

Engaging Latin American Feminisms Today: Methods, Theory, Practice

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This paper articulates a methodological strategy for creating a “conceptual home” whose aim is the enabling and promotion of Latin American feminist philosophy in the context of Latin American feminist theory’s concern for the relationship between theory and practice. The author argues that philosophy as a discipline is still too compromised by masculine-dominant, Anglocentric, and Eurocentric ways of representing knowledge such that discursive and ideological impediments make it difficult to conceive and develop ways of feminist theorizing that arise from an interpellation of the philosopher by the Latin American conditions affecting her social and cultural life. The author offers a fourfold approach to grounding knowledge, based on the principles of pursuing a critical approach to knowledge, a concern for the relationship of theory and practice, an orientation toward progressive political projects of freedom and liberation in the context of Latin American history and politics, and a transformative politics of culture. It is argued that through such specific methodological concerns, Latin American feminist philosophy can attain a distinct identity and stop depending for its articulation on paradigms of knowledge whose premises are not necessarily best attuned to understand the issues it must confront in its sociocultural practice.

To speak of “Latin American feminisms” elicits a bundle of associations in diverse mixtures and proportions: geographical, linguistic, cultural, racial, political, and more—depending on the interlocutors’ backgrounds and interests. “Latin America” appears in a relational mode when the discourse is initiated in the United States, such that a main pole of the relation is precisely feminisms in the United States (or perhaps in other world locations). For most speakers, the move is from the more to the less familiar, from the more proximate to the more distant. There is enough abstract continuity, however, to conceive of common problems women must face and challenge in different

parts of the world (the results of inequality, injustice, male dominance, and the like). There is also a moral and political interest in seeking knowledge that would identify, in another continent or culture, some of the counterparts and protagonists of feminist movements in our more familiar part of the world, so that we can link our struggles and keep each other informed of current issues.

The question of interpellation that I have laid out above in general terms has significant repercussions for both the production of Latin American feminist philosophy and for the reception of Latin American feminist philosophy in the United States (which, in a sense, constitutes another cycle of production vis-à-vis new audiences, markets, and interlocutors). The repercussions are significant because in the United States there is a cultural imaginary within which Latin American feminist philosophers are interpellated. Those who do not fit the expectations of such a cultural imaginary will have some degree of difficulty getting recognized as competent speakers on the subject. My present concern specifically is the role methodologies play in opening or restricting the possibility of engaging with Latin American feminisms insofar as those feminisms emerge from, or respond to, the demands of a different socio-cultural hermeneutic horizon. I therefore attempt to articulate a group of methodological orientations used by Latin American feminists with elements from the socio-historical and cultural contexts out of which they arise. In this process, the orientations selected will be seen to incorporate a certain degree of cultural specificity that, I hold, needs to be given due weight if we are to be successful in advancing "Latin American feminist philosophy" both as a category or notion (abstractly) and as a field (in the practical terms of teaching and research).

In other words, in this paper I want to lay the basis for a specific conception of Latin American feminist theory in which feminist philosophy can find a conceptual home. This conceptual home cannot be the discipline of philosophy as it currently exists for the most part in Latin America, since feminism is too new there to be able to effectively transform centuries of masculine intellectual dominance in philosophy. Nor can it be the field of Latin American thought (that is, *pensamiento latinoamericano*, as compared with philosophy) because this, too, is permeated by a masculine-dominant view of what constitutes Latin American culture and/or a politics of liberation for Latin Americans. It cannot even be "feminist philosophy" as practiced usually in the global North since, despite commendable efforts to be more inclusive of ethnic and racial diversity, for the most part this field was conceived and continues to be practiced without attending to the living conditions of most women and girls in Latin America. A distinct and effective conceptual home needs to be created, one that responds philosophically to the needs and liberatory aspirations of Latin American women and feminists. It is not my intention to discard feminist philosophy as we know it in the United States, especially given its support of diversity and inclusiveness within both feminism and phi-

losophy in general. Nor, as I clarify subsequently, is my intention to come up with some type of thinking that pretends to be unpollutedly feminist and Latin American. The last thing I would want to propose is some purist methodological approach that claims to be free from multi-faceted cultural or intellectual influences. Rather, my aim is a matter of appropriating existing historical and cultural elements of discourse in such a way as to be able to speak and hopefully to be heard in terms that come closer to one's lived experience and socio-cultural environment, from which one can build distinctive philosophical perspectives that break the mold imposed by narrow cultural imaginaries.

1. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Before moving on to the methodological perspectives through which we can engage the question of feminist theory and practice, a few considerations need to be addressed regarding the “decentering” process needed to attain such a hermeneutic standpoint. This paper does not proceed through a process of formal argumentation. Rather, it follows a hermeneutic approach whereby critical reflection is applied to the process by which we think through a particular question or issue. Because I am going to situate the proposed approach to methodologies within an interdisciplinary and not a strictly philosophical outlook, a few words of clarification are needed as we transition from the usual subject of philosophizing to a multidisciplinary feminist perspective. This transition involves two components. The first involves identifying the problem of masculine dominance in philosophy as it manifests itself in Latin American culture. The second involves identifying the problem of cultural privilege enjoyed by feminist philosophers (whether in the United States or in Latin America) over the living conditions of most women in Latin America. The combination of these two components yields the result that, although women can be especially marginalized within philosophy (the more so if we adopt openly challenging feminist positions), as professional experts we enjoy many forms of privilege denied to the vast majority of women in our societies. The gap between theory and practice arises when the demands of academic life exacerbate the rift between feminist theory and practice. I will return to this topic later; first, I address the two components mentioned above.

