%
F	19, 072	17, 491	91.71%	17.6%	18.8%	12.8%	13%	1.8%	1.8%
G	14, 802	14, 127	95.43%	20.9%	21.3%	7.8%	7.6%	9.7%	9.8%
H	3, 609	3, 311	91.74%	14.2%	15%	1.6%	1.4%	3.3%	3.4%
I	3, 148	3, 136	100%	23.8%	23.8%	3.9%	3.9%	2.6%	2.6%
J	3, 236	2, 673	82.60%	15.4%	17%	1.4%	1.6%	3.1%	3.5%
K	73, 138	53, 65	73.35%	15.3%	19.1%	10%	11%	4.9%	5.7%
L	4, 447	4, 444	99.93%	28%	28%	9.5%	9.4%	9.8%	9.7%
M	2, 818	2, 818	100%	22.5%	22.5%	3.2%	3.2%	4.4%	4.4%
N	40, 547	36, 108	89.05%	17%	18.5%	6.9%	7.4%	4.3%	4.6%
O	6, 831	1, 214	17.77%	9.7%	19.2%	8.6%	9.2%	5.3%	8.0%
P	4, 113	1, 255	30.51%	9.8%	16.6%	2.7%	3.3%	3.3%	4.5%
Q	1, 689	1, 574	93.19%	18.4%	19.6%	20.8%	20.8%	5.1%	5.6%
R	8, 449	7, 541	89.25%	16.6%	17.6%	14.6%	13.7%	3.1%	3.1%
state capital	830, 732	193, 061	23.23%	3.2%	8.3%	3.7%	5%	1.7%	1.5%

Source: Own elaboration using data from CDI,

http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2578:catalogo-de-localidades-indigenas-2010&catid=38:indicadores-y-estadisticas&Itemid=54 and <http://www.educacion.yucatan.gob.mx/estadistica/estadistica>

Reflections in the field

Since 2008, I have been researching female mayors in Yucatán. For this research, 10 months of fieldwork were carried out during 2012 and 2013. My own positionality influenced data recollection. I was asked frequently to show my university credentials

and national identity card (IFE) to prove that I was from Yucatán. The fact that I am not Maya, my skin tone is 'lighter' and I come from the state capital, raised a number of issues during fieldwork. While visiting the municipalities, I made no active attempt to exploit my physical appearance or status to receive special treatment. Yet, my looks as an outsider from these localities often led the municipal employees to approach me in a different way than the local population. My body was recognised as 'privileged' and I was often offered refreshments and chairs to sit while others who had been waiting long hours were not. Bodies in the field are full of encoded power relations that do not need to be stated (Grosz, 1993:199). My own racialized body shaped encounters in the city hall. While this seemed advantageous when interviewing mayors and party officials, this was a disadvantage when engaging with some constituents.

Despite being treated more favourably I was still subordinate to the mayors. During my fieldwork, mayors often made me drive for hours to cancel the meeting once I was there. One has to understand that these women are busy. Granting an interview to a researcher was not one of the mayors' priorities. Another possible reading is that mayors were asserting their power and control over the situation. The presence of indigenous people was hardly ever acknowledged by most of the city council's employees. These types of situations distanced me from potential informants. Such patterns illustrate the power relations embedded in municipal spaces and the role that bodies play in these dynamics.

Part of this reflexive process involves recognising the limitations of this study. One of these constraints was not being able to interview all female mayors for the 2012-2015 period. As a result, this article reflects 85% of female mayors' experience in Yucatán. An additional restriction was not being able to follow-up with in-depth interviews during the second and third year of female mayors' administrations. Hence,

the analysis is restricted to their first year in power. The primary source of data are semi-structured interviews and participant observation in the municipalities governed by female mayors. Over 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of 10 months. Anonymity was not entirely possible as the mayors' names are published in the *Diario Oficial del Estado de Yucatán*. Yet, given the impact that this research may have in future years in Yucatán, anonymity was implemented. An alphabetical anonymous system was used to quote and describe the municipalities (i.e. mayor B, municipality B).

