

*Between Life and Death: Berta Cáceres, Decolonial Feminism, and
Resistance in the Gualcarque River*

Diana Raquel Chavez
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA



Abstract: Following the 2009 military coup in Honduras, the interim government rapidly approved extractive megaprojects across the country. Rivers sacred to Indigenous communities were privatized, including the Gualcarque River in Lenca territory, where the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam was planned without the consultation or consent of the Lenca people. Berta Cáceres, an Indigenous Lenca environmental activist and co-founder of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), emerged as a leader in the resistance against the dam. Speaking out meant risking targeted violence, political retaliation, and death; staying silent meant allowing the erasure of her community's land, autonomy and spiritual relationships. As threats intensified and other organizers were assassinated. Berta faced a critical question: how far was she willing to go to defend her people and their river?

Introduction

Berta Isabel Cáceres knew that she was destined for a future in activism. She grew up in La Esperanza, the capital city of the Intibucá Department in southwestern Honduras. La Esperanza was home to the newer Mestizo communities, while their neighbors in Intibucá and Ocotepeque were traditionally Lenca. Mestizo refers to people of mixed ancestry with a white European and Indigenous background and Lenca refers to the largest Indigenous community in Honduras, making up over 60 percent of the Indigenous population (Lenca in Honduras, 2024).

From a young age Berta realized her privilege coming from a comfortable and traditional home (Rodríguez Indiano 2018, 30). Her family was very involved in politics, and her father was well known for his prosperous coffee-growing business. Her mother, Austra Flores, noticed the ethnic apartheid of their community as Indigenous children were banned from attending Mestizo schools in La Esperanza. These early encounters with injustice shaped her worldview and by the 1970's, as conflict spread through Nicaragua and El Salvador, Austra transformed her home into a refuge and headquarters for Salvadoran guerilla soldiers and young men avoiding military conscription (Lakhani 2020, 19). As a young child, Berta witnessed her mom's work and was made aware of the injustices in the world. Her mom helped organize against the U.S.-backed death squads in Central America while also being a community midwife and assisting Salvadoran civil war refugees.

Though Berta came from a place of privilege, she saw firsthand how her background, coming from a well-off Mestiza family, protected her from some of the neocolonial policies put in place by the Honduran government, such as land grabs and resource exploitation. Berta was also part of the Lenca community but understood that being from La Esperanza put her in a position to help others, just like her mother had. It was because of her upbringing that Berta found her purpose

and promoted her political practices (Curiel et al. 2021, 71). She became a globally recognized environmental activist and the leader of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH).

Berta's understanding of national power dynamics became more critical as Honduras entered a period of political upheaval. On Sunday, June 28, 2009, the Honduran military, backed by the National Congress and the Supreme Court, overthrew President Manuel Zelaya (Rodríguez and Indiano 2018). He was replaced by interim president Roberto Micheletti, who was only in office for seven months before he was replaced by President Porfirio Lobo. Prior to the coup, hydroelectric businesses were not legally allowed to develop in Honduras; however, the new government enacted the Framework Law for the Electric Subsector, which allowed private thermal generation plants to start projects. In this context, Desarrollos Energeticos S.A. (DESA) was founded as a private corporation that developed energy projects such as the Agua Zarca Project. The Agua Zarca Project on the Gualcarque River had plans to build a dam, a tunnel, a heave tank, a penstock, and a huge powerhouse costing approximately \$63.4 million U.S.D.

The Agua Zarca project would take place on the land of the Rio Blanco community, a collection of 13 *campesino* (peasant) communities. This region is made up primarily of the Lenca Indigenous people. In the Lenca cosmology, as well as other Indigenous cosmologies, water, earth, and humans are all connected, and the river is sacred and essential for their survival. As Berta later shared in her 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize Ceremony:

In our cosmologies, we are beings that come from the earth, the water, and the corn. We, the Lenca people, are the ancestral guardians of the rivers, also protected by the spirits of the girls who teach us that giving our lives in many ways to defend the rivers is giving our lives to the greater good of humanity and of this planet. (Curiel et al. 2021, 77)