THE QUESTION OF MASCULINE DOMINANCE IN PHILOSOPHY

In a recently published work, the Cuban-born philosopher (residing in Germany) Raúl Fornet-Betancourt documents the “difficult relationship” between women and philosophy in the context of Latin American thought dating back to the nineteenth century (Fornet-Betancourt 2009). Of course, the difficulty of women's access to philosophy and their ultimate recognition as philosophers

dates back much further than this, given the patriarchal and masculine-dominant features of earlier stages of Western cultures, including its colonizing practices in the Americas. But during the post-independence period of national formation in Latin America, at a time when positivism was accepted as the guiding ideology for national advancement and scientific progress, one can still notice either the rejection of—or, at best, the ambivalence of the leading thinkers of the period toward—the incorporation of women, as major writers and intellectuals, into the national culture. Fornet-Betancourt documents what an informal review of the history and practice of Latin American thought (or *pensamiento latinoamericano*) reveals even to this day: namely that, historically, the understanding of the meanings given to Latin American culture has been articulated and handed down generation after generation through the perspectives of educated men (in earlier and more traditional times known as *letrados*, or “lettered”), with little or any space provided for women’s visions of society or of social liberation. Especially left out of consideration were those women who departed from or contested the views of their prominent male contemporaries. To be fair to Latin American studies and philosophy, it should be said that a similar problem occurs in other research fields, even in today’s climate of so-called gender inclusiveness. For example, it is not unusual to find studies of colonialism and post-colonialism highlighting issues of race, class, and cultural imperialism, without incorporating a comparable constitutive epistemic category intended to address issues related to the construction of gender roles or the critique of gender normativity. In short, even today (outside of feminist theory *per se*) the consideration of gender issues often takes on an optional status, whereas issues of race, ethnicity, class, or some other variable thought to be constitutive of colonialism are treated as defining the epistemic frameworks for research.

In the case of Latin American thought, Fornet-Betancourt finds that a recurring theme contributing to the marginalization of women is the question of maternity. More broadly, one could expand this question to the premises involved in the interpretation of sexual difference (insofar as women’s representation as mothers and the normative gender construct of mothers as primary caregivers and nurturers in the home depend on their sexual differentiation from men). In the positivism of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811–1888) and José Ingenieros (1877–1925), Fornet-Betancourt detects an ambiguity that, while promoting women’s education, does so only up to a point, and against the backdrop of regarding a woman’s education as enhancing her abilities to fulfill her maternal responsibilities and to embellish domestic life through the affection imparted to husband and children. If educated men saw themselves as nation builders, they represented the “good” women in the nations they professed to build as nurturers and sustainers of family life. Education was not meant to alter these roles, but rather to adapt them to the new

conditions of the Independence and post-Independence periods. Regretfully, argues Fornet-Betancourt, these cultural constructs continue to influence the masculine-dominant “monologue” found in Latin American thought and philosophy even to this day. It is not that women cannot do philosophy; rather, it is that the field itself has evolved from a masculine point of view. As *individuals* women can succeed and be recognized today in philosophy; the problem is that collectively speaking, philosophy today is still a male-dominated field.

Fornet-Betancourt’s response to this predicament is to document some of the salient contributions to philosophy by women in Latin America (and occasionally in the diaspora), from the precursors such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695) to our own feminist-identified times. Although Fornet-Betancourt has offered to rectify the marginalization of women in Latin American thought by criticizing the obstacles to their recognition and by making the work of a few prominent women philosophers more visible (both important and worthwhile endeavors), in this paper I take a different approach to the problem. Indeed, if it is true that the influence of masculine dominance continues to be so strong in Latin American philosophy, as Fornet-Betancourt documents, I propose that we also look beyond the discipline of philosophy to reflect collectively, not just individually, on Latin American women’s achievements as feminist theorists. By locating feminist philosophy within the larger category of feminist theory, instead of the larger category of philosophy as such (as philosophy is known when it appears simply as a noun, without adjectives), we can develop our strength collectively, not just individually as scattered experts within the discipline of philosophy at large.¹ The challenge, as I see it, is to articulate a methodological analysis that can serve as an integrating force for the production of feminist philosophy in Latin America. In fact, I would argue that such a force already exists in other academic areas: it can be found in the social sciences and in literary theory, for example, where feminist studies and criticism can be said to have a strong and distinct presence in intellectual circles. Before laying out my approach, however, let me offer a few cautionary and/or explanatory comments.

