



Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (Coord.)

# UNDER THE SHADE OF THE GUAMÚCHIL

Life Stories of Indigenous and  
Peasant Women in Prison

Incarceration Nations Network

Collection Editor  
**BAZ DREISINGER**

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING





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Colectiva Editorial  
Hermanas en la Sombra



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Images made by imprisoned women / Sumi-e workshop with Pilar Hinojosa

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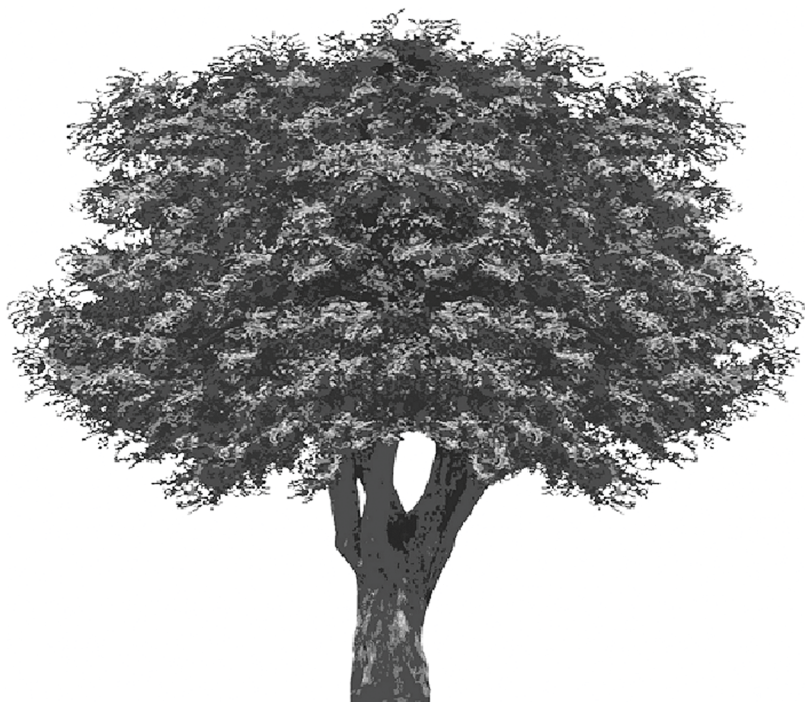
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**Under the shade of the guamúchil**  
**Life stories of Indigenous and**  
**peasant women in prison**



Book & video

María Elena Basave, Carlota Cadena, Elena de Hoyos,  
Marisol del Águila, Amatista Lee, Alejandra Reynoso,  
Rosa Salazar, Sol Nocturno, Galia Tonella, Leo Zavaleta

Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (Coordinator)

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# Abstract

This book approaches the experiences of inequity and racism in the Mexican justice system through the voices and writings of thirteen incarcerated women who undertook the task of documenting and writing the stories of fellow indigenous and peasant women who did not have the privileged knowledge of writing. The life-story workshop was held by the publishing collective *Hermanas en la Sombra* in the women's area of the Atlacholoaya prison in Morelos. Such a collective process created new ties of solidarity between indigenous and non-indigenous women, and opened a space in which to reflect together on the machismo and racism that mark Mexican society, and how it impacted on the chain of injustices and exclusions that resulted in the deprivation of their freedom. The book also includes poetry and thoughts written in the creative writing workshops that *Hermanas en la Sombra* held in the same prison.

## Key words

1. Violence against women – Mexico.
2. Indigenous Women
3. Domestic violence.
4. Rape – Mexico.
5. Female prisoners Mexico.
6. Women – Legal status, laws, etc. – Mexico.
7. – Life stories.
8. Atlacholoaya Social Rehabilitation Center, Morelos.
9. Racism
10. Feminist writing

# General learning objective

Through the life stories written by women in a Mexican prison, the students and general public will understand the importance of racism in the criminalization of Indigenous women, a social phenomenon that is present in all the global prison complexes in the Americas. The criminalization and incarceration of indigenous peoples in Mexico, escalated in the context of the so-called “war on drugs”, has created another form of forced dispossession and displacement, as people are placed into prisons far from their families, breaking their ties to their communities, subjecting their bodies to multiple forms of violence. The reading of these life stories will promote an intersectional perspective on the incarceration of Indigenous women, who are subjected to specific forms of violence before, during and after detention, which includes harassment and physical violence, as well as the separation from their children, families and communal context, which for them represents another form of torture.