The sacred river provided spiritual and physical nourishment for the community. Thus, they felt an immense responsibility to protect the river and stand up to business interests and the government (Lakhani 2020, 14). That responsibility placed them in direct conflict with the state's development agenda, which promoted 'green grabbing'- the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends, and claimed to uplift Indigenous communities while grounding its projects in territorial dispossession (Fairhead et al. 2012). These development projects, like the Agua Zarca Dam, threatened Indigenous communities by introducing targeted acts of violence, repression, and death. Berta and her Lenca community were faced with a decision. Should she speak out against the planned construction project? Berta not only had to face the Honduran government in her pursuit to protect the river, but she also had to navigate her role as an Indigenous woman leading a movement in a country that was unsupportive and hostile against Indigenous and environmental activists with high rates of gender-based violence.

History of Colonialism and Racial Hierarchy in Honduras

Contemporary struggles over land, like the Agua Zarca Dam project, must be contextualized historically and understood as part of the legacy of settler violence, racial hierarchy, and U.S. imperialism in Honduras (Loperena 2017, 807). The roots of dispossession and marginalization of Indigenous people trace back to the colonial era, when Spanish colonizers imposed a racial caste system to maintain dominance. In the late 1800s, the new Honduran state

rolled out their Civilization Program, which was meant to integrate the Black and Indigenous peoples and alter their land use practices. This program positioned Indigenous communities as outside modernity and framed their communal land use practices as obstacles to development (Mollett 2015, 418).

One of the central constructs from colonialism was *mestizaje*, which is a political ideology that promotes blood and cultural mixing to homogenize the population (Mollett 2015, 419). This racial mixing was intended to modernize the region and minimize the presence of the supposedly “savage” Black and Indigenous people. Along with the ideology of *mestizaje* came a caste system wherein being white was superior, and the process of *blanqueamiento*—the enduring appeal for whitening—situated Black and Indigenous people at the bottom of the caste system with Mestizos right below whites (Bonnett 2000). This colonial caste system continues to play a central role in national identity formation in Honduras, burying Indigenous historical narrative through census minimization, mythologization, and a homogenizing process known as *Mayanization*. (Mendoza 2006, 191).

Mayanization falsely projects Mayan identity onto all Indigenous people in Honduras, which flattens cultural differences and enables state appropriation and romanticization of Mayan symbols for tourism and nationalist purposes. This process erases the diverse Indigenous communities in Honduras, as there are nine Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, representing seven percent of the population (United Nations Sustainable Development Group n.d.). This process continues to create a hierarchy within the different populations in Honduras (Mendoza 2006, 191). As a result, Indigenous communities like the Lenca and Garifuna Indigenous groups faced neglect and apathy from the state when it came to land disputes and extractive practices. Indigenous and Afro-Honduran communities assert ancestral rights to land, but these rights are delegitimized as “extra-legal” because they fall outside of Western legal standards (Mollett 2015, 422). These competing visions of land, one that is rooted in expansion and profit and the other in relational and collective stewardship, reflect the colonial legacy that continues to structure land governance in Honduras.

The United States also played a foundational role in reinforcing racialized capitalist structures in Honduras, especially through the rise of the banana industry. Honduras became emblematic of the term “banana republic,” a phrase used to describe countries rendered politically and economically dependent on United States fruit corporations (Bucheli 2005). By the early 20th century, Honduras was the largest banana exporter in Central America. Companies like United Fruit and Standard Fruit established massive operations with the full support of local dictators such as General Terencio Sierra and Tiburcio Carias. These corporations attained Indigenous lands through coercion and forced removals, transforming coastal and Indigenous lands into export zones (Bulmer-Thomas 2003).

The relationship between the Honduran government and United Fruit was one of mutual reinforcement. In 1932, Carias, whose presidential campaign was funded by United Fruit, assumed power and instituted a 16-year dictatorship. During the Great Depression, as banana prices collapsed, United Fruit cut wages and payments to local producers. Carias supported United Fruit by banning labor organizing and cracking down on all opposition (Bulmer-Thomas 2003). The Honduran state functioned as a tool for United Fruit, repressing its own citizens to preserve foreign capital.