Municipalities as gendered, racial and ethnic spaces

Throughout this article, I understand 'the body' to be formed by discourses and institutions, a product of social inscription and phantasmatic individualised idealisations (Grosz, 1994). In this sense, 'the body' is constructed by the individual's 'lived' experiences and the institutional discourses and practices that are inscribed on the same body that they produce. Studies in the field of feminist geography have analysed 'the body' in a specific temporal, historical context (Johnston, 1998; Longhurst, 2012; Slocum, 2008; among others). Such studies have shown that a 'standard' understanding of 'the body' does not reflect the complexity of power relations involved in forming a subject. Similarly, they have begun to explain how bodies are influenced by their day-to-day experiences and, to a lesser degree, how the space that 'the body' occupies forms part of gender, racial and ethnic constructions (Radcliffe, 1999). In this sense, to comprehend how bodies are produced, it is necessary to study the distribution and placement of bodies in particular spaces.

In their seminal work in merchant banks, Linda McDowell and Gill Court concluded that gender expectations are affected by the space particular bodies are in and the role that self-surveillance has in these performances: 'What is an appropriate bodily performance in one context, in the workplace for example, may be inappropriate

elsewhere' (McDowell, and Court, 1994: 731). Following McDowell and Court's argument, I show how constituents' reactions to newly elected female mayors was contextually dependant. A key factor in such reactions are the racial spatial notions that are articulated in these municipalities. In this sense, subjects are constructed through the racial and ethnic notion of space: "Racialization" is therefore the process by which racialized groups are identified, given stereotypical characteristics, and coerced into specific living conditions, often involving social/spatial segregation and always constituting racialized places' (Kobayashi and Peake, 2000: 393). From this standpoint, space is a key element in the development and reproduction of racial and ethnic power dynamics that constitute the norms in which bodies perform racial and ethnic identities in daily encounters with other bodies and spaces. Following this, I wish to examine the 'everyday practice(s) that produce the embodied racial geography' (Slocum, 2008:849) of the municipality and its articulation of indigenous female mayors' bodies (Baydar, 2012). In order to achieve this, space is seen as performative, embedded within racial, ethnic and gendered power relations (Gregson and Rose, 1999). Understanding space as performative enables me to analyse the role municipal space has in shaping, articulating and disciplining the bodies that occupy it (Davis and Walker, 2010).

Body, space, race and ethnicity become intrinsically linked as they mutually constitute each other: 'Indeed, while bodies do matter in geographical inquiry, so do the racial cues and symbols, and their affects, embedded is influenced by place-specific histories and landscapes' (Faria and Mollett, 2016: 85). These hierarchical relations are not immune to gender. An example of the intrinsic relation between race, ethnicity, space and gender within the Latin American context is Jelke Boesten's work regarding the term 'chola' in the Peruvian context. The term 'chola' has become a racial-ethnic, social category that refers in a derogative way to women (especially indigenous) that

have 'dared' to cross geographical and racial borders and search for social mobility (Boesten, 2008). Boesten's work demonstrates that racial and ethnic identities are not only constructions but they are performed and some cases subverted.

More recently, critical race studies in Mexico have begun to explore the diverse meanings that 'whiteness' has in diverse contexts. In her research, Mónica Moreno Figueroa has demonstrated that 'whiteness' is not necessarily associated to a specific body rather 'whiteness' is a site of privilege' that is spatially contextual: 'Skin colour, body features and privilege are attached to each other, but not in a fixed pre-given manner. They also appear and are perceived differently according to the circumstances and the specific people involved' (Moreno Figueroa, 2010: 398). In other words, bodies can be white in one space and non-white in others. Hence, the privilege that comes with whiteness is also relational, fluid and dynamic. This is important as the rest of this article analyses when female indigenous bodies enter 'white' spaces like city hall, these spaces become threatened with their presence, destabilising racial and ethnic norms.