DECENTERING THE SUBJECT OF PHILOSOPHY FROM CULTURAL PRIVILEGE

Residues of cultural privilege inevitably cling to our words and thoughts. Decentering ourselves from privilege is not an easy matter. At least some decentering, however, needs to take place if we are to appreciate the issues and problems arising out of another cultural location, especially one that has been characterized historically by asymmetrical power relations vis-à-vis Anglo-American hemispheric hegemony. Let me mention three quick points, which I develop more fully elsewhere,² but which sustain the approach I take in this paper:

(1) It is important to make an effort to understand works in Latin America as they emerge from their historical, cultural, and political sites, and, as much as possible, not to superimpose U.S. conceptual frameworks on them. For a study of feminist theory in Latin America, why not experiment with refraining from using the obligatory race/class/sex categories of analysis, at least as developed in the United States? This does not preclude covering questions of race, class, sexuality, and so on, but it does preclude using these concepts strictly as we understand them from U.S. epistemic locations, or prejudging that something is “missing” in Latin American feminist theory insofar as it does not reproduce such models.

(2) Instead of thinking of feminist methodologies as homogeneous, consider taking into account, through the maxim of cultural alterity, the impact of cultural differences on emerging feminist theoretical practices. This approach can also work hand in hand with an attentiveness to detail from the ground up in contrast to a “top/down” method of classification of feminist practices. Again, it is a question of seeing how various practices emerge from specific historical and cultural locations, even if the findings are “messy,” non-quantifiable, and “impure” (in terms not easily classifiable under existing canons or mainstream methodologies).

(3) Awareness of the problem of epistemic violence as a factor in cultural imperialism (and even in the more benevolent “civilizing” engagements with the foreign “other”) is an important antidote to the factor of epistemic privilege. Even though the reality of epistemic violence must be acknowledged, I believe we should avoid the discourse of victimhood, although not all feminists may be persuaded to follow this route. Given the traditional role of women as self-sacrificial in much of Latin American culture, the counterpoint to the many forms of violence suffered by women (physical, emotional, economic, epistemic) is to increase their sense of agency and empowerment, and to do so collectively as well as individually, if at all possible. This approach is not intended to deny the atrocities women may have suffered, but to channel the path of recovery in the most constructive manner available.

Taking the above considerations together, there is an urgent task in giving a framework and a name to practices of the feminist organization of knowledge that otherwise might remain invisible (to North Americans and even to Latin American feminists disconnected among themselves). This framework, I would add, is most needed by feminist philosophers precisely because of the difficulties that Fernet-Betancourt pointed out as especially affecting women in this field. But it also provides the groundwork for identifying certain criteria for the recognition of work in Latin American feminist philosophy as part of the

articulation of a feminist ethics and social theory in the United States, particularly the recognition of the work most prone to invisibility, insofar as it is most distant from dominant discursive frameworks.

2. DEFINING THE INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

Insofar as this analysis serves to provide the basis for identifying certain criteria for the recognition in the United States (and possibly elsewhere, including Latin America) of work in Latin American feminist philosophy, the analysis contains an emerging normative component. But it should be stressed that it is far beyond the reach and scope of this paper to expand on the potential implications of this normative component, or to set forth an elaborate normative framework. Nor would I want to assume such normative tasks single-handedly, without ample opportunities for discussion among other practitioners and interested parties in a field whose most urgent need at this point is to become visible (hence this proposal). Becoming visible is primary so that, to reiterate, philosophers can view themselves and be viewed by others as part of a collective, with defined interests that are objectively recognizable by themselves and others. For the purposes of this paper, the main normative assumption to be made explicit is simply the recognition of the value-laden quality of both the interpretive activity that infuses the analysis and the directionality of the analysis itself; specifically, we must recognize the value-laden nature or quality of the horizons of interpretation and understanding that become possible through the discussion that follows. The discussion is interpretive and undoubtedly selective, but not arbitrary. The descriptive aspect of my proposal is meant to do justice to the type of work that has actually been done in this area and to some of the historical and cultural background conditions that have shaped the content and direction of such work. The descriptive elements I emphasize function in principle as a corrective against foreclosing the topic, should there be a need to revise or expand it. Moreover, because what I offer is an interpretive approach, I am fully aware that any "description" is always already an interpretation or a value-laden statement, since no description is totally aperspectival. What I offer is a starting point for discussion. We are bound to our bodies, our intellectual and social environments, our personal interests and dispositions, and countless other factors in terms of how we "see," experience, theorize, and inhabit both the world in general as well as discrete elements in that world.

The normative force of a hermeneutical interpretive account does not derive from a formal argument, as one would find in analytic philosophy. Rather, it derives from the intellectual spaces the interpretive account opens, from its capacity to pull together partially scattered perspectives into a more interactive, dynamic set of concerns, and from the direction of a vision that can serve

to stimulate further research, inquiry, or discussion on the subject (among other considerations). Overcoming the practices of cultural imperialism from a hermeneutical perspective requires modifying the horizons of meaning available to social agents so as to foreground modalities of reciprocity and dialogical interaction among cultures. When one finds apparent similarities in meaning between a culturally dominant and a culturally marginalized group, one must learn to “read in reverse,” from margins to center. The four methodological orientations I posit, on the surface, appear to be the same as some of those one might find in feminist scholarship in other settings. No doubt, to some extent they are at least similar to a large degree. They are, however, differentiated by the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped them, as I try to illustrate at length in the analysis that follows. If the analysis is successful, the reader should be able to shift perspectives, acquiring a facility to “see as” meaningful a theoretical practice in light of its own distinct historical and cultural background, as contrasted with a unidirectional type of reading where one simply assimilates the unknown into the known without modifying the ethnocentric perspective of the knower in question.