These intertwined histories of colonialism, racial hierarchy, and U.S. imperialism created the conditions under which contemporary Indigenous resistance, such as Berta’s fight for her community, are better understood. Land is not just a resource to be developed for Indigenous

communities; rather, it is a site of identity, history, and political struggle. Development projects like Agua Zarca are not merely technical or economic interventions but continuations of settler colonial logics that seek to displace Indigenous communities for profit. Understanding this legacy is essential to grasping why Berta's resistance in Honduras was not only about environmental protection but was also a struggle for sovereignty, survival, and historical justice.

Berta's Activist Origins

Berta was fifteen when she met her future husband, Salvador Zuniga. Zuniga was a student activist who co-founded the radical Patriotic Student Organization of Lempira (OPEL) and was involved in many rebel offenses in El Salvador (Lakhani 2020, 35). Berta decided to move to El Salvador with him after having their child, Olivia Marcela Zuniga Cáceres, in 1989. She joined the war effort with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Berta was part of the health brigade, drawing on her experiences assisting her mother in midwifery. Despite the continuous violence and atrocities occurring daily as the war on unarmed civilians continued, Berta organized classes for children and taught adults how to read. Her experience in the middle of the conflict zone shaped the rest of her life and she returned to Honduras in February 1990.

A pivotal moment in Berta's political formation was the Zapatista movement in the 1990's which started her Indigenous awakening by centering Indigenous identity, autonomy, and collective rights as the foundation of political struggle. The day that the North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, the United States, and Mexico went into effect was the first day of the Zapatista uprising, which was a declaration of war on the Mexican government and the beginning of a resistance against the neoliberal globalization of the world. It was this struggle against capitalism and the centering of Indigenous worldviews that Berta resonated with, though she was never a part of the movement (Lakhani 2020, 37).

Berta's Leadership & the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras

The Zapatista movement inspired Berta to found the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) in March of 1993. COPINH's purpose was to bring together the battles for Indigenous rights, rivers, territories, and the environment. They opposed capitalism, racism, and the patriarchy (Teran 2021, 99). COPINH was committed to an anti-violence approach to mobilization and instead employed a strategy of direct action for their first action by organizing roadblocks, sit-ins, and continuous protests against the illegal logging in the Lenca community (Lakhani 2020, 39). With Berta as their leader, they managed to stop an illegal logging operation in the west of Honduras, and in July 1994, she organized the Indigenous and Black Pilgrimage for Life, for Justice, and for Liberty, which was attended by tens of thousands of participants (Erdos 2020, 200).

Machismo is defined as the attitudes, customs, laws, beliefs, and behaviors that identify and sustain men as dominant, stronger, and more important in every sphere of life than women. Machismo is at the heart of capitalism because capitalism can only survive by keeping poor women of color at the bottom of the racial hierarchy and rich white men at the top (Lakhani 2020, 147). In Latin America in particular, machismo is prevalent and perpetrators of rape and violence against women are treated with total impunity stemming from deep-seated machismo.

Berta not only threatened machismo from DESA but also from her own community and members of COPINH. Berta and Salvador split up in 2013, and she dated Aureliano "Lito" Molina, as her first public relationship after splitting up (Teran 2021, 100). Salvador was hurt because Lito had been like family to them and was twenty years younger than Berta. Salvador was furious and

left COPINH. But his fury was not only related to Lito, as he credits his decision for leaving to the growing influence of Berta's feminist friends. He struggled to understand Berta's critique of patriarchy and was unhappy with her overtaking him as the main COPINH leader, whereas, for a while they were co-leaders.

Berta also hated domestic chores and was constantly on the move due to her activism (Lakhani 2020, 46). Behind her back, relatives and members of COPINH would call her a bad mother who cared more about the *indios* than her own children. Miriam Miranda, Berta's friend and leader of Honduras' Garifuna *Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña* (OFRANEH), recalls that Berta was deeply hurt by these accusations: "As women, it's much harder for us to take on leadership and political roles; we're not allowed to show any weakness in such a patriarchal system" (Lakhani 2020, 50). Berta loved her children, but she also refused to give up the struggle as long as poor people continued suffering for further economic gains for rich people. Whether these rifts within COPINH and criticisms from her community would have arisen if Berta were a man is unclear, but at several points elements of machismo contributed to her challenges as a leader.