The newest forms in which racism is currently expressed in Mexico are in the form of multicultural policies. In the case of Yucatán, these policies promote the idea of a 'regional identity,' which tends to exploit Maya traditions and customs for economic benefits while at the same time establishing social, racial, ethnic and spatial boundaries between non-indigenous and Maya people. What this means is that multicultural policies and discourses publicly embrace different racial and ethnic groups that compose a region while in reality, promote a particular type of racism that still locates whiteness above other racial and ethnic groups (Castellanos Fuerrero, Izquierdo and Pineda, 2009). Multicultural policies produce particular disciplinary norms regarding indigenous bodies. These policies have shaped racial-ethnic performances in Yucatán in numerous ways.

Multicultural policies in Yucatán are closely bound up in government goals of promoting tourism in the peninsula. Tourism (e.g., archaeological visits, ecotourism, and gastronomy tours) is currently the state's economic base and has resulted in the appropriation of Maya traditions while promoting racial and ethnic discrimination and spatial segregation. For example, Córdoba Azcárate examined how rural midwifery practices have been re-tooled as elements of an up-market tourist experience in haciendas that have been converted into luxury hotels in rural Yucatán. National and international tourists receive massages using midwifery knowledge by women who work in these hotels. In this scenario, this type of practice is seen as an extravagance. Nevertheless, urban middle-class Yucatecans disapproved of it among rural women, taking it as a sign of belonging to the lower indigenous class (Córdoba Azcárate, 2011). From this, spatial segregation is integral in the articulation of racial hierarchies; tourist destinations mark racial and ethnic power relations between individuals working in these establishments and consumers.

In this sense, the rural municipality is immersed in racial power relations that articulate the corporeal presence of female mayors. As stated above, geographical spaces are socially and politically constructed (Nash, 2010; Price, 2012; Zanotti, 2013); they patrol through disciplining mechanisms the continuous performance of gendered and racial norms by individuals, thus affecting how subjects negotiate their existence and fluidity in a particular space. This point has been explored by Lise Nelson regarding indigenous women's political participation in Mexico. She concluded that municipalities are 'tangible manifestations of a racialized "colonization of the political" by the state –lines that intrude on daily life, political identities, and the politics of resistance within indigenous regions' (Nelson, 2006: 370). Examining the rural municipality in this way allows a discussion on how gender, race and ethnicity are

articulated, appropriated and transformed by the space that Maya municipalities occupy in national, regional and local discourses and practices. In Yucatán, city hall in rural communities has been traditionally in the hands of non-indigenous male subjects. What the presence of newly elected indigenous female mayors demonstrate is that this hierarchical relationship between non-indigenous and indigenous spaces is not fixed rather it is in constant flux and negotiated through female mayors' actions during their administrations. From this perspective, spatial understandings of femininity and indigeneity influence power dynamics regarding women's occupation of public space and the forms in which Maya female mayors respond to local disciplining mechanisms regarding their gendered, racial and ethnic bodies.

Rural spatial embodied experiences: public reactions to newly-elected female mayors

Female mayors' corporeal presence in city hall altered spatial understandings of gender, race and ethnicity in diverse ways. Nevertheless, not all female mayors transgressed gender, racial and ethnic spatial boundaries in the same way. Municipalities with newly elected female mayors had diverse reactions and expectations about women in charge of local government; causing an unrest in their locality. Such responses were caused by a myriad of factors such as gender, racial and ethnic expectations of who has the 'right' to occupy public municipal spaces. Before expanding on how the intersection of gender, race and ethnic spatial notions (Crenshaw, 1989) affected how female mayors were perceived in their communities, I would like to focus on how female mayors (regardless of their racial and ethnic identity) were associated with being 'fragile' objects in need of protection, as weak or unable to command because they were women. These types of sexist conceptions were highlighted in ten of the municipalities where it was the first time women were elected as mayors.

There are families, people who think that only a man can do this job. I have heard this in several occasions. People say that women were made to stay at home and that men should be in command [laughter]. So they are not entirely convinced that a woman can do this job. So I think they are just waiting to see what different things I can do, considering that men have always been mayors and now there is a woman (Interview mayor D, 2012).

