

Theorizing Multiple Oppressions Through Colonial History: Cultural Alterity and Latin American Feminisms

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Within feminist theory, special attention has often been paid to the discursive space required for women to effectively participate in the interpretive processes of culture without having to perform great feats of linguistic and psychic dexterity. Historically, the call to alter, enlarge, and transform this space has centered on the awareness that performing such tasks, while allowing women to engage in public dialogue and moral deliberation through a determinate location of their voice within preexisting social norms, typically comes at the expense of radical differences and complex intersections of multiple categories of self-identification (including those of race, sex, gender, class and ethnicity). Under such a bind, North American feminists have developed critical tools of analysis such as “double-edged thinking” to address the problem of mobilizing projects of emancipation against a historical backdrop that is still deeply embedded with masculine narratives, texts, and practices, and which may include the very terms emancipatory projects supply (Butler, 129). In Latin America, given the context of European colonialism, feminist inquiry not only faces this bind (insofar as in order to decolonize, one is burdened with the task of mobilizing projects of liberation against colonial thinking using the very colonial epistemology which originally constrained one), but is *further* stamped by cultural and historical differences that invariably shape the epistemic location of women’s voices, but which often go unacknowledged in transnational contexts.

The powerful legacies of colonialism and imperial rule, along with the specific conditions of rampant poverty, uneven development under neoliberal globalization, compulsory motherhood, militarization of border regions, rural and linguistic marginalization, social violence and the stratified

division of labor all serve as a backdrop against which the traditional interpretive foci of race, sex, gender, class and ethnicity prove insufficient as analytical categories in Latin American feminisms. By working through some contemporary examples involving the de-legitimization of indigenous women’s epistemic authority to tell their own narratives, I want to address how in Latin America, philosophical problems—like the problem of language and its capacity to describe experience—emerge in ways that are different from the global North due to the impact of colonialism on Amerindian conceptual frameworks and linguistic systems. Theorizing harms through the interpretive lens of categories like gender is thus not enough to attend to the complexities of women’s concrete experiences of suffering and oppression in the region and to decode the imprint of neocolonial violence on their lives.

In discussing these issues, it is not my intention to erect a false binary between Latin American and Anglophone feminisms, or to suggest that analytical categories like ‘gender’ have not served important roles in framing issues in twentieth-century Latin American and Caribbean feminisms, especially in such a way as to promote transnational dialogue and build advocacy coalitions over shared concerns. Indeed, feminisms vary widely within local and national contexts and are active sites of internal dialogue, negotiation and contestation. Articulating their full complexity, even within Latin American philosophical feminisms alone, is well beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, what I want to focus on here is the extent to which the *context-dependent* strategies and methodologies that *have* developed in response to women’s situated experiences with oppression—which include feminist theories of ‘hybridity,’ ‘mental nepantlism,’ ‘transtextuality,’ and ‘world-

traveling,' among many others—have been consistently subsumed under (or marginalized within) more mainstream transnational and Anglophone categories of knowledge that developed in response very different socio-historical conditions, and which may not be maximally equipped to deal with issues unique to post-colonial Latin American, borderland identities, or even those of Latinas in the United States (Ruíz 2010).

Take the category of 'gender', for instance, which has no exact correlate in Spanish. *Género*, as it has come to be translated, is a classificatory noun derived from the Latin *generis* that designates *kind* or *type* (as in 'mankind'), and only in grammatical contexts was it used to refer to the masculinity *or* femininity of a noun (thus internally reproducing heterosexual dualisms). Although the organizing rubric of gender has been important for building transborder links with North American and global feminisms and, in many cases, reworked to fit specific local contexts, historically, its importation into Latin America in the 1990s was met with deep concerns about its depoliticizing effect on women's struggles. In fact, as Claudia de Lima Costa recounts, "states and inter-governmental agencies unabashedly embraced gender" as a way of promoting "gender equity" in public policies and programs, thus resulting (among other things) in the proliferation of masculinity studies programs as a time when women's studies programs were severely underfunded or altogether lacking (173). By contrast, in Argentina, where state-sponsored terrorism against women was institutionalized through military impunity from rape and the forced disappearance of minor children, mothers of disappeared children organized around the traditional (some would argue, essentialist) concept of maternity and the Catholic deification of motherhood to establish political subjectivities that could attain some level of audibility and protection under state terrorism. But the trajectory of feminist inquiry and activism under conditions of human rights abuses and political repression in Latin America itself requires further contextualization, as the emergence of state-sponsored violence in Latin America can be traced back to the volatile shaping and reshaping of autochthonous political traditions following European colonization of the region.