Over time, as Berta's confidence and standing increased, her vision for COPINH evolved. She began understanding capitalism as a patriarchal model. She began bringing these ideas to COPINH and speaking about machismo in the community at every opportunity, calling out the men in the community for not helping in the household and relying on the women to be the heart of the families and the struggle. This created a rift, and men stormed out and insulted her.

For the first few years of COPINH's existence, success came quickly and easily. They improved Indigenous communities' access to healthcare and education and in 1995, they pressured Honduras to sign the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of the International Labour Organization, known as ILO 169, which recognized Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination (Lakhani 2020, 42). This was significant for Berta's community as it officially established a multicultural society and instated free, prior, and informed consultation for projects like the Rio Blanco Dam. COPINH helped more than 200 Lenca communities acquire land titles and through several protests in 2006 and 2007, they stopped plans to build a dam on the Lempa River between Honduras and El Salvador (Erdos, 2020, 200; Lakhani, 2020, 39).

Berta quickly became a respected environmentalist in Honduras and internationally. In 2014, she met Pope Francis at the World Meeting of Popular Movements, which brought together grassroots organizers from around the world. And in 2015, she received the Goldman Environmental Prize, which is equivalent to the Nobel Prize for environmentalists (Erdos, 2020, 201). During her acceptance speech, she spoke about the Gualcarque River.

The Gualcarque River has called us, as have the others that are seriously threatened around the world. We should respond. Mother Earth— militarized, fenced off, poisoned, where elemental rights are systematically violated— demands that we act. (Berta Cáceres quoted in *Archivo Vivo Paulo Freire* 2018, 2'52"—2'55")

Supporters hoped that her international recognition would protect her life, unlike the hundreds of other comrades who had been murdered. Berta was not afraid to risk her life; she knew that justice required martyrs. Thus, she did everything she could to protect her community even if it meant she was at risk. She created conflict with the Mestizo elites, the national government, private investors, and international financial institutions. (Loperena 7, 805). Despite continuous scaremongering about armed insurgency, death threats, and murders, the organization continued their work (Lakhani 2020, 43). Not only did DESA want them removed even if it be through murders, but the

state also valued state profit and development over these lives they viewed as dispensable. Berta was aware of the danger, as she stated in an interview referencing DESA and the government backed militia groups protecting the dam, “When they want to kill me, they will do it,” but she was not scared (Erdos 2020, 201). She believed that they were the ones who were scared, because people were being educated on their rights and COPINH was achieving victories through unarmed mobilizations (Lakhani 2020, 43).

Green Capitalism and Land Grabbing in Honduras

Green capitalism is an economic model that allows countries to grow economically through the use of nature without contributing to climate change (Teran 2021, 101). This model favors protecting the environment by making it economically enticing. Green capitalism is not a sustainable or efficient solution for the climate crisis, and it relies on the exacerbation of other inequalities. Development projects should prioritize climate-friendly models; they must also consider the hidden environmental costs and degradation that comes with common eco-friendly alternatives like biofuels and hydroelectric power. These projects must also consider the displacement of Indigenous communities and the ways their projects disrupt their relationship with nature (Teran 2021, 101).

A green capitalist economy goes hand in hand with “green grabbing,” which has led to the privatization of common resources and sacred land for the purpose of economic growth. The proposed Agua Zarca project on the Gualcarque River would destroy cultural and economic heritage and deny the citizens the basic human right to water. This also violated the rights of the Lenca people under free, prior, and informed consent (Teran 2021, 122). The central tension between the Lenca community and the government and DESA was that the Lenca community relied on the territory for their livelihoods, ethnic identity, and culture, while the proponents of the dam saw it solely as a source of profit and “progress.” The idea of national progress is used by investors and multilateral development banks to further disenfranchise rural communities of color while also justifying acts of violence against land and environmental activists under the guise of development (Loperena 2017, 802). Land displacement and its ensuing violence are inherently connected to “white sociospatial imaginaries and the politics of frontier making” that live on as remnants of colonialism (Loperena 2017, 801). Mestizo elites continue to assert their power and racial domination over Indigenous and Black peoples in Honduras by turning their territories and livelihoods into areas for economic development.