## Specific learning objectives

1. Identify the common themes that emerge across the different life stories presented in the book and analyze the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity in the experiences of imprisonment as described in the text.

2. Evaluate the concept of structural violence through the lens of the life stories shared in the book and analyze how the prison system perpetuates structural violence against Indigenous and peasant women.
3. Examine the role of the State in the incarceration of women, particularly from marginalized communities.
4. Critically assess how the personal narratives in the book challenge dominant discourses on crime and incarceration in Mexico and explore the alternative visions to punitive justice proposed throughout the book.
5. Articulate the role of storytelling in the processes of healing and resistance among incarcerated women and reflect on the personal and collective transformations made possible through the literary workshops described in the text.
6. Evaluate the contribution of participatory and collective writing practices to movements for social justice.

Consider how the book can serve as a critical tool to rethink the prison system and its functions.

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# You no longer sing for me at night

*Galia Tonella*

Guamúchil, shadow of what I was, I do not forget that little girl of deep dreams. I am no longer a leaf carried by the wind. When night falls, unanimous silence shelters my prayer.

How the wind whips! You must be as cold as the one whipping my loneliness.

Guamúchil, you no longer sing for me, the night has been cut short as if cutting sins.

Silhouettes of silent buildings burn, frustrating dreams plundering behind bars, leaving melancholy that concerns prison.

Guamúchil, you turn green for me. The creeping yoke does not annihilate you, so I will turn green one day. You know my sins, and even so, you give me your shadow.







# Introduction: Stories of exclusion

*Rosalva Aída Hernández*



The guamúchil is the tree of the corrals and guardian of the roads. For some unknown reason, it likes human presence, as it tends to proliferate where there is frequent traffic of people. In the women's area of the Atlacholoaya Social Readaptation Centre (Cereso) Morelos, the guamúchil is the only green area that allows the imprisoned women to feel close to nature and forget for a moment about the penitentiary context that surrounds them.

Indigenous and rural women have taken ownership of this space where, as one of them explains, "the green of the guamúchil, the birds that nest there, and the laughter of the children that reaches us from the playgrounds make us feel that we are not locked in."

*Under the Shade of the Guamúchil* tells us about the experience of Indigenous and mestizo women (almost all of rural origin) imprisoned in the women's area of the Cereso<sup>1</sup> Morelos, where around 200 women have been isolated from society by a justice system that sees punishment and imprisonment as a solution to the failure of a social model that, through exclusion and poverty, has contributed to producing criminality.

The second edition of *Bajo la sombra del guamúchil* (*Under the Shade of the Guamúchil*) includes six new stories that were written in a second stage of the Life Stories Workshop under my coordination from 2013 to 2015. Eight years had passed since the first workshop when we did the second edition and ten years, now that we are publishing the English version. In this period, most of the women who participated in the first edition of the book, both those who wrote and those who told their story, have been

released. From being a writing workshop, the group became the *Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective*, which has already published twenty-five books to date (2025).

Four of the Indigenous women who did not know how to read learned to do so and are now writing poetry and short stories, and are participating as co-authors in the different publications of the Collective. Leo Zavaleta, a Me'phaa woman from Guerrero, whose story had been written with Carlota Cadena, learned to write and decided to produce her own book, under the title *Los sueños de una cisne en el pantano* (2016) (*The Dreams of a Swan in the Swamp*). At her request, we changed the previous story to a summary of her new book.<sup>2</sup>

Only one of the participants in the first project was still in prison when we did the second edition in 2015. The others were released, several of them after their judicial files were reviewed. Some of them continue participating and writing now as active members of *Hermanas en la Sombra*. The new members who joined the workshop and those who are already outside have built a group identity as the *Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective*, becoming a reference for all the imprisoned women by proposing new, more sisterly ways of relating to each other and by questioning the racism and sexism of the penitentiary system with their writings.