This quote illustrates some discourses confronted by female mayors once in office. Women picked up on unsettled feelings and anxiousness amongst constituents resulting from having ‘other corporealities’ in city hall. The physical presence of female bodies in the mayor’s office is not ‘the normal practice.’ Their bodies visibly challenge pre-existing conceptions regarding the type of corporeality that has a right to occupy the mayor’s office (male subjects). That is, men are expected to be mayors while women are not. The unsettlement caused by the presence of female mayors was amplified by the fact that the majority of them identify as indigenous. Their presence triggered a break from the ‘natural colonial order of political spatialities’ (Schurr, 2013: 78). That is, everyday political practices that have reinforced the idea of the municipal space as exclusively white and male (since colonial times) are destabilised by indigenous female mayors’ presence in city hall (Loyola-Hernandez, 2018). Female indigenous mayors were often met with resistance, as they encountered disciplining mechanisms from certain constituents such as the threat of physical violence, hate speech and spreading of rumours. This is demonstrated in the following quotes of two mayors that identify as Maya, have Maya surnames and typically wear the huipil (traditional female indigenous attire):

The opposition had meetings to threaten me. They said that they were going to come to my house and beat me. They also said that they were not going to allow me to enter

office and take over as mayor. The day that I was given my proof of election they tried to hit me, they assaulted me (Interview mayor E, 2012).

They [people who supported her] came to my house and guarded me with a human fence all the way to collect my certificate of election. They did this so that no one could hurt me like they did during my campaign. I was hanging up my laundry when a person used a slingshot and threw a rock at my head. I had a huge bump on it!

[laughter] (Interview mayor M, 2012)

The deployment of threat tactics can be seen as a moment when anti-women and anti-indigenous power relations became particularly visible (Carte, 2014). By winning and becoming mayors, these women are to some degree destabilising gender-racial power dynamics that have historically denied indigenous female presence in city hall. Some illustrative cases of how the intersection of gender, race and ethnicity play a role in how female indigenous mayors are perceived once elected are the following two examples. Mayor M identifies as Maya, has a Maya surname, speaks Maya and wears an huipil. When asked how she felt as mayor, she commented while laughing that it did seem a bit ‘different’ that she was in command, particularly when addressing the town hall staff who were all men.

I think you can see things differently when a woman is in charge, especially when I am in a meeting with the municipality’s policemen. A woman goes into the office and is surrounded by men! [laughter] I don’t feel different, although people ask me how I can manage with all of those men! And I look around and I have all the policemen behind me and I think: “I won’t be able to talk!” [laughter] (Interview mayor M, 2012).

Saying ‘I don’t feel different’ the mayor is highlighting that she does not perceive her authority (and body) as ‘abnormal’ for being in charge of city hall. However, by stating in the beginning of the quote ‘you can see things differently’ she is acknowledging that her body is visibly ‘out of place’ (Colls, 2006). That is, the norm is to have a mestizo man (and his body) in charge of the municipality. With the presence of her body, this mayor is effectively challenging gendered-racial spatial norms. Through her laughter and bodily presence, mayor M exposes gender, racial and ethnic power relations as well as claiming municipal spaces as rightfully hers. Her indigenous body positioned vis à vis policemen (representing the male force of the state) ridicules spatial boundaries. At the same time, it transgresses local gendered, racial and ethnic hierarchical relations that until then had restricted female indigenous presence in local politics. By laughing at the comments, this mayor is challenging normalising mechanisms that attempt to constrain her spatial and political movement. She stands in front of the police, demanding their acknowledgement of her bodily presence as well as her being the ultimate authority figure in the municipality. In short, no matter how shocking it might seem, she is the authority at least in that specific situation.

Another case where an indigenous female mayor was confronted by polarising reactions to her presence in the mayor’s office was mayor B’s municipality. Mayor B identifies as Maya, has a Maya surname and speaks Maya. Mayor B experienced hate speech, understood as a speech that attacks a specific person or group with the purpose of inciting violence or prejudice based on gender, race or ethnicity, among others. Through the use of racist and sexist discourses, the political opposition attempted to prevent her from occupying office.

The opposition said: We are not going to allow her to take possession! We are taking her win away from her! Blood will be shed in [name of municipality]! We cannot let a

woman become mayor! Let alone because she is negra [black in Spanish] chaparra [short female person in Spanish] and from another religion! We will not allow her! (Interview mayor B, 2012).