A major hurdle to be overcome when speaking of distinct cultural or historical differences is the prejudicial practice of stereotyping the other or confining them to a social (in this case, intellectual) ghetto—if they are to retain their so-called authenticity. I reject such a purist conception of cultural identity and difference. My approach presupposes that identifying a set of methodological orientations in a field of knowledge is no more of a ghettoizing gesture toward practitioners of that field than specifying any area of competence or specialization in general would be. It is up to the practitioners themselves to determine the level of involvement they would want to commit to this field vis-à-vis other interests they wish to pursue. For some, it would be a full-time occupation. But someone could be an expert in Marx or Foucault, for example—or even more likely, on Beauvoir or Butler—and also be doing Latin American feminist philosophy. The question here would be the extent to which one research interest would influence or cross over toward the other. Does a hybrid product emerge? If so, how do we understand, classify, and value it? Providing a set of methodological orientations often found in Latin American feminisms could therefore help to provide a more fine-grade understanding of the complexity of perspectives and multi-cultural influences that lend meaning to a given text or oral narrative.

3. A FOURFOLD METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

I propose, then, that we identify Latin American feminist theoretical methods collectively as containing at least a fourfold set of orientations or concerns. I list these orientations initially in general terms provided we understand that their

full articulation will take place when they are placed (as in the discussion that follows) in a cultural and historical context. To proceed, then, first, one would look for a critical conception of knowledge. Second, one would look, if not for an explicit, at least for an implicit move to connect theory and practice. Third, one would take into account the ways in which the methods support a generally progressive project of liberation (which is a way of restating the two former points). Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, at stake in employing these methods is the enacting of a transformative politics of culture. Arguably, the projects of liberation mentioned in the third category can be conceived in a variety of ways, a matter that helps to explain both historical and ongoing disagreements among feminists in Latin America. Similarly, the concept of cultural change is subject to major disagreements, especially between reformists and radicals. The fourfold concerns identified are not intended to signify unanimity of opinion, but rather signify nuclei of concerns around which theoretical orientations pivot. By calling these "fourfold" I also mean to suggest that there is a dynamic among the elements incorporated into these methodological orientations; the relationships among them are neither constant nor uniform. The accent or intensity of feminist work may favor one or more of these orientations, but all together they serve to characterize Latin American feminist theory conceptually and to provide a working conceptual framework for Latin American feminist philosophy.

A CRITICAL CONCEPTION OF KNOWLEDGE

What does it mean to hold a critical conception of knowledge? Perhaps the simplest step in deciphering this question is to take the juxtaposition between positivist and critical approaches to knowledge. The positivist approach operates on the view that there are a certain number of positive, observable or scientifically verifiable facts in the world, and that the role of knowledge is to accumulate and order them in such a way as to reach hypotheses with predictable and efficacious outcomes, which in turn will lead to new facts subject to the ongoing processes of observation, gathering of new hypotheses, testing, and application for maximum efficiency and utility. The building blocks of positivist knowledge tend to be quantifiable and the overall goal of this knowledge is its efficacious control over nature. The philosophy of positivism was very influential in Latin America in the nineteenth century and to a large extent continues to be influential today in the social sciences. As mentioned earlier, positivism promoted the education of women, but in general worked side by side with preserving the venerated maternal role of women in the home. Moreover, positivism privileged Western constructs of knowledge over indigenous and Afro-descendant thought, thereby reinforcing the ideology of Eurocentrism as a necessary component of progress.

In Latin America, the critique of Eurocentrism in the social sciences reached a peak in the 1960s and '70s, especially when some of the most important social scientists critical of capitalist development economics articulated the concept of "dependency theory," which analyzed and protested the imposition of a Western capitalist model of modernization on Latin American states. Various forms of critical theory subsequently emerged, including the critique of the "internal colonialism" of Latin American states toward their own indigenous populations and the critical analysis of social movements for democracy and other popular causes, among others. History, culture, and power, as sites for, and interconnected relations with, knowledge, are central features of the critical conceptions of knowledge. Feminist theory in Latin America, especially in the social sciences, is grafted on to such a critical conception of knowledge. Feminist critical tools, such as the critique of women's subordination, androcentrism, and patriarchal power, deepened and expanded the critical approaches to knowledge that flourished especially during the second half of the twentieth century and that continue to sustain and expand feminist theory today.

The modern versus postmodern debate in Latin America takes place *within* the critical Left, and largely in the interaction among Leftist literary theorists and social scientists (see Beverley, Aronna, and Oviedo 1995). In the humanities, the critical conception of knowledge took a turn toward deconstruction and post-structuralism in the last decades of the twentieth century. Contrary to what a number of anti-postmodern philosophers argue, my view is that deconstructive and postmodern thought in Latin America has been an important form of progressive critical knowledge, at least in a sufficient number of important thinkers, such as Nelly Richard (Chile), Santiago Castro-Gómez (Colombia), John Beverley (United States), Margarita Mateo (Cuba) (see Schutte 2010). In other words, the critical conception of knowledge I am postulating in this conceptual map is radically inclusive in character and scope. It includes both critical social theory and post-structuralist approaches to knowledge. It includes both "modern" and "postmodern" approaches as long as each exercises a critical (also, self-critical) function in theory construction. I am speaking of approaches to knowledge that are or can be critically appropriated or deployed by Latin American feminists and progressive (feminist-compatible) theorists, not "modern" or "postmodern" as appropriated or employed by masculine-dominant and Eurocentric thinkers.