The 2009 coup was followed by a dramatic increase in extractive activities throughout the national territory. For the purposes of this case, extractivism is defined as “the expropriation of natural resources for export and is both a historical and contemporary development model as well as an economic activity” (Alimonda 2011). Extractivism undermines local integrity and decision-making, disproportionately affecting fragile ecosystems and marginalized communities (Farthing and Fabricant 2018). In 2010, Porfirio Lobo took office as president of Honduras and took extractivist activities to an unprecedented level. He implemented several reforms, notably one that ended the mining moratorium instated by previous president Zelaya, which started a period of intensive natural resource concessions to foreign and national investors. According to civil society organizations these concessions amounted to 35% of the national territory, much of it being land that Indigenous and Black communities have legal rights over (Loperena 2017, 804).

The Lenca people viewed these extractive projects not as development but rather as continuations of colonialism (Phillips 2019, 344). Several companies vested interest in the construction of the Agua Zarca dam, including the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), which had capital investment from the United States and other countries like

the Dutch Development Bank (Lakhani 2013). This development guided by outside interests represented the “logic of elimination” that settler colonialism employs, expressed through legal arrangements that undermine Black and Indigenous sovereignty over natural resources and their territory by overlooking property rights. Numerous legal frameworks existed that granted Indigenous peoples territorial rights, but the Honduran state continued to violate these rights by pursuing development projects using national progress as their motive (Loperena 2017, 802).

National economic progress thus relies on the racialized dispossession and forced removal of Black and Indigenous peoples from sites with promising development opportunities (Loperena 2017, 802). Extractivism is much more than the process of accumulation and dispossession of land and resources, as it explicitly produces subjectivities and denies Indigeneity. However, this aspect of Indigenous erasure and oppression is often ignored by land grab scholars; the literature often leaves out how dehumanizing these projects are for Indigenous communities and their implications on continuing racial hierarchy through green grabs that have become normalized and legitimized at the expense of Indigenous communities (Mollett 2015, 426). As a result of numerous legal and systemic violations people resisted and were often led by women, Afro-descendants, and Indigenous peoples (Cupples 2022, 83). Berta was one of the many Indigenous women leaders forced into resistance and leadership because of the continued extraction and dehumanization of her community, legitimized by the state.

Decolonial Feminism

Berta never explicitly labeled herself a decolonial feminist, yet her activism and worldview reflect the key principles of decolonial feminist thought. Decolonial feminism challenges the universalization of women’s experiences rooted in racial and class privileges, and it demands a re-centering of feminist theory and praxis away from Eurocentric narratives (Curiel et al. 2021, 69). Berta’s activism offered a powerful example of this re-centering, grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, communal resistance, and a rejection of all systems of domination.

Berta understood how racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism intersected in Honduras, particularly in state and transnational violence against Indigenous peoples. Her feminism did not prioritize gender at the expense of other oppressions; rather, she insisted that “we women carry on this triple struggle, and we wish men would carry it on too to dismantle all forms of oppression” (Curiel et al. 2021, 74). For Berta, fighting gender oppression was inseparable from confronting capitalism and racism. Her leadership in COPINH reflected this, including anti-patriarchal politics alongside anti-capitalist and anti-racist agendas.

Berta’s vision extended into the structure and priorities of COPINH itself. The organization’s programs for sexual diversity, women’s leadership, and community tribunals for domestic violence exemplify how Indigenous feminisms critique both external and internal systems of oppression. As feminist scholar, María José Méndez explains, “COPINH’s critique of gender inequality ... is emblematic of how Indigenous feminisms critically scrutinize the internal oppression against women within their communities as well as in dominant society” (Méndez 2018, 13).

Berta’s work illuminated the impossibility of isolating gender oppression from other forms of domination. As she explained, “We *compañeras* from COPINH have not accepted the notion that we first had to fight against transnationals, and later against racism, and lastly against violence against women. We all experience multiple forms of domination—women being the most affected—so the fight must also be multiple and diverse” (Women Human Rights Defenders 2016).