The second edition, revised and expanded, includes six new stories and the film documentary *Semillas de Guamúchil, Ahora en Libertad* (Guamúchil Seeds, 2016) produced by our *compañera* Carolina Corral, which tells of the life in freedom of some of the participants in the first workshop.

In the workshop, which ran from 2008 to 2010 and from 2013 to 2015, participants took on the task of documenting and writing the stories of fellow Indigenous and peasant prisoners who did not have the privilege of writing. This collective process allowed for the creation of new bonds of solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, and opened a space for reflection on the machismo and racism that mark Mexican society and that influenced the chain of injustices and exclusions which ended up depriving them of their freedom. This double publication (book and video) also includes poems and reflections that were written over the course of these years within the framework of different projects of the Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective. This is, therefore, an effort that I carried out jointly with the poets Elena de Hoyos and Marina Ruiz, with the visual anthropologist Carolina Corral, as well as with the visual artist Pilar Hinojosa, together with imprisoned women and writers in training—a task to which we have dedicated more than seven years and which is the fruit of the aforementioned workshops.<sup>3</sup>

During these years, we have learned more from them than we were able to teach them. Our dialogues with each of the imprisoned women forced us to see our own lives through different eyes. We learned that the need to change this discriminatory justice system is urgent not only for the women who have been unjustly imprisoned but for all of us who are outside, for our children, who run the risk of falling into its “clutches” at any moment, since in Mexico, being in prison is almost an “accident” that can happen to anyone. This work is an effort to share and denounce these injustices, and arises not from an “altruistic” initiative to save someone, but from a political conviction that, in order to

save ourselves, we have to denounce, even if it is through limited strategies such as editorials, the injustices that keep thousands of women away from their children and families.

According to the 2013 Census presented by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), there were 16,632 female prisoners in Mexico at that time. Of these, 42% are in prison for drugs related crimes. This trend is repeated among the Indigenous population, where 52% of women have been arrested for crimes against health, such as participation in drug dealing. Indigenous women have become hostages in the war against drug trafficking, because in order to demonstrate its “effectiveness” in the fight against organised crime, the Mexican government is imprisoning people from the most vulnerable sectors: rural women, poor women, many of them Indigenous.

Neoliberal structural reforms have deepened the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples, forcing them to migrate north and, in many cases, to grow or transport illicit substances as a means of survival in the face of the crisis in peasant production. At other times, they are forced to do so by drug traffickers. The stories we share here put these “crimes against health” into context and help us understand the reasons why some chose to break the law or, in the worst cases, remained silent when their husbands or sons became involved in illicit acts.

These stories also show us that the imprisonment of women, uprooting them from their communities, the abandonment of their children, and the destructuring of family life are not solutions for keeping Indigenous, poor, and rural communities away from the networks of drug trafficking. Nor is it an effective way to

demonstrate that multicultural reforms have made justice more accessible to the country's Indigenous population. Only a social policy that provides economic alternatives to the Mexican countryside, based on the redistribution of wealth and the true recognition of the cultural and political rights of Indigenous peoples, can counteract the advance of drug trafficking in Indigenous and rural lands, keeping peasant women and men away from the networks of organised crime. The stories gathered here are not exceptional; they are merely examples of the many stories of sexual violence, racism, discrimination, and state violence shared by many of the 16,632 women imprisoned in the 604 detention centres in Mexico.

When I first arrived in Atlacholoaya, I was motivated by an academic and political interest in learning about the living conditions of Indigenous women prisoners. Through some personal networks, I managed to get invited to one of the workshops in the *"femenil"* which was run and coordinated by Elena de Hoyos: *"Mujer, escribir cambia tu vida"*<sup>4</sup>. It had been running for over a year, with 10 to 12 imprisoned women participating, interested in learning to write literary works. Most of the participants had some level of schooling, ranging from primary school to technical studies. None were Indigenous. When I introduced myself and explained my interest in learning about and writing the life stories of Indigenous women in prison, they themselves suggested that I teach them the methodology for preparing life stories, and they could be the ones to interview and write the stories of their fellow Indigenous women.