To be clear, the question here is not whether gender can be a powerful and useful interpretive lens across a broad range of issues in Latin American feminist inquiry—it certainly has been instrumental in orchestrating conceptual strategies against state and religious attempts to reproduce normative family structures that condemn homosexuality through biologically reductive conceptions of sex (174). Moreover, there is a difference between the reception of these categories in Latin America and within Latina feminisms operating within the United States, particularly as they have been appropriated by women of color and U.S. third-world feminisms. For example, writing from the experience of the U.S.-Mexico borderland (both geographically and epistemically), Gloria Anzaldúa maintains that "for a people who cannot identify with either standard" of linguistic and cultural norms (i.e., the Anglo or the Spanish), but who are caught in both worlds, what is needed is a critical reworking of these categories to account for the multiplicity of harms and vulnerabilities complex identities face (1987, 77). She writes: "Necesitamos teorías that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, blur boundaries" (1990, xxv).

Thus, despite these points of complementarity, the larger worry here is that what tends to get lost in the all-too-often unilateral flow of ideas (or transnational commerce of 'theories') is the creative efforts by Latin American feminists to deploy, for instance, strategic and tactical deployments of maternity—even to reify it in parodic ways—so as to address specific harms and context-dependent struggles. In "The Coloniality of Gender," Maria Lugones makes an even stronger case for the historical situatedness of our interpretive categories, arguing that the "modern colonial gender system" is itself not native to Mesoamerica and introduced a whole host of power differentials and biases that must be accounted for in order to robustly theorize and enact women's coalitional agency against "systematic racialized gender violence" (16). Considerations of race—a hallmark of philosophical feminisms in Latin America—are thus equally important, but *also* layered with cultural conceptions of racial mixture and

miscegenation rooted in the region's multifaceted experience with colonialism. It is out of this context that the key interpretive categories of *hybridity* and *mestizaje* arose to address issues of 'race,' but which often go unnoticed in North American philosophical discussions of race and ethnicity.

Henceforth, despite substantial cultural and historical differences, the methodological perspectives and regulative concepts used to analyze issues that specifically concern women's lives in Latin America and border regions have, by and large, been unsuccessful in being marshaled into disciplinary discourses that provide, among other things, institutional support for the mapping and dissemination of ideas, the development of specialized vocabularies, and the organization of professional conferences. This is especially true with regard to *philosophical* feminisms in Latin American (Schutte 2011).

At a time when designating Latin American philosophy as a distinct field of inquiry within academic philosophy is still plagued by serious difficulties, articulating the disciplinary outlines of Latin American *feminist* philosophy may seem to be a doubly daunting task. Indeed, some of the same typologic questions about the term exist: namely, whether what is being designated is feminist inquiry *in* Latin America that is philosophical in nature or engages 'traditional' philosophic concerns; whether it is philosophy done *by* Latin American women or those that speak to issues pertinent to Latin American women and the historical vulnerabilities they face; whether it is the deployment of theoretical correctives *to* Latin American philosophy or traditional narratives in the history of philosophy by Latin American women or feminist voices located in Latin America (or whose epistemic position is Latin America but write abroad)—these are all ways of delimiting (in the narrow sense) the robustness and complexity of the field. A better approach is to syncretize, strand by strand, collective concerns and methodological approaches that can be braided together to create a shared vision while respecting internal differences and resisting unilateral interpolation of women's diverse needs and voices through, for example, *academic* feminisms or

professional philosophy. It is for this reason that I interlace (but try not to conflate) discourses drawn from Latina Feminisms and Latin American feminist theory into discussions of philosophical feminisms in Latin America as part of a broader, pluralist practice.