Also to be borne in mind is the premise that "modernity" and "postmodernity" do not have the same meanings in Latin America as they do in the United States or Europe. In Latin America, "modernity" is associated politically with nation-building after the demise of the colonial era. Culturally, it has been associated with a scientific or science-compatible outlook toward the world and with a kind of cosmopolitanism largely inspired by advances associ-

ated with developments in Europe or elsewhere in the industrialized world. “Postmodern” could therefore mean the transformation of this modern world vision through a variety of factors, where breaking the linear and/or excessively Eurocentric narrative of modernity is paramount. Undermining some of the central binaries of modernity such as civilization/barbarism (made famous by the nineteenth-century Argentine statesman and educator Domingo Sarmiento)—which also affected the critical understanding of nation-building by questioning past conceptions and practices—and introducing a new concept of *mestizaje* (cultural and/or ethnoracial mixing) through the figure of the hybrid are some of its salient features. For the Chilean feminist Nelly Richard, it is not acceptable to totalize the meanings of “modern” and “postmodern” (with the subsequent intention of ruling one out in favor of the other). Rather, Richard defends the concept of a postmodern feminism, on the premise that postmodernism is not a homogeneous notion (Richard 2004a; see also Schutte 2010). Despite postmodernism’s much criticized Eurocentric and/or politically superficial aspects, Richard argues that feminists in Latin America can also construct their own postmodern critiques of authoritarian, masculinist politics and society. She notes that although postmodern thought opens an interest in the margins, and this means that, for the European or North American, Latin America now appears as a “margin” demanding attention, it is up to Latin Americans and, in this case, Latin American feminists to insert their voices into these new openings. Otherwise, the “margins” would be recurrently represented by the interests of the “center.”

CONNECTING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Despite feminism’s ideal to connect theory and practice critically, it is all-too-evident that the connection is not always foregrounded and often falls out of view. It is well known that theory and practice become disconnected for numerous reasons. Perhaps the most common complaints are, on one hand, that academic requirements tend to divert theory to a cultural world removed from practice or even from women’s experiences and, on the other, that practice gets disconnected from theory because of the pressure to get things done without sufficient time for critical reflection or long-term evaluation.

But looking back at the general question of methods in feminism, the issue of linking theory and practice deserves a more fine-grained analysis. This is because not every case of linking theory and practice is one that I or many other feminist theorists would want to endorse. For example, the capitalist neo-liberal policies that have impoverished so many Latin American women and others throughout the global South, and even many others in the global North, also demand that their cognitive models be put into practice. Positivism as well demands a strong connection between theory and practice. The right-wing

fundamentalisms in Latin America that do so much violence to women's ability to exercise their reproductive rights require of their adherents unswerving activism toward their cause. So we need to put the context of the connection between theory and practice back into the fourfold framework I laid out earlier, whose other three components are the critical concept of knowledge, a critical and transformative notion of personal and political liberation, and a transformative (decolonizing) politics of culture.

As an example of the types of theoretical models Latin American feminists have used to connect theory and practice, let us take a look at some of the cognitive models whose foci have been the women's movement, the gay rights and queer identity movements, or the feminist movement as such. Against critics who charge that academic feminisms are totally co-opted by institutions and divorced from feminist praxis, one can cite numerous cases of methodologies employed by feminist researchers to link theory and practice. In a recent article I coauthored with María Luisa Femenías, we identify at least three methodological approaches that feminists in Latin America have used to link theory and practice (Schutte and Femenías 2010, 401–3). In what follows I offer a more select analysis by emphasizing some examples and themes that advance my current proposal for the fourfold methodological approaches to knowledge under consideration.

Among the most popular objects of research by feminist social scientists is the study of social movements and mobilizations on behalf of women's rights and other progressive causes. This type of research has an empirical component, so it is specifically appropriate to the social sciences. However, it also requires theoretical work, especially to the degree that new conceptual frameworks helping to frame activists' work must be formulated. The analysis of activists' uses of language often reveals very interesting aspects of the politics of identity underlying such social movements. For example, the Mexican anthropologist Lourdes Arizpe has noted how the language that many women protesters from the popular sectors were using in the social movements of the 1980s was based on their everyday experiences in the home. If they were ridiculed by some because they did not use the established discourses of labor unions and politicians, the other side of the coin is that they confronted the limits of public discourse by using terms associated with women's home-grown experiences. Such discursive practices contributed to transforming the private/public split that confined women to the home and left the political leadership positions primarily open to men (see Schutte 1993, 233).