This was the beginning of a new space for dialogue and collective construction of knowledge, which presented new challenges for me

as an academic and activist. Between 10 and 15 imprisoned women participated in the Life Stories Workshop; the number fluctuated as some were released during the two and a half years the first workshop lasted, while others joined. The formal objective of the workshop was to “train participants in the technique of writing life stories<sup>5</sup> as a literary resource and for reflection on gender inequalities.”

The workshop, which was held weekly at first and then biweekly from October 2008 to June 2010, had each participant work on her project to write the life story of a fellow Indigenous prisoner. From 2013 to 2015, we repeated the experience with a new group, following the same process as in the first workshop.

Once a month, the women whose stories were being systematised attended the workshop to listen to the progress and to comment on or question the representations the participants were making of their lives. Several of the participants chose to write their own stories. One Indigenous woman, by the end of the two years, had learned to write and chose to complete the story written by her partner, adding details and nuances to the original version. My intention in this workshop was to facilitate intercultural dialogues between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and to promote critical reflection on the chains of ethnic, gender, and class inequalities that led to their confinement.

The participants began to develop their own theories and reflections, which, when integrated into the biographical narrative, took on hybrid and novel forms that went beyond life stories. At the same time, four handcrafted books were published: *Fragmentos de mujer*, *Mujeres habitando un sueño de libertad*, *Mareas capilares*,

and *Mundos paralelas intramuros*. Under the auspices of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, the series *Colección Revelación Intramuros* was published, consisting of three volumes of poetry, fiction, and essays.<sup>6</sup>

The various projects promoted by the Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective have been a means of sensitising hearts and creating a sisterhood among women of different social classes. One of them said during a writing exercise:

In my small space in the women's area, where the different minds, customs, and convictions of women mingle, it is interesting to take on the challenge of uniting our voices and capturing life stories, freeing them from this place and getting the outside world to know and reflect on the reality lived here. This workshop will make possible the union of women who seek a common goal. It is a means to help each other by being the spokespersons of real stories. Personally, it allows me to live a new experience in the world of writing and to feel proud to support those who have remained silent for a long time. With my writing, I will be the spokesperson for those who dare to tell their story. For illiterate women, this workshop is a way to free their story, to vent their feelings to a listening ear, and to recover the value of being a woman that society has taken away from them.

Through these dialogues, Amatista Lee, a woman of Korean descent who began the workshop with disillusionment and distrust towards the imprisoned women, came to know the reality of Indigenous women through the lives of four imprisoned women—two in the first workshop and two in the second. Morelitos and Flor de Nochebuena, the women whose lives Amatista documented in the



first workshop, were released shortly after their stories of injustice were made known through our book. Sadly, Morelitos, a 70-year-old Nahuatl woman, died a few months after being released due to a gastric ulcer she developed in confinement. In this second edition, Amatista dedicates a poem to her, expressing the bonds of affection that grew between them.

Over these seven years, Amatista gradually opened her heart, transforming from the hard and distant woman of the first months to a supportive and thoughtful companion who enriched our workshops with her views on racism, sexism, and inequality. Carlota Cadena, on the other hand, chose to approach two women from Tlapa, Altagracia and Leo, to whom she offered her pen and friendship. With her ever-ready smile and sense of humour, she made them laugh amid the sad memories stirred up during her interviews. Carlota was always the joy of our workshop, and she infected us with her optimism for life. Both Carlota and her two companions are now rebuilding their lives in freedom.

From these dialogues, Leo learned to write and decided to capture her own story in the form of a book that reflects her new identity, which she herself describes as a “rebirth.” “I am someone else,” she tells us. “Here I learned not only to write, but to look people in the eye and speak out loud. I no longer want to use a pseudonym, as I had told Carlota at the beginning. I want to use my real name, Leo Zavaleta, and for everyone to know that this is my story.”

Another friendship that was consolidated in the workshop was that of Guadalupe Salgado and Luz, a peasant woman from the mountains of Guerrero who was disabled by a stroke. Luz had trouble speaking; Guadalupe learned to understand her and became her

translator. Her babbling, which was unintelligible to us, was transformed into words through Guadalupe Salgado's pen. She reconstructed her story while becoming her friend, nurse, and caregiver, using the skills she had developed caring for her own daughter, who suffered from cerebral palsy. At the end of Luz's story, Guadalupe was released and left Atlacholoaya, but not before telling all of us in the workshop not to forget Luz and to include her in our activities. Luz died in 2014, due to the deterioration of her health. Although she was not responsible for her illness, she decided to remain in seclusion because it was there that she had built a community that welcomed her. She died under the care of Amatista Lee, who took charge of her care after Guadalupe left.