In fact, philosophy may not even be a suitable home for Latin American philosophical feminisms. As Ofelia Schutte has argued, "no es fácil para las mujeres incorporar el pensamiento feminista dentro de la filosofía porque la filosofía como discurso académico ha sido elaborada principalmente por hombres y está centrada en un mundo masculino a lo largo de la historia" (Walczak, 6). Even the field of Latin American Thought (*pensamiento latinoamericano*) and the various liberation epistemologies it is home to may not suffice, since they too are prey to universal conceptions of victimhood inattentive to women's specific experience of social violence and harms (Schutte 2011). For instance, when we look closely at Latin American revolutionary discourses we notice that, in the wake of colonialism, social theorists attempting to develop a critical counter-text that advances social liberation have often slipped into constructions of social reality as homogenous and authentic; this is particularly evident in regulative concept of 'the people' in the Catholic-Marxist theology of liberation or in anti-imperialist movements. Under this rubric, women's bodies and experiences of oppression are excluded from engaging equally in a collective interpretive process within culture that addresses urgent problems of marginalization, servitude, violence, and patriarchy. In fact, 20th century Latin American revolutionary discourses often functioned through the implicit subordination of women's voices to the collective aim of the revolutionary vanguard, and by deferring their material interests to those of 'el pueblo'.

Despite this absence of a disciplinary home, very broadly speaking, we can say that philosophical feminisms in Latin America have their roots in forms of analysis that arose in response to the colonial imposition of European conceptual orthodoxies in Latin America and the Caribbean, as colonialism imposed a new system of gender binaries and restrictions that differ significantly

form pre-Columbian conceptions of sex and gender. The juridical and social institutions built to manage, regulate, and perpetuate those restrictions resulted in civil codes and municipal regulations that severely restricted women's access to, for example, education (most notably literacy), divorce, reproductive autonomy or voluntary motherhood. Because philosophical feminisms arose to critically address these lived concerns, they are fundamentally bound up with forms of feminist inquiry that see women's liberation from oppression through participatory approaches to emancipation (rather than as abstract pursuits). And yet, although as Amy Oliver notes, "autochthonous feminist thought has existed in Latin America for centuries," dating back to the writings of Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz (1651-1695), philosophical feminisms did not actually begin to emerge in a significant way until socio-political conditions in the mid to late twentieth century precipitated the need to urgently address human rights emergencies (31). They are thus historically responsive to the movements of liberation that swept the subcontinent following the 1959 Cuban revolution, including the quickly developing *movimiento de mujeres* in the 1980s (Alvarez, 541). In fact, it was not until 1979 that the first panel on feminism was held at a national philosophy congress in Latin America, organized by the late Mexican feminist philosopher, Graciela Hierro (1928-2003) (Schutte and Femenías, 401). Even with this precedent over 30 years ago, to date, the journal *Hiparquia* (1988-99) has been the only journal devoted to feminist philosophy in Latin America (Ibid). Given this history, part of understanding the many difficulties involved in developing a distinct identity for Latin American philosophical feminisms today has to involve a deeper appreciation for the socio-historical situatedness of philosophical practice in general, and how such contexts tend to be covered-over in transnational (especially North-South) contexts.

As a way of extending this claim to women's epistemic authority in Latin America and the distinct difficulties women can face as speakers, we should note that one of the greatest impacts of European colonization in Latin America has been the closing off of discursive *alternatives* in culture, as well as the inability to give voice to contradictory

experiences resulting from the loss of prior cultural contexts. The tendency to see speech acts as graphematic, for example, foreclosed the articulative range and potential of the Andean quippus, the Navajo blanket, as well the narrative mode of performance-based history, as in the Sinaloan *Danza del Venado*. For historically marginalized and subaltern peoples like indigenous women in Latin America, this has had serious ramifications that often go unacknowledged, especially in North-South dialogue. Telling a narrative marked by apparent discontinuities and contradictions (from the standpoint of Western discursive norms and rationality), for instance, can potentially de-legitimize a claimant's voice in advance of the cultural particularities that bear directly on one's ability to speak.