Her opponents used hate speech to injure, as Butler (1997) argues, and to identify her body as ethnically racialised that does not belong in power. This type of hate speech towards indigenous people to discredit their political mobilisation has been studied by Carolin Schurr in Ecuador. Also based in Butler's work, Schurr (2013) argues that the Ecuadorian indigenous movement has resignified the term 'indio' from a pejorative term to an affirmative one to claim local political spaces. In the Yucatecan case, while in common speech, negra and chaparra may be understood as terms of endearment, these terms can be used as an insult to highlight physical attributes that mark indigenous female bodies in a negative manner. Depicting the future mayor as 'negra' and 'chaparra,' the political opposition is attempting to mark her body as an embodiment unworthy of occupying city hall, of being physically 'out of place' (Ahmed, 2000). 'Negra' and 'chaparra' reflect racist discourses in the region that pathologize short, darker-skinned embodiments (Iturriaga, 2011). By referring to the mayor as 'negra,' her opposition is trying to physically restrict her from claiming her place in city hall -a public and political space normally associated with mestizo-male bodies. With the support of constituents, the mayor turned the tables on the opposition and assumed her identity of 'negra' and 'chaparra,' creating a 'subjectivity of resistance' (Schurr, 2013:86).

I was never scared of their threats. After we won, I told my people that I would not go outside unless they promised me not to attack anyone or offend them in anyway, even though they were insulting us. We had a line from my house to the main

square. There were so many people that we occupied the whole plaza [main square]. Nobody insulted us (Interview mayor B, 2012).

The practice of going around the main square after the winner is announced is a common practice in rural Yucatecan municipalities, a literal act of claiming municipal space. Typically, this walk is done by men who by implication are neither ‘negros’ nor ‘chaparros.’ By repeating the same act but with a different body (female indigenous), the mayor’s corporeality in conjunction with its movement exposed the racial-gendered regime while reappropriating the terms ‘negra’ and ‘chaparra’ as positive. In this sense, this mayor confronts existing colonial political spatial notions. However, the fact that mayor B is married and has children helped her gain ‘acceptance’ by the municipality. That is, even as she challenged certain spatial notions of ‘indigeneity’ and race, she is reiterating heteronormative performances (Butler, 2006).

A clear example of the intricate flow and mobility that female mayors have to balance between public and private spatial notions often associated with gender expectations is when I visited a comisaría in municipality E. I accompanied the mayor and her husband to the comisaría. The elections for comisario (the mayor’s representative in the comisaría) were going to take place but were postponed because the ballots were not ready. The mayor still had to go as they had already committed to having lunch in the comisaría.

We arrived at the new comisario’s house. It was a traditional house with no doors or windows, no bathroom or cement floor. The kitchen was outdoors; all the women were gathered there waiting for the cochinita pibil (a traditional Yucatecan dish) to be ready. The mayor’s husband went to the other side of the house where all the men were congregated. The men were waiting for the beers that the mayor’s husband had brought. The men were in a more secluded place and the women were located near the

house in a more visibly opened area. During the time when the food was being prepared only the comisario came to talk to the mayor. No other male entered the private space of the kitchen -even if it was located outside (Bruzzone, 2017; Christie, 2008; Floyd, 2004). This facilitated a more openly dialogue between the women and the mayor. They talked to the mayor about some concerns they had. They were worried about a school closing and that there was no doctor in the comisaría. The transition between Spanish and Maya was fluid and natural from the women of the comisaría to the mayor and vice versa. The men only came to where the women were located to collect food. No alcohol was consumed in the kitchen. After talking to them, the mayor asked me to accompany her to where the men were. She introduced me as a 'friend of the party.' Most of the men worked as construction workers or in the market in the near town. The themes discussed here were politics and money.

