

## **On Feminisms and Postcolonialisms: Reflections South of the Rio Grande**

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In these times of globalization, characterized by fragmentation—of the productive process, of political struggles, of the collective imaginaries—the critical sectors around the world, whether in activist movements or in academia, have the challenge of building alliances and micro-political equivalence link-chains to confront a globalizing neoliberal project that uses ideas, images and weapons to wield its power. In this effort to build alliances it is a priority that those of us who carry the struggle from the so-called third world—or what some have called the Two-Thirds World (Gustavo Esteva and Madhu suri Prakash [1998])—establish a dialogue and share our experiences. The Mayan women of the agro-ecological movement in Chiapas, with whom I have worked, would have much to share with the women of Garhwal in the Himalayas, who have defended their woodlands and opposed the transnational wood industry through an eco-feminist movement called Chipko (see Shiva 1988). Unfortunately, people and information do not move as easily from South to South as capital and labor (when required to do so) move from North to South and South to North, respectively. Political and intellectual exchange between Latin America, Africa, and Asia has been limited by language barriers and the precariousness of our publishing industry and our scientific and educational institutions. The ideas of African, Arab, or Indian intellectuals have reached us through the United States or Europe. It has been the migration to the North which has made it possible for these two-thirds of the planet to meet, and often it has been the political, economic or political immigrants who have become bridges between political and intellectual debates. This is the case of the academic output

of the group known as postcolonial theoreticians, a heterogeneous and trans-disciplinary group composed mostly of intellectuals from the Middle-East and South Asia linked to universities in the United States and England. In fields spanning literary theory, history, anthropology, and philosophy this group of intellectuals—among whose main exponents are Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—have the common concern of analyzing the effects of imperialism, colonialism and racism in their textual and discursive manifestations, and of exploring the various strategies of resistance that these forms of knowledge-power produce.

This body of literature has been known in Latin America mainly through Spanish-speaking academics living in the United States, who, whether they are adopting these theoretical proposals (See Grupo Latinoamericano de Estudios Subalternos 1998, Rodríguez 1998, Coronil 1998, Mignolo 1998, Mendieta 1998, Castro-Gómez 1998, Moreiras 1998) or confronting them (Achúgar 1998, Moraña 1998, Richard, 1998, Verdesio 1997), have incorporated their ideas to the Latin American debate on the crisis of modernity.<sup>2</sup> However, the lack of recognition on the part of postcolonial theoreticians to the ground Latin America has covered in the processes of de-colonialization of knowledge has hurt some people's feelings and has perhaps influenced the rejection of their ideas as irrelevant to our geographic or historical context (see Dussel 2000 and Verdesio 1997), or as illegitimate for being the product of a new intellectual fad generated by North American academia or a globalizing theoretical avant-garde movement (See Richard 1998, Moraña 1998). The work of a group called the Subaltern Studies Group, which originated at the end of the 1970's in Southern India, has had an

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<sup>2</sup> The debates about the crisis of the Enlightenment Project in Latin America and the critique of the colonialism of knowledge can be found in three excellent anthologies that offer a general perspective about the different views on the subject: Santiago Castro-Gómez, Oscar Guardiola-Rivera and Carmen Millán de Benavides (eds.), *Pensar (en) los intersticios. Teoría and práctica de la crítica poscolonial*, CEJA, Bogotá, 1999; Santiago Castro-Gómez y Eduardo Mendieta (eds.), *Teorías sin disciplina. Latinoamericanismo, Poscolonialidad y Globalización en Debate*, y Edgardo

equally contradictory response.<sup>3</sup> The academic work of this group of social historians, under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, set out to cleanse India's historiography of colonial leftovers and to recover the historical agency of the subaltern, whose subordination had been reproduced and perpetuated by official historiography. It was not until the late 1990's that their work became available in Spanish and began to be debated by Latin American historians; its presence in the curricula of our universities is still weak, however.<sup>4</sup> I believe it is time to rise above the arguments of whether the intellectual de-colonization process was discussed in Latin America before postcolonial studies were popular or whether Alfonso Reyes (1942) and Edmundo O'Gorman (1958) were way ahead of Edward Said (1978) in the analysis of how Latin America was constructed or invented by European thought. I believe it is time to establish more constructive dialogues between intellectual traditions so that we are able to recover those theoretical and more importantly methodological proposals in our epistemological and political search.