Take the case of Rigoberta Menchú. In 1983 the K'iche' Mayan woman attempted to bring attention to the massacre of over 200,000 Maya Indians at the hands of the Guatemalan Armed Forces by giving a testimonial account (*testimonio*) of her experiences to an ethnologist. David Stoll, an American anthropologist, responded to the subsequent publication of Menchú's oral narrative by questioning the veracity of her claims. Using a model of speech acts based on a correspondence theory of truth, he cast doubt on the legitimacy of her narrative by pointing to apparent contradictions in the names and ages of her deceased family members, including the manner of death. While Stoll claimed his intent was not to challenge the primacy of larger claims to genocide by the K'iche' community, the debate stirred up enough controversy as to usurp the urgency of Menchú's plea for intervention and instead disseminated her narrative within the broader academic discourses of the 'culture wars' that were emerging in the 1980s.

If we look to some of the Western conceptual biases inflected into Amerindian cultural traditions through colonialism—as in the assumption that history is a linear narrative based on logographic recording methods (which privilege literacy)—we find that the speaking positions of modern K'iche' are always interwoven, *pre-predicatively*, with a cultural history marked by relations of power and domination, and which become visible each time the Western observer's claim to finding 'textual

distortions' in K'iche' narrative texts arises. Against this view of cultural difference and alterity, one argument commonly emerges which points to pre-Hispanic Mayan codices (hieroglyph scripts) as sharing many of the same conventions typically associated with 'Western' historiography; while recent scholarship may show these scripts as meant to be sung rather than 'read' (a practice which presupposes the interiorization of consciousness), by all accounts they seem to enumerate a coherent, meaningful continuity of politically-significant events, including the successive names of rulers, priestly casts and local rights of administration, etc. In turn, scholars like Stoll have deduced from this Mesoamerican history a more general, cross-cultural standard of rationality assumed to exist *below the level of culture*, and which can be steadfastly applied to the formal study of objects in empirical research, including ethnography. Yet paradoxically, this argument only reinforces the existence of cultural difference, historical alterity and cross-cultural misrecognition in the Latin American context. We know, for example, that in Mesoamerican K'iche' society there existed an influential priestly scholarly community known as the *aj tꝥ'ibab* (or *aj tꝥ'ib*, as in 'painter' or 'scribe'). Because the *aj tꝥ'ibab* sustained Mayan religious practice through the composition and interpretation of calendars, Spanish conquerors quickly moved to eradicate both the religious calendars and their perceived 'authors' (Carmack, 17). The violent extermination of the *aj tꝥ'ibab* is significant to the de-legitimization of Menchú's narrative almost 500 years later, since, as George Lovell and Christopher Lutz point out, "once the practice of training 'historians' was curtailed—it was a Kaqchikel [Menchú's tribe] custom also, we should note—the loss must have had a serious impact on how ...[Maya] oral tradition was passed down through the generations" (171). Thus, the development of certain oral-poetic, mnemonic features in K'iche' narrative practice after the conquest (specifically, in Menchú's testimony) owes much to the fact that, while Spanish conquerors violently forced a functional change in sign-systems onto Amerindian linguistic communities, they *simultaneously excluded* those communities from practices (such as literacy) that would allow them to engage collectively in the interpretive processes of culture. This is especially

important with regard to women (and particularly rural, indigenous women) as they have historically lacked access to formal education and suffer the highest rates of illiteracy.