Alejandra Reynoso also learned to write in confinement and decided to tell us the story of a Nahuatl woman whose pseudonym is Perla Negra. Alejandra went from learning vowels to writing poetry in a surprising way, with a sensitivity that is moving. She is a beautiful woman, who has a seductive tenderness. It is almost impossible not to love her immediately when you meet her. Her reflections in our collective space often moved us to tears. She is a woman who has touched the bottom of the abyss to emerge again without resentment. She is love despite the pain, and that is what she shares with us. Alejandra was released after the publication of the first edition and continues writing and giving her testimony at the various cultural events in which the Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective participates.

Doña Rosa Salazar was one of those illiterate peasant women who rarely came to the workshop space, except to sell some food. But one day she stood at the door listening to her companions read their texts. She began to visit our workshop, not

only to sell food but to hear what was read there. After several sessions, she told us that she was learning to write and that she would like to attend as a listener, although she could not write her life and was not interested in anyone else writing it. "It hurts a lot to remember the past, you know? I prefer to listen to what others write." Over the last few years, Rosa began to participate more actively in the workshop, giving her opinion on the topics discussed and sometimes writing texts with her reflections. Now free, "Mamá Rosita" welcomes into her home and gives solidarity support to the companions who are released and do not have a home to go to. She also continues to participate actively in the Collective's events.

During the first years of the Collective, the collaboration of Marisol Hernandez del Águila (Águila del Mar) was fundamental. She was an inspiration to all of us, for her love of the written word, but also for her audacity in approaching eroticism and sexuality in her texts, without ever forgetting the sharp criticism of the machismo and sexism that characterise Mexican society. Her story, like her life, breaks with pre-established patterns. She decided to "go free" and, rather than a life story, wrote a story somewhere between erotic and noir literature, which is perhaps the germ of a future novel. Now free, she continues writing and participating in radio programmes and cultural gatherings, and has become part of the cultural community of Cuernavaca.

In the second workshop, María Elena Basave, Sol Nocturno, and Galia Tonella joined, along with Amatista Lee, who became the veteran of the group. Each of them invited an Indigenous and peasant companion to share her story and, as in the first group, networks of friendship were woven that in many cases changed

their lives. The case of Martha Elena Bermúdez, a Tsotsil peasant woman from Chiapas, and Galia Tonella, a businesswoman, therapist, and writer, is an example of the intercultural dialogues that have been promoted in these years. Martha Elena, now free, currently lives in Galia's house in Cuernavaca, waiting for her friend to be released so they can continue sharing the knowledge they both have about the life and culinary traditions of our country.

All of these women, both those who wrote and those who shared their stories, are survivors of a sexist and racist system that has marked their lives. But none of them has assumed the identity of a "victim." Each one of them, in her own way, has learned to resist and confront the patterns that imprison them inside and outside of prison.

I have to acknowledge the limitations of this type of work, which does not undermine or destabilise the penitentiary system, nor its effects of power over the bodies and minds of female prisoners. I start by recognising these limitations and, based on them, I try to contribute these reflections and actions for the transformation of a corrupt, sexist, and racist justice system, which not only affects the lives of female prisoners, but is a latent threat to me and to all women who are outside. We know that this is a small, limited task, which has been proposed to accompany the processes of critical reflection and the work of denouncing the injustices, racism, and sexism of the penitentiary system by the imprisoned women themselves. We hope that this book-video will be a way of freeing their voices and can contribute, even minimally, to raising awareness in society and improving the living conditions of thousands of women, whose bodies and minds neoliberal states seek to control.

## Under the shade of the guamúchil



The stories gathered here are not exceptional; they are merely examples of the myriad stories of sexual violence, racism, discrimination, and state violence shared by many of the 16,632 women imprisoned in the 604 detention centres in Mexico.