During the time I spent in this comisaría, I was able to appreciate how the mayor was the only woman allowed to move from one space (the kitchen –considered to be a space confined to women-) to another (exclusively male). When a woman wanted to talk to the mayor, they would approach the area where the men were and signal the mayor to move away from the men's group so they could speak privately. Despite the mayors 'free' movement from these two spaces, she was still restricted by certain gender norms. For example, she was offered a glass of beer but declined and handed it to her husband. In spite of the fact that she was allowed to be in a male dominated space, it would have not been well perceived by others that she drank beer. All of the examples in this section have shown how a diverse group of female mayors unsettled gender, racial and ethnic spatial notions to varying degrees. The following section explores the type of actions female mayors carried out during their administration regarding municipal spaces.

The transformation of municipal spaces under female mayors' administrations

In this section, I focus on how the modifications made by female mayors to municipal spaces -such as city hall and the main square- 'are examples of how material spatial structures render political change visible' (Schurr, 2013: 52). In this sense, by changing local public spaces, female mayors transgress gendered-racialised notions of space, politics and power (Baydar, 2004; Gregson and Rose, 1999; Jackson, 2005). The physical changes made by new female mayors can be subtle manifestations of changes happening at a local level that alter gender, racial and ethnic spatial understandings of what bodies have a right to occupy city hall.

As seen in the previous section, constituents had polarised reactions to newly elected mayors. These feelings sometimes were expressed materially through the ransacking and looting of city hall prior to female mayors entering office. At the beginning of their term, fourteen of the newly elected mayors found city hall in a total state of abandonment. The previous administrations had looted office supplies and sabotaged official vehicles, among other things. These actions were not common when male mayors started office. However, an intersectional approach is necessary as these types of negative actions towards female indigenous mayors were more common when they belonged to a different political party than the previous mayor. Being a woman, indigenous and from another political party prompted more negative reactions that physically manifested in public spaces:

They gave us city hall in a very bad state. The municipal warehouse was completely empty. The municipal vehicles were in really bad shape. They [the former

administration] mixed fuel with sugar and dirt and put it in the vehicles. I shouldn't have accepted them like that because now they don't work. They did not hand in any type of documentation. None of the departments had lightbulbs. The locks were broken. No computers. Terrible! (Interview mayor Q, 2012).

Nine of the municipalities where women found a ran-sacked city hall had never previously been governed by a woman. In other five cases, at least 10 years had passed since a woman had governed. The looting of municipal offices was a reaction against female mayors occupying a space historically assigned to men. In contrast, male mayors interviewed did not mention such actions against their administration. Of the sixteen female mayors that had their offices ransacked, ten identified as Maya and eight have a Maya surname. In this sense, these negative reactions can also be seen as a manifestation against the rupture of spatial order in which municipal political spaces have been occupied by mestizo-male bodies until these women's election.

Another form in which I analysed political change was through the painting of municipal buildings under female mayors' administrations. In the case of the female mayors in this research, twelve of them found it necessary to change the colour of the municipal buildings to 'cleanse' the municipality from the previous administrations. Seven female mayors found it essential to paint municipal buildings in their own party colour. This is a visible manifestation of political change from one political party to another (see Fig. 2.). That is, they found it imperative to visibly show that they were now in power. As exemplified in the following quote:

I think that by painting city hall with my colour, green, it translates to cleanliness. You know that my party is PRI [the colours associated with it are green, red and white]. I have always liked the colour green and I love my party. I am loyal to it and I think the colour green represents that (Interview mayor N, 2012).

Figure 2 Example of city hall before and after being painted by mayor N

Before

After



These physical changes were not always welcomed by local residents. When conducting participant observation in municipality B, one constituent stated with disdain that the mayor had changed city hall's colour because she belonged to PAN (colours associated with this party are blue and white). The constituent later noted that soon municipal authorities would have the locality covered in the same colour. He said he did not feel comfortable going to city hall as he voted for another political party. In this sense, by painting municipal buildings a different party colour than the one that some citizens voted for, the mayor is possibly alienating people from going to city hall.

Figure 3 Example of city hall after being painted by mayor B



A way of avoiding this type of alienation but still painting city hall a different colour than the previous administration was choosing one that had no association with a specific political party. This was the case of mayor E who opted a 'neutral' colour for

city hall:

I choose yellow terracotta. I wanted an elegant colour but one that was impartial. If I painted it [city hall] blue it was going to be identified with my party and not all people would feel welcome to go into city hall. Also, if I painted it white, green or red my people were going to think... [laughter] (Interview mayor E, 2012).