Her identity as a Lenca woman shaped her resistance, and it also intensified the violence she faced. “I also know that I have been persecuted not just for political leadership but also for being a woman, for being Lenca... It may be easier to confront the transnationals and the army than it is to confront the patriarchy,” she reflected. “There won’t be justice or democracy... if patriarchy exists, and even worse if we don’t discuss it in our organizations” (Méndez 2018, 13). This statement powerfully underscores how patriarchy is embedded not only in dominant institutions but also within movements themselves, something Berta was never afraid to challenge.

Indigenous Worldviews

Berta’s involvement with the Agua Zarca dam construction led by DESA began when a community member informed her of the presence of heavy machinery and equipment that had been shipped to their land. Berta investigated and found out that DESA was planning to build four hydroelectric dams on the Gualcarque River (Erdos 2020, 200). From that point on, Berta’s ultimate project became fighting against the construction of dams on the Gualcarque River because of how intimately it impacted her.

In stark contrast with the ideologies of developers and proponents of the Agua Zarca dam and other extractive industries that devastated ecosystems for mining, oil drilling, and agribusiness to accumulate economic wealth, Indigenous cosmology’s view the Earth and the water as something sacred, reciprocal, and inherently worth protecting.

Massive hydroelectric projects like the Agua Zarca dam not only result in the violent displacement of Indigenous peoples but also cut off the lifeblood that nurtures Indigenous cosmology’s (Méndez 2018,13). In order to understand the implications of the Agua Zarca dam on the Lenca community, one must forget about sociality that assumes only human intentionality, because the intentionality that Berta and the community attribute to the Gualcarque River can only be understood through unlearning the human-nonhuman dichotomy and hierarchy that places humans at the center of existence (Méndez 2018, 18). Western ways of conceptualizing the world are viewed as the superior forms of assessment, which leave little room for the understanding of different epistemologies. Epistemology, in simple terms, is the study of knowledge, and epistemologies are different forms of knowledge production and worldviews (Repko et al. 2012).

Lenca epistemologies view the river as an artery of life and as a vital relationship. Lenca cosmology has established a horizontal and reciprocal relationship with the environment, granting it subjectivity and agency (Gabiola 2022, 56). Berta, specifically, felt a special connection to the river, which fueled her activism:

“When we started the fight for Rio Blanco, I would go into the river, I would talk to the river, and I could feel what the river was telling me. I knew it was going to be difficult. But I also knew we were going to triumph, because *the river told me so*. (Frente Juvenil 2016)

Berta and the Lenca community had intimate conversations with the river and were deeply interconnected, while dominant models of development projects rejected the existence of a reciprocal relationship with the environment. From the Lenca cosmology, water was fundamental and contained spirits, which is why they treated the water another community member (Méndez, 2018, 21). The Lenca centered the environment as a fundamental element of life and understood the importance of earth and its role in biodiversity, sustainability, and harmony between humans and non-humans (Gabiola 2022, 56).

They adamantly believed in the equality of all beings, so when the river was threatened by the construction of the dam, they felt an immense responsibility and duty to defend the river (Méndez 2018, 21). Understanding the worldview of the Lenca community and the value of the rivers is not an effort to rationalize why so many activists have surrendered their lives to it, but rather to begin the process of decolonizing concepts and narratives of the natural world (Méndez 2018, 22). The destruction of the Gualcarque is also the destruction of cosmology and a way of living.

The Lenca people have a strong bond with the river. Their sufferings are intertwined, as they experience displacement, deteriorating air quality, deforestation, and the construction of dams, they also feel a responsibility to protect this sacred land. Consequently, many of them have been murdered for their resistance (Gabiola 2022, 62). The 2014 analysis of Global Witness concluded that Honduras was the most dangerous country for environmental defenders (Erdos 2020, 200). Moreover, in both 2017 and 2020, more than 300 human rights defenders were murdered in Honduras, most taking place in the context of development projects (Front Line Defenders 2017 & 2022). Berta's resistance put her life in danger, and she had to grapple with these broader themes of Indigenous violence and repression in Honduras and contemplate if she was willing to die for her community and the river.