In fact, if we look at broad themes such as discursive formations (in which issues of the uses of language can be examined), or the representation of social identities in public discourse, it will be seen that language and identity function as transversal issues that cut across the four methodological categories under discussion. For example, it was common in the 1980s to categorize women

protesters in Latin American societies as “new social agents,” a category that could be integrated easily into universalizing concepts of democracy. With the advent of post-structuralist and postcolonial approaches to knowledge, the concept of subalternity can also be applied to the women protesters, in a way that can make more complex the critical analysis of the degree to which women’s demands can be said to achieve an effective form of representation in society. Indeed, whether a feminist methodology views women protesters as “new social agents” or as “subaltern” speakers/agents does not necessarily make one methodology preferable to another, abstractly speaking. Where their paths diverge lies primarily in the differences they hold with respect to the emancipatory projects pursued and the types of cultural transformations they envisage. The path that sees the women protesters as new social agents, although critical of the exclusion and marginalization of women, especially women from various minority sectors or from popular sectors, is not as critical of the process of representation as such except insofar as the legal and political means and procedures of representation are laden with institutional barriers to the new social agents. In contrast, the path that sees the women protesters in terms of the difficulty for any subaltern group to attain representation, in the very society that has marginalized them historically and culturally, is far more attentive to the imaginary and symbolic (and therefore cultural/ideological) constraints of representation as such. Such constraints include the violence generated by repetitive patterns of discursive or social exclusion that may occur not only in traditional settings but in new ones as well. The emancipatory vision of feminists who question the limits of representation is more radical and harder to articulate, as is the concept of cultural transformation envisioned for the enabling of a future feminist or feminist-compatible society. In both cases, however, one sees the fourfold dimensions of methodology operating: a critical conception of knowledge, the concern about the relation of theory and practice, the presence of emancipatory projects, and a transformative approach to cultural change.

With the impact of globalization, feminist theorists pay attention to the way in which certain notions or concepts associated with scholarship or activism in the United States circulate transnationally and are given new meanings in Latin America. Given the long-standing critiques of cultural imperialism in this region, scholars and activists, especially those critical of liberalism and neo-liberalism, often express strong suspicions about the strategic use by Latin American theorists of terms and categories associated with research or activism in the United States. Again, this is not to say that, because specific theories may originate in the United States or elsewhere in the global North, they may not have strong resonances in various contexts in Latin America; they often do. For example, U.S. feminists’ approaches to social justice (Nancy Fraser and others) and gender transgression (Judith Butler) as well as work by Latinas

and women of color in the United States (which challenge global North hegemonies) are read widely in Latin America. What is meant is that strong precautions must be taken when importing and applying theories from the global North to the global South, particularly when such theories do not take into account local theoretical perspectives and/or fail to undergo critical processes of resignification, analysis, or interpretation on the part of global South theorists.

An interesting case in point—discussed by Amy Lind, a social scientist at the University of Cincinnati—involves a debate over the term “queer” among activists in Ecuador (Lind 2008). Having traveled to Ecuador to interview activists in the LGBTI movement regarding their views on the Leftist politics of change taking place there, Lind found that the most radical wing of this movement identified as *transfeminista*. Lind explains that “in Latin America, ‘queer’ is often associated with northern or ‘western’ cultural imperialism and seen as a notion that reinforces a whitening and/or homogenization of people who do not fit within the cultural prescribed sexual or gender roles of their societies” (30). When queer studies as we know them in the United States are discussed in academic seminars in Ecuador, it is not unusual for Ecuadorans to “resignify” the notions and give them new names linked to local experiences. *Transfeminista* has been a successful identification arising from such a local resignification of queer studies. “For the transfeminist current,” states Lind, “‘trans’ implies a break not only with the traditional gender/sex system but also with other forms of normativities based on race, ethnicity, class and geopolitical location” (32). “Trans” activists argued that they could organize around a *transfeminista* agenda in a local context where “trans” already carried a cultural meaning of activism combined with transgression. They took “queer” to stand for more of an academic term, disconnected from activism. These and similar interpretations of and disputes over identity terminology used in feminist studies, in my opinion, show how important it is to relate theory to practice in a way that allows for open lines of communication and interaction between academic studies and social activism.

Another way of relating feminist theory to the practice of social movements, and one that also fits in with some of our work as philosophers, involves using the personal narrative form as a way to both examine and theorize aspects of our own lived experiences (Schutte and Femenías 2010, 403). For example, the Panamanian feminist philosopher Urania Ungo has published two books directly related to her experience in the feminist movement and in the administration of public policy (Ungo 2000; 2002). Ungo interprets the feminist movement in Latin America, manifested in the feminist Encuentros initiated in Bogota, Colombia in 1981, as oriented toward the political goal of transforming life (“cambiar la vida”). She recalls the radical roots of the movement based on the notion that the personal is political, and laments the gradual loss

of this vision, occurring during the high point of neo-liberalism, as the feminist agenda was watered down considerably. The goals of stopping violence against women, defending women's reproductive rights, and incorporating women's rights into the laws and constitutions of the Latin American states, therefore, continue to be of the highest priority. A philosophically grounded personal narrative can be a powerful agent of consciousness-raising and change in such circumstances, especially in view of relentless attacks against feminist agendas by right-wing fundamentalisms and other anti-feminist elements in the region. Depending on its particular focus and content, the personal narrative may also challenge the classic division between the public and the private spheres constitutive of masculine-dominant Western political theory.

The examples provided above do not exhaust the multiple possibilities of relating theory to practice. What would distinguish a Latin American feminist orientation from others is the effort to theorize from, or out of consideration for, a cultural or historical Latin American context. Such an approach stands in stark contrast with the so-called "view from nowhere" (or from "everywhere") characterizing some philosophical methodologies as well as with views contextualized by various other socio-cultural locations.