This female mayor consciously elected not to use any colours associated with the two rival political parties in her municipality (blue for PAN and white, red or green for PRI), on the basis that she felt the need to offer the same leadership to all constituents regardless of who they voted for. The above examples demonstrate how small and maybe ‘unimportant’ physical changes like the painting of municipal buildings are nuance spatial manifestations of political power struggles in Yucatán. These disputes of authority are not restricted to show that a different political party is in control of the municipality. Material alterations of city hall also reflect the negotiation of gendered and racial notions of space that female mayors encounter once in office.

Three female mayors used the term ‘feminine touch’ [*mano femenina*] to describe the physical changes they implemented in city hall. Electing the words ‘feminine touch’ to describe the changes, female mayors are assigning a distinctive gendered characteristic to these modifications (see Fig. 4). This is a way of appropriating municipal spaces traditionally assigned to men.

This administration is going to make a difference. There have been only male mayors. Today we have a clean municipality, it is swept every day and it is nicely painted. You can always see a feminine touch [*la mano femenina*]. It is definitely not the same when a woman sweeps than when a man does it. Men have a very peculiar way of doing things but women... You can see the feminine touch [*la mano femenina*] wherever you

are (Interview mayor N, 2013).

The term ‘feminine touch’ was used in one occasion by a mayor’s husband to describe changes his wife had made during the first months of her administration. An interesting fact to highlight is that he had been the mayor of the same municipality two years prior.

Today you enter the community and you can see her feminine touch [mano femenino]. It is cleaner, nicer. For example, she changed the entrance of the municipality, she put some palm trees and some lights (Interview husband of mayor A, 2013).

Figure 4 'Feminising' city hall in some of the female mayors' municipalities



These ‘feminine touches’ can be read as a form of transforming public and political spaces. By adding ‘feminine touches’ to city hall, female mayors are blurring the line between spaces that have been considered male (the public) and female (the private) (Bruzzone, 2017). That is, these delimitations are fluid and negotiated in the daily actions of female mayors not only by their physical presence in city hall (as discussed in the previous section) but also through specific actions such as ‘cleaning’ the municipality and ‘beautifying’ it. In this sense, while female mayors transgress gendered spatial notions of who belongs in city hall, they are reinforcing traditional gender roles in their municipalities (Blunt and Varley, 2004). In other words, female mayors reproduce gender power dynamics by hiring women to sweep—a traditional role that women ‘should’ have in the private sphere, the house- a municipal public place.

This illustrates the different degrees to which female mayors transform gender power relations in their localities.

Spatial hierarchical relations are not only subjected to gender notions but racial-ethnic ones. Spatial structures are places that produce particular ideologies regarding what bodies have the right to occupy them (McDowell, 1996). Public municipal spaces such as city hall and the main square have historically been centres of local struggles of power and social control between the Spanish and mestizo elites and the Maya population in Yucatán (Eiss, 2010). For example, the Yucatecan city of Izamal is famous for having Maya ruins and a monastery built on top of it in the main square, reflecting an ongoing battle of who has the right to public municipal spaces (Low, 2000). Female indigenous mayors' embodiment as heads of local power destabilise such ideologies; particularly in the case of two female mayors who chose to incorporate indigenous heritage in public municipal places.

Female mayor B has a Maya surname, fluently speaks Maya and self-identifies as indigenous. She painted the local school with indigenous children in huipiles, next to a 'typical Maya house,' bringing the presence of indigenous bodies in to the main square (see Fig. 5.).

Figure 5 Indigenous school in municipality B's central square



In Yucatecan rural municipalities, housing around the main square differs from houses in the outskirts. Although the Maya structure remains the same, houses near the plaza use concrete blocks and domestic electronic appliances. These construction materials eliminate the social stigma associated with having a straw house, that is, of being 'indio' (pejorative term for indigenous) and poor (Guzmán Medina, 2005). By painting Maya houses near the main square, mayor B reworked racial-ethnic spatial boundaries which historically have assigned the plaza as a non-indigenous space. When asked the reason behind this action, the mayor commented:

Previous mayors forgot about us. They tried to separate themselves from us, indígenas [indigenous people]. That kind of thinking makes me more committed to my municipality. I want to show my constituents that I am not like that, I am proud of being indígena (Interview mayor B, 2012).