Theoretical proposals from postcolonial feminists have received even less attention, in spite of the fact that their questioning of feminist ethnocentrism and their theoretical proposals to historicize and contextualize the analysis of gender inequality could be very useful to those of us who, from academia or political activism, are pushing for a transcultural feminism or a feminism of diversity

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Lander (comp.) *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas*, CLACSO-UNESCO, Buenos Aires.

<sup>3</sup> Although these authors' output is considered part of the literary body of Postcolonial Studies, this term includes a wider collective of intellectuals from different countries and disciplines that do not constitute a consolidated work group as is (or was) the group of Subaltern Indian Studies. For a reflection about the links between Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Studies, see Gyan Prakash (1997).

<sup>4</sup> The first translations of the work by the Group of Subaltern Studies were published in Bolivia in 1997 in an anthology compiled by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Rossana Barragán. Two years later several of these translations were re-printed and complemented with other works in a new anthology edited in Mexico by Saurabh Dube (1999). The same year an issue of the magazine *Historia and Grafía* (No. 12. 1999) published by the Universidad Iberoamericana de México was dedicated to the Subalternists. For an analysis of the contributions of the Group of Subaltern Studies to Latin American Historiography see Florencia Mallon's article "The promise and dilemma of subordinate studies: perspectives from Latin American history", in *American Historical Review*, 99 (1994)

(*feminismo de la diversidad*) that recognizes the plurality of contexts in which we Latin American women construct our gender identities, live in relationships of inequality, and develop our strategies for struggle.

As part of this effort to establish constructive dialogues from South to South, to create interfaces and confront political fragmentation, I intend to approach the theoretical production of postcolonial feminists by reading their contribution from my own geographical and historical point of view, and through the political and cultural realities that women live South of the Rio Grande.

***A spot on the map is also a spot in history... and a perspective on knowledge I.***

I adopt the words of Chandra Mohanty (2003) to remember that our place of enunciation determines the way we live and conceive relationships of domination, that in order to expose the networks of power that are hidden behind the facade of neutrality and universality of western scientific knowledge it is necessary to remember that our discourse production and our world view are marked by geopolitics. I think therefore it is important to place myself on the map and in history, to explain the way in which the theoretical proposals of postcolonial feminists echo my own political and epistemological search. I would like to *situate my knowledge*, to recognize the historical and social context from which I perceive reality and develop my intellectual work. Echoing the proposal of feminist anthropologist Donna Haraway, I believe it is important to substitute patriarchal objectivism with situated knowledge that recognizes where we are speaking from, while at the same time neither rejects the possibility of knowing, nor makes relative, the ethical and explicative value of any knowledge.

My personal history and my place on the map have influenced the fact that three conceptual proposals developed by postcolonial feminists have not only been

useful to me in my academic work, but also invaluable as political tools: thinking about identities and borders, the proposal to think of colonialism not as a historical stage but as relation of power between different types of knowledge, and the call to reconsider our feminism through the recognition of diversity.

## **Border Identities**

The first time I read the postcolonial feminist critiques of cultural purism and ethnic essentialism I identified with the way in which they confronted or negotiated with anti-imperial or anti-colonial nationalisms that at once gave them spaces for resistance and subordinated them and colonized their bodies in the name of identity and tradition (see Chaterjee, 1986, Narayan 1997, 200, Anzaldúa 1997).<sup>5</sup>

The gender analysis these theoreticians make of the national postcolonial projects and/or the contestatory nationalism of ethnic minorities revealed for me the importance of complementing the analysis of the world-system (Wallerstein 1996) with a gender perspective in order to understand the complexities and contradictions of political and identity spaces that seemed to me before to be clearly contestatory. Their analysis of the way in which national narratives subordinate women to make them into the “guardians of tradition” and “mothers of the nation” reminded me of the old Latin American revolutionary song, which I once sang uncritically: “A parir madres latinas, a parir más guerrilleros, ellos sembraran jardines donde había basureros”. (“Give birth, Latin mothers, give birth to more guerillas, for they will be the ones who plant gardens where once there was garbage”).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Although the term postcolonial feminism has been used mainly to refer to the output of African (Arab and Sub-Saharan) and Indian feminists, it has been appropriated by some Chicano and Black feminists who have questioned the colonial discourse of white feminism. For a justification of their inclusion in Postcolonial Feminism see John 1996, Hurtado 2000 and Shutte 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Already in the 1970's the feminist rock band “Las Leonas” criticized the patriarchal perspectives of the left, parodying the revolutionary song in the following terms: “A abortar madres latinas, a abortar impunemente, para no parir soldados que maten a tanta