Berta's Mobilization Against DESA

In the spring of 2013, Berta started a peaceful blockade that was successful for over a year in preventing the hydroelectric firm from accessing the site and beginning construction. In July 2013, the military opened fire on the unarmed protesters, killing local Indigenous leader Tomás García Domínguez. Eventually, the human rights violations backfired, as both the main financing partner and the Chinese building company withdrew from the project. Following this, however, DESA accused COPINH and Berta of inciting violence and damage to the company's private installations (Erdos 2020, 805).

DESA was determined to continue developing the dam even if it meant forcefully eliminating any opposition. Berta was also determined to maintain roadblocks and land occupations and to continue exposing the project and its displacement of her people by using her large international platform (Lakhani 2020, 110). Berta was offered money to stop her resistance, and when that did not work, DESA used intimidation tactics. Berta was wrongfully arrested numerous times with completely fabricated charges (Lakhani 2020, 110)

Berta knew the threats were legitimate, as she told Al Jazeera's Nina Lakhani, "The army has an assassination list of 18 wanted human rights fighters with my name at the top. I want to live; there are many things I still want to do in this world, but I have never once considered giving up fighting for our territory, for a life with dignity, because our fight is legitimate." Berta was marked for death, and DESA did not intend to stop until she was removed. Berta represented a severe threat to DESA because COPINH was challenging every aspect of exploitation facing Indigenous communities. She was empowering Indigenous communities and equipping them with effective tactics to resist.

Berta made it difficult for DESA to move forward with their development and intimidation tactics, and they believed that removing her would minimize the problem (Teran 2021, 99). This is part of the "death system," a development model pursued by the state in collaboration with IFI's and elite Honduran investors, which justified the murdering of Berta in the name of economic growth (Loperena 2017, 806). DESA used paid informants and threats from military officials to systematically scare Berta. Just before Christmas 2015, Berta confided in her sister Augustina that her life was in danger.

“The messages never stop, the harassment never stops, and they have me under surveillance. They don’t care that I have children. Those sons of bitches are going to kill me” (Lakhani 2020, 1).

Berta was no stranger to struggles involving big business interests, and she made sure the people of Rio Blanco were too before committing to the struggle. Community member, Francisco Chico Javier Sanchez explained:

Berta warned us that opposing the dam would mean threats, violence, deaths, divisions, persecution, infiltrators, militarization, police, sicarios, and that everything would be done to break us. COPINH was ready to support us in peaceful protests and actions, but it had to be our decision, the communities, because it was us who would suffer the consequences. We were totally ignorant, but she was very clear. Everything she told us that day came true, and worse. (Lakhani 2020, 15)

Berta had several options. First, to continue leading COPINH’s direct resistance: organizing road blockades, documenting environmental harms, and publicly naming the companies and officials responsible. This choice carried immense personal risk, escalating threats, criminalization by the state, and the possibility of violence from private security forces and military actors who had already targeted her. Second, she could step back from visible leadership to protect her safety. Doing so would have meant confronting the moral weight of abandoning a struggle and community she had spent decades building and protecting. Third, she could increase her engagement with international institutions, human rights mechanisms, and foreign investors to halt the dam. But this course risked placing herself and the Lenca community under even more scrutiny to their already vulnerable situation. Each path required Berta to weigh the costs not only to herself but to the collective she represented: What would happen to the Lenca people if she withdrew? Who would step into the dangers she had long been facing? And could outside institutions be trusted to intervene in ways that respected and protected her community’s autonomy rather than dispossessing them further?

Conclusion

This case followed Berta Cáceres’s decision about whether to continue her activism against the construction of the Agua Zarca dam, and the risks that she would be willing to take in defending the Lenca people’s land, water, and spiritual sovereignty. Berta’s experiences navigating state violence, corporate power, and international financial institutions raise broader questions about environmental decision-making and development. What roles should governments and transnational actors have in determining the fate of Indigenous territories? At what point does “development” become dispossession, and who gets to decide what counts as environmental progress? What should Indigenous activists be willing to risk to protect their communities?