By using the pronoun 'us,' the mayor is identifying herself as part of a racial-ethnic group that has historically been marginalised and had their bodily presence excluded from the main square (a non-indigenous space). Hence, painting indigenous bodies in buildings that surround the main square can be seen as another subtle display of confronting existing racial-ethnic spatial notions. Another destabilisation of racial-ethnic spatial boundaries occurred through the creation of a municipal logo and its imprint in significant municipal buildings in mayor R's municipality (See Fig. 6.). The mayor identifies as indigenous but does not have a Maya surname. The municipal logo depicts Nachi Cocom's palace. Nachi Cocom was a Maya leader who fought against Spanish conquest in the 1540s, and originated in this district. Nachi Cocom defied colonial power by taking up arms against Spanish rule.

Figure 6 Official logo of mayor R's government in the local park



When asked the reasoning behind incorporating Nachi Cocom into the municipal logo, the mayor stated:

We have the shadow of Nachi Cocom's palace in the logo. I feel that we must take this figure as our banner. This is what symbolises [municipality's name], water that turns, [name in Maya]. The logo says 'proudly the heart of Yucatán' because when we checked the map we noticed that we are in the middle of Yucatán and we said, let's use that (Interview mayor R, 2012).

Before her administration there had not been an attempt to incorporate Nachi Cocom or any other local Maya leader into official municipal spaces. By placing a picture of Nachi Cocom's palace in the middle of the official municipal logo, the mayor is reevaluating racial-ethnic spatial boundaries. She is validating an important Maya figure in a context in which Maya leaders that rose against the Spanish have been perceived as 'the quintessence of barbarism. Frequently, the rebels were labelled as 'savages' and 'wild or barbarous Indians'' (Gabbert, 2001: 471-472). With this in mind, integrating Nachi Cocom's palace into the municipal logo this mayor is renegotiating who (indigenous bodies) have the right to occupy public and political municipal spaces.

Conclusion

This article has contributed to feminist political geography, critical race studies and postcolonial research as it examines how ideas of race and ethnicity are spatially dependant. Postcolonial critiques have challenged notions that the body, race and ethnicity are pre-given identities. Rather, they are social constructions and performances that are continuously changing. Yet, there is some stability to them as in the case of Mexico, concepts like race and ethnicity are constantly sustained by the state and society in general. In this sense, what is understood as ‘body’ and ‘space’ perpetuate racist ideologies and discourses that locate ‘whiteness’ above other groups. By empirically tracing indigenous women’s political trajectory in Yucatán, I try to expand feminist geography’s understanding of ‘the body’ as a place of political battle. That is, I wish to bring together theoretical arguments about racial and ethnic performances and the corporeality of the body in politics outside Western democracies. This article also adds to feminist geography’s understanding of how daily practices and encounters shape specific corporealities. Analysing racial and ethnic identities from this perspective allows us to pick up the nuance ways in which female indigenous mayors navigate these ideologies and discourses in diverse ways. Thus, in Yucatán ethnicity and race play a central part in the articulation of corporeal identities. The body is a significant category as the place the body inhabits in gender, racial and ethnic performances impacts political identities in Yucatán. Understanding ‘the body’ in relation to the space it occupies allows me to see municipal public places such as city hall and the main square as performative spaces embedded in multiple power relations. In this sense, this article aids in comprehending how newly elected female indigenous mayors alter notions concerning the space specific gendered, ethnically racialised bodies occupy. The material changes female mayors made in their municipalities are subtle yet important

ways to trace new democratic changes at a local level. A more in depth examination is required in order to understand if there was a long term impact of female mayors in their localities. Does the presence of female indigenous mayors have a long term effect in local spatial notions on gender, race and ethnicity? Are the material changes made by these mayors still visible? These types of questions shed light on how gendered, racial-ethnic spatial notions evolve through time.

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