In spite of the identity essentialisms that demand our loyalty to a Mexican or Latin American identity, our reality often puts us at the crossing of frontiers, whether they be geographical or metaphorical. Gloria Anzaldúa, a postcolonial Chicano feminist, describes us in what she calls the new *border identities*, and points out: “Because I am in all cultures at the same time, a soul between two worlds, my head buzzes with contradiction. I am disoriented by all the voices speaking simultaneously.” By defining herself as the “New Mestiza”, Anzaldúa questions any criteria of authenticity and cultural pluralism, reminding us that nothing is static, that even ancient traditions have become ancient because someone re-signified them and claimed them as such. *Border identities* not only confront cultural traditions, but the very way in which “tradition” is defined: “I am a mixture, I am the very act of mixing, uniting and combining, which has produced not only a creature of light and a creature of darkness, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings” (Anzaldúa 1987:81)

As a feminist, Anzaldúa rebels against the machismo of Chicano nationalism, and its limited and “disciplinary” definitions of tradition; at the same time, as a Chicana she questions the ethnocentrism of Anglo-Saxon feminism, and as a lesbian she questions both the homophobia of Chicano nationalism as well as the heterosexist perspective of the feminist movement. From her own experience she shows us the limitations of those identity politics that are based on criteria of exclusion and authenticity. She does not propose to create a general theory of identity, nor claims that identities are always experienced as multiple and contradictory, but simply that, in the new global context, there are many subjects such as she, who live their identities as a mixture and whose heads buzz with contradiction.

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gente”(“Abort Latin mothers, abort freely, don’t give birth to soldiers that kill so many people”) I thank Olivia Gall, ex-member of Las Leonas, for sharing this information.

Like Anzaldúa, I place the genesis of my identity perspective in my border experience. I was born and raised in the North of Mexico, just an hour away from San Diego, California, the main U.S. Naval base. I grew up and lived thinking of the border not only as a geographical space, but as a life experience marking my encounter with Mexico as a nation and with the imperialism of the United States.

My father, a fisherman, mechanic and electrician, came to the border attracted by the promises of the “American Dream,” but after several encounters with the *migra* (U.S. immigration authorities), he decided to live in Ensenada, where he stayed until his death. He kept his crossings of the *line* to an absolute minimum, and always prided himself on “not owing anything to the gringos”. Through him (he was a freemason, a free thinker, and was anticlerical) I came into contact with anti-imperialist nationalism, and read about “México Indígena,” whose discourse vindicated post-revolutionary nationalism. The exaltation of the image of the dead Indian—symbolized in the cult to the Aztecs and represented in murals by Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco—was in stark contrast with the discrimination and marginalization of living Indians. *Mestizaje* was the keystone of the official discourse on national identity: “we are the result of the fusion of two races,” the text books repeated, once again bestowing on women’s bodies the “patriotic” duty of giving birth to the *mestizo*.<sup>7</sup>

While my enthusiasm grew for what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla would later call “Profound Mexico” (1987), the *Mixteco* indigenous migrants started arriving in the agricultural valleys of Baja California and were regarded with disdain, or in the best

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<sup>7</sup> The discourse on *Mestizaje* diminished the political action spaces available to the Living Indian and led to a formulation of his presence as a national “problem” to whose solution Mexican anthropologists dedicated themselves creating a current called “Indigenismo.” Its principal exponent, Manuel Gamio, was a student of Franz Boas at Columbia University and is recognized as a pioneer in modern anthropological practice in Mexico. His book, Forjando Patria (Making a Nation) set the ideological basis for official nationalism. For an analysis of the transition from Mestizo Mexico to Pluricultural Mexico in the representations of the nation and the policies towards the indigenous populations, see Hernández Castillo and Ortíz Elizondo (1993).

of cases, with condescension, by the local population, who saw them as a necessary evil for the benefit of local agriculture.

My father's nationalism contrasted with the family's daily reality, in which we followed with interest the Hit Parade, spoke a colloquial Spanish full of anglicisms, celebrated both Halloween and Day of the Dead and called all our activities to a halt when the Dodgers —our household's favorite baseball team—faced "away" teams. My mother—cook, hairdresser, tarot and Spanish card reader—strove to raise seven children while keeping active in an informal economy that barely served to complement the household budget. Her longings as a consumer were marked by "the other side"—to have cars like the ones "they" had, to live as "they" did, and to be able some day to retire as "they" did. Caught between a