Questions also remain about whether Berta should have become the global face of Indigenous environmental resistance. As a leader with international recognition her visibility gave the movement unprecedented influence, yet it also placed her at a level of exposure greater than most of her comrades and other grassroots defenders. Her fame amplified the Lenca struggle in spaces where it would have otherwise been ignored, but it also concentrated the risk on herself and other prominent leaders that were strategically targeted by the state and DESA. This tension raises

difficult but important questions: Did her global platform strengthen the movement's power or did it make her and her community more vulnerable to repression? And supporters and observers were left to wonder: if even a leader as prominent and established as Berta Cáceres faced escalating threats to her advocacy, what did that mean for the safety and future of countless other Indigenous activists and environmental defenders with less visibility?

Epilogue

Berta and the Lenca community had successfully halted the construction project, but the victory came with tragedy. On March 1, 2016, Berta dropped her daughter Laura, 23, off at the Toncontin airport in the capital, Tegucigalpa, as she was returning to her studies in Mexico City. Berta's last words to her daughter were, "This country is fucked, but if anything happens to me, don't be afraid." (Lakhani 2020). Laura later said she assumed her mother might be arrested but believed her meeting the Pope and winning the Goldman Prize would be enough to protect her.

The same day, Berta's long-term friend Gustavo Castro, a Mexican environmentalist, arrived to lead a workshop on alternative energy for COPINH members. Afterward, he and Berta returned to La Esperanza, where they planned to spend the night. Around 9:30 pm, a neighbor spotted a Toyota Hilux with no license plates parked outside Berta's mother's house. When Berta and Gustavo arrived at her green-and-gold bungalow, protected by a security gate operated by two guards, they were already being watched (Lakhani 2020).

At approximately 11:35 pm, Gustavo heard tapping, followed by a thud. Moments later, he faced an armed man wearing a black top and white scarf. He heard three gunshots and watched the attacker stomp on Berta's bleeding body until she could no longer resist. Gustavo was also shot but the bullet only grazed his left ear. He rushed to her side as she lay dying. Her last words were, "Call Salvador, call Salvador!" Berta had been murdered in her own home only a year after receiving the world's most prestigious environmental prize (Lakhani 2020).

Just twelve days later, her fellow COPINH member Nelson Harcie was also murdered, and the two deaths sparked international outrage. In response, the Dutch development bank FMO and Finn Fund suspended their involvement in the Agua Zarca project (Goldman Environmental Prize 2023). In 2018, a Honduran court ruled that executives of DESA ordered Berta's assassination as well as her comrades. Seven men were found guilty and are currently serving up to fifty-year sentences. According to Global Witness, some of Honduras' most well-connected business and political elites are on the DESA's board (Global Witness 2017). This investigation led to the most emblematic corruption case in the country's history, known as the *Fraude del Gualcarque*. This is the first case that acknowledges institutional corruption linked to extractivist projects and revealed the use of governmental apparatus to assist and enable the concession in the Lenca territory (CESPAD 2019).

Berta Cáceres's killing reflects a global pattern of violence against those who defend land, water and Indigenous sovereignty. Each year as many as 200 environmentalists are murdered, with Indigenous leaders facing particularly severe. Many of these deaths and disappearances go unnoticed, but Berta's death caused an international outcry (Erdos 2020, 189). Berta knew the costs and was repeatedly warned about the consequences of resisting, but she was relentless as a leader and was willing to put her life on the line (Lakhani 2020, 15).

Her friend and Garifuna leader Miriam Miranda later stated that "they didn't just kill a defender or an Indigenous leader or an environmentalist; they killed a woman who dared speak

out against a patriarchal system. That's why I call it political femicide" (Lakhani 2020, 148). Community members believe that Berta's murder was fundamentally a *machista* act, an attempt to silence a woman who had repeatedly challenged a capitalist, male-dominated system and threatened powerful business interests. (Lakhani 2020, 148).

Still, her legacy endures. It is not only memorialized but actively invoked in struggles across the world:

"Berta's presence has multiplied indeed, and her name is increasingly invoked by feminist, Indigenous, and environmental struggles that value her analysis of the intersections between structures of domination and exploitation." (Méndez 2018, 8)

The cry "Berta did not die; she became many" reverberates through movements committed to decolonial feminist politics.

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