PROGRESSIVE PROJECTS AND CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM AND LIBERATION

At the heart of feminisms in Latin America there has always been an emancipatory political project, whether articulated as "la causa de las mujeres" (women's cause), women's rights, reproductive rights, gender equity, stopping violence against women, or a host of popular emancipatory movements. This is a region of the world where freedom has been as much curtailed and destroyed as it has been fought for and enacted. Political economies shift, autocratic governments come and go, and there is still no end to the need for emancipatory politics. Oppression has left its historical mark on these societies since the days of colonialism, if not also earlier times. Freedom from imperialism, neo-colonialism, "internal colonialisms," patriarchal and authoritarian mentalities, racism, systematic poverty, and gender oppression among others continue to constitute important priorities for those wanting to live together with others in societies free from systematic violence and cruelty. Moving beyond "freedom from," "freedom for" Latin American societies can be theorized through the lenses of ethics and political philosophy. At the level of the social body, "freedom for" is most often thought of as part of the project of democratization (and social justice). Just exactly what constitutes democratization, however, is and has been the source of intense debate given the full range of political stances taken from versions of Marxism-Leninism to those of neo-liberal capitalism as well as feminist interventions in political movements and organizing. At the level of intersubjectivity, the ethics of alterity based on the concepts of

dialogue, reciprocity, and attunement to the needs of others, especially those who are most vulnerable, provides a ground for thinking of “freedom for” as the freedom to live peacefully and creatively without fear of violence, hostility, abuse, or the deprivation of support for material and social needs.

Concepts of freedom and liberation need to be grounded in a historical and cultural context if they are to be understood appropriately. If we think of a giant picture of Latin America as moving gradually from the 1980s through the 1990s into a global neo-liberal political economy, one of the interesting features to notice is that at the same time many countries of the region were transitioning out of local political military dictatorships, they were entering new forms of economic and political dependence on the terms dictated by instruments of the neo-liberal capitalist global economy, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Feminist activists were able to benefit from the gradual erosion of the military dictatorships, but at the same time many were absorbed, as it were, into the new neo-liberal system that became dominant, and that, as we know well by now, steadily and systematically widened the gap between the rich and the poor. The idea of integrating women (even feminists) into local, regional, and national politics was part of the democratizing projects; the problem was that the economic system these countries adopted (or were forced to adopt) was also hurting women in massive numbers, and a number of democracies were especially weak as they “transitioned” out of the dictatorships. In the case of countries that had been free of military dictatorships, given their dependence on Western capitalism and generally weak national economies, they also had to pass through the global politics of structural adjustment and neo-liberal “reform,” all of which exacerbated class divisions among women, including those in the feminist movement.³

The problem of being partially integrated into a system of power, let’s say, that rests on habits, if not ideologies, of masculine dominance, and that still, whether directly or indirectly, exploits or marginalizes part of the population, including women, is a terrible burden to face. It is not clear, in my view, that resisting institutional participation, as advocated by an “autonomous” wing in the feminist movement, is the solution. Much depends on the context in which participatory opportunities arise. In the end, feminists sort themselves out according to their political beliefs. What I think does require mention in the context of democratization is the degree to which power struggles can arise *between and among women* when some attain positions of power and/or significant advantage over others. Here we go back to questions of class privilege and to questions of ethnoracial or heterosexist privilege that play themselves out inside the women’s and/or feminist movements (see Alvarez et al. 2002; Curiel 2007, 182–84). This is problematic not only because such couplings of privilege and power perpetuate the deep class and ethnoracial divisions

characteristic of traditional (anti-democratic) societies, but because of the resentment such forms of power can spread among the marginalized. Feminist politics, in this sense, needs a feminist ethics to balance issues of power with issues of fairness, reciprocity, and justice.

The upward mobility associated with the adoption of the term “gender” (rather than “women” or “feminist”) in feminist studies has led to rifts and divisions among feminists. Claudia de Lima Costa writes about the period of the democratic transition in Brazil in the context of the feminist debate over the use of the “gender” category. She states that at the time, part of the reason “gender” overtook the terminology of “women” or “feminist” is that “gender” seemed to be a lot safer politically than either of the other two terms. Even so, in preparation for the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, the Vatican condemned the concept of gender and, fearing that it might lead to the acceptance of homosexuality and the so-called destruction of the family, associated it with a “sinister foreign influence” (Lima Costa 2007, 174, citing Franco 1998). Conservatives try to stop feminism’s gains by implementing their own policies for integrating women into their specific social, political, and/or religious objectives both in leadership positions and at the base. Inevitably, some of these conflicts have also been felt in academic feminism. Lima Costa’s main point, however, is to focus on how feminist terms such as “gender,” as well as various theories, “travel” from one location to another, along with some of the consequences for Brazilian and other Latin American feminisms. To fully analyze this important issue, it is necessary to move to the fourth component of feminist methodologies outlined above, namely, the incorporation of a decolonizing transformative politics of culture.

TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS OF CULTURE

Throughout this paper I have alluded a number of times to issues having a deep repercussion in the context of a transformative politics of culture, one that would be feminist or at least feminist-compatible. For the Latin American world (and given the advances post-colonial and feminist thought have enjoyed lately), such a transformation would need to be a “decolonizing” one as well. Here again we enter a highly complex issue that elicits its own set of debates about methods and epistemology. One way or another, however, decolonization involves overcoming the privileges and institutional power structures that a Eurocentric coloniality and, later, an Anglo-Eurocentric modernity (coupled with its gendered and ethnoracial and class hierarchies) held over the shaping of identities and communities, as well as over the distribution of resources in Latin American societies. Decolonization involves a constant challenge to move beyond domination at both the personal and collective levels. But, in the feminist movement and in feminist theory, decolonization

signals an empowering approach to unleash the testimonies and perspectives of women of color, lesbians, ecological feminists, and anyone whose political values and/or socio-cultural standing has been reigned in or suppressed by male-dominant consortiums of power. This methodological orientation often relies on documentation taken from oral narratives and requires collaborative research projects among, for example, anthropologists, historians, linguists, and cultural critics, especially if the research focus is historical or deals with internally colonized populations. The Bolivian anthropologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, for example, is known for decades of work on indigenous and *mestiza* women from the Andean region of South America (Rivera Cusicanqui 1996). My point is that although not every feminist philosopher or theorist may be able to specialize in this kind of work, it is important to keep the spirit of this type of work alive when we carry on with our respective areas of specialization. The transformative politics of culture to which we commit as feminists is incomplete if we fail to acknowledge the creative potential of those women who have existed in our societies behind a veil of silence, whether because of poverty, ethnicity or race, sexual harassment or humiliation, or all factors combined.

There is also a more contemporary understanding of the concept of decolonization, which basically refers to the critique of anything that may be characterized broadly as a colonizing practice. The conceptual links among disciplining the body, disciplining the mind, and colonization are clear when the disciplining in question reveals severe forms of repression intended to punish, humiliate, and subordinate into conformity anyone deviating from the disciplinary norms. Despite Michel Foucault's efforts to disengage disciplinary from repressive power relations, the context of colonialism and its sequels complicates the distinction, as the interaction between repressive and disciplinary force may indicate a more fluid and less predictable track. Overall, the influence of Foucault's genealogical concept of power/knowledge has been remarkable. In particular, feminist philosophers have appropriated analytic tools to undertake a systematic critique of heteronormative cultural constructs. For example, the post-structuralist-influenced wing of feminist theory found in Chile (which includes philosopher Olga Grau and cultural critic Nelly Richard) has strongly called into question the degree to which democracy has advanced in that country even after the demise of the Pinochet dictatorship. Grau has analyzed how the discourse of "family" shares similar features whether it is enunciated by the liberal state, the Catholic church, or the mainstream media (Grau 2004). She documents how heterosexuality and even reproductive sexuality are considered normative or presupposed without question or qualification, whereas homosexuality is associated with social or psychological deviancy. The analytic tools needed to make the case for such feminist positions derives from examining the disciplinary practices aligned with certain

discursive formations, a Foucauldian perspective most useful to advance critical feminist cultural analysis. From a plurality of perspectives in academic culture, feminist theorists also carry on significant work toward a feminist politics of culture (see Schutte 1993; Alvarez 1998; Femenías 2002–07; Richard 2004a; 2004b; Femenías 2007). The examples and conceptual clarifications I have offered are multiple and illustrative rather than exhaustive or exclusivist. I believe feminist engagement with cultural transformation should be flexible to take into account the research interests and personal experiences of the theorists in question.

4. A FINAL WORD

Limitations of space have forced me to offer only a sketch, aided by a few reflections and considerations, of a methodological strategy aimed at creating what I have called a “conceptual home,” whose aim would be the habilitation and promotion of Latin American feminist philosophy. I have argued, overall, that philosophy as a discipline is still too compromised by masculine-dominant, Anglocentric, and Eurocentric ways of representing knowledge, such that discursive and ideological impediments make it difficult to conceive and develop ways of feminist theorizing that arise from an interpellation of the philosopher by the Latin American conditions affecting her social and cultural life. With the fourfold approach to knowledge I have outlined, Latin American feminist philosophy 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. This goal remains a constant challenge for those of us seeking a proper sense of epistemic inclusion as we insist on the recognition of our more complex and so far marginalized or invisible/in audible epistemic locations in a world where discrimination against global South women and women of color continues to be a matter of serious concern.

NOTES

1. The practice of recognizing feminist philosophers from Latin America as *individuals* does not conflict with the approach I am proposing. In fact, we need more of this recognition, whether in the form provided by Fernet-Betancourt or in the form of anthologies such as *Feminist Philosophy in Latin America and Spain*, edited by María Luisa Femenías and Amy Oliver (Femenías and Oliver 2007). The limit of the individually-oriented approach, nonetheless, is that it tends to miss or underestimate certain epistemic features related to the process of doing philosophy from a particular socio-cultural context, which may be found in greater or lesser degrees among the individuals noted.

2. See especially Schutte 1998a on the topics of cultural alterity and epistemic violence, and Schutte 1993 and 1998b on theorizing Latin American feminisms in the contexts of Latin American philosophy and feminist thought.

3. For an analysis of the challenges faced by feminists in Mexico, see Zapata Galindo 2007. For an analysis of the structural changes affecting Latin American feminisms in the 1990s, see Alvarez 1998.

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