In light of this example, we see how, when a modern K'iche' woman goes to speak or make claims on behalf of her community, relations of power and domination *already shape* her enunciative attempts: her very language and narrative practices are a product of this history of domination. What this example does not address, however, is that problems of social violence in Latin America often involve multiple oppressions marked by complex intersections of racial, sexual, and linguistic vulnerabilities, *but which may not be readily articulable at the level of official culture*. That is to say, in a culturally asymmetrical speaking situation, indigenous women's voices may be put under erasure in ways that cannot be easily accounted for through traditional frameworks of understanding social oppression or the intersections of multiple oppressions. Consequently, solutions and collective practices for social change may emerge which, because they do not speak to or address these complex issues, prove ineffective or, in the long run, reify neo-colonial practices of exclusion, especially towards indigenous women and other marginalized groups in Latin America. Part of the answer, then, involves increased attentiveness to both the powerful asymmetries that exist between differently situated speakers in culture as well as to how those differences are shaped by history.

In this regard, the complicity between Eurocentric conceptual and linguistic frameworks and neo-colonial practices can be deepened if we look at the problem of meaning formation from a hermeneutic perspective. Within a hermeneutic view of language, meaning is framed in terms of one's tacit familiarity with a shared interpretative framework made up of the discursive acts, practices, and institutions of a particular life-world. This framework makes it possible for us to understand things, and we understand because we grow into a world where the things in question already 'make sense.' In the original encounter with Mayan culture, for example, the lack of a 'shared framework' compelled the colonial observer to misinterpret the Mayan way of making sense of things. The narrative logic of

Mayan language, if and in what way it would have been conceived by the Mayans, was not communicable to the first colonial observers because, for one thing, Mayan hieroglyphics lacked a visible metric of translatability (perhaps a linear alphabet) for the Spaniards to see it as a narrative logic in the first place, much less as what Mayans actually purported the codices to say. However, this misrecognition of meaning can have serious modern-day ramifications, especially when culturally privileged agents who have access to the writing instruments of official history (as Michel de Certeau would put it) enact it.

To explain this issue, the cultural anthropologist Quetzil Castañeda has cited the cartographic naming of the Yucatán peninsular region as a prime example of cross-cultural misrecognition, but one with deep significance for the configuration of postcolonial power relations in Latin America. He writes that “the discourse on the naming of the Yucatán has become a topos not only of Yucatán but of Latin American colonial discourse criticism, since it economically marks the *complex textual inversion of alterity forged in the encounter between European and Indian*” (23, emphasis added). The story of the naming of the Yucatan, he contends, constituted an arbitrary (because it was not seen by the Spaniards as arbitrary, but as universal truth) imposition of the Spaniard’s interpretative horizon on Amerindian landscapes. He reproduces Tzvetan Todorov’s congruent claim that “when the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called; as they did not understand him, they said *uuyik a t’aan*, which means, ‘what do you say’ or ‘what do you speak’, that ‘we do not understand you’. And then the Spaniard ordered it set down that it be called Yucatan...” (27). Told in a slight variation, Castañeda writes:

When the Spaniards landed—landed on this ‘*tierra del faisán y venado*’ this ‘land of pheasant and deer’—the Indians called it ‘*u luum cutz, u luum ceh*’; and, when they met the natives who approached, they asked, ‘what is the name of this land?’ Not understanding *k’astrant’aan* (i.e. Spanish), one Mayan turned to the other and exclaimed, “*Uuy ku t’aan!*” [Listen how they talk!] (28).

As a major outcome of this forceful misappropriation of Mayan linguistic expressions, modern Mayans have had to *re-make intelligible their own world back from colonial (mis)translations*. Moreover, the Herculean task of unconcealing the resources of expression covered over by colonialism is particularly difficult for Mayans because current expressions—such as the widespread popular use of Yucatán to designate an ancestral Mayan dwelling place rather than the original “we do not understand you”—have been normativized by official representations of colonial history as foundational facts: namings vested by the Spaniard’s powerful claims of authority to be subsequently certified into timeless, encyclopedic form. The problem, of course, is that discursive frameworks always carry with them an unacknowledged background of assumptions that become settled and calcified in culture, especially through normative social practices and language.

Historical insights such as these have led the Chilean feminist and cultural critic Nelly Richard to contend that “the Latin American context is characterized by the fact that the mechanisms of oppression and repression are always *multiple* (colonialist, neoimperialist, militaristic, and patriarchal, multicapitalist, etc.)” but multiple, one should add, in a way that fundamentally differs from the structures of oppression and subordination generally theorized by Anglophone and North American feminisms (286). The added consideration here is not only the history of European colonialism, but colonialism’s impact on the subsequent formation of the structures of oppression that affect women’s lives, including the material contexts of poverty and widespread discrimination. This extends to theorizing the *intersectionality* of oppressions based on categories like gender, as the continuation of neocolonial and neoimperial conditions necessitate further considerations of how the historicity of oppression *bears on those intersections*, particularly in such a way as to render them *subaudible* under certain categories of knowledge.

It must be said, of course, that the lacunae and gaps-in-knowledge opened up by the importation of analytical categories such as gender into the

Latin American context is not on account of the categories themselves, as it would be misleading to portray them as monolithic discursive domains rather than dynamic sites of negotiation and contestation, even within the feminisms they emerged from. More at stake here is how the multiplicitous nature of the historical structures of oppression that undergird the formation of interpretive categories in Latin America have a tendency to become under-theorized when the circulation of terms emanating from the north are privileged in transnational discourses.

That said, one problem that can come out of critiquing such discourses and the interpretive categories privileged therein is the development of an account of Latin American women as suffering from a form of historical victimhood. As I see it, deeply diachronic approaches to social and political problems that affect women in Latin America (such as conditions of marginalization in communication) should not be seen as deflationary with regard to political praxis, or as privileging theoretical models of feminist inquiry over activist ones. What, one might ask, is the aim of pouring over conquest-era ethnographic records and administrative manuals, if the guiding concerns of our philosophic practice center around the lived-experience and afflictions of modern-day women and marginalized, peripheral voices? The diversity of methodological perspectives of Latin American feminisms, taken together in an inclusive sense, not only address women's *lived* concerns but help raise important questions about the adequacy of, for example, dominant Western conceptions of language and selfhood to do justice to the narrative life of multicultural and subaltern subjects—subjects who often dwell in an understanding of things marked, not by continuity, but by discontinuity, rupture, and alterity.

Beyond this, analyses such as the one I am offering should instill a deeper sense of the complicated factors involved in North-South dialogue, including an awareness of the difficult epistemic and interpretive labors marginalized subjects must often perform without any reciprocal acknowledgment of those efforts.

In arguing for an epistemically inclusive, pluralist theoretical model for Latin American philosophical feminisms, I have been following Ofelia Schutte's call to articulate a vision of "Latin American feminist philosophy [that] can achieve its own distinct identity and stop being dependent for its articulation on paradigms of knowledge whose premises are not necessarily best attuned to understand the issues arising from its cultural location and contextual differences" (2011, 801). One important step towards this goal, I have argued, is to develop a more robust account of the *historicality of oppression* that often gets lost, or is subaudible within Anglophone and North American feminist discourses (and which I recognize, are themselves plural and complex). To this end, I have worked through issues of epistemic de-legitimation raised by the North American reception of Rigoberta Menchú's testimonial narrative as a way of re-investing notions of cultural alterity as central to theorizing the historically complex multiplicity of oppressions that characterize Latin American feminisms. To avoid problems of fears over political paralysis, especially at a time when violence against women and human rights emergencies remain widespread, I have situated the history of European colonization within wider concerns about the marginalization of women's voices in cross-cultural dialogue. On this account, one can agree that, at a minimal level, addressing questions of oppression and marginalization often involves engaging in dialogue across North-South contexts. The problem is that such dialogue invariably involves negotiations nested within particular kinds of Western argumentative frameworks that, historically, have tended to disempower indigenous, non-Western speakers in general and women in particular. Thus, at the practical level, there are important historical issues that bear negatively on the ability of women and marginalized, indigenous communities to express their interests and/or advocate on their own behalf. In this respect, the historical roots of oppression cannot be disassociated from the inquiry of a critical Latin American feminist philosophy, since it is always present, even in the gaps between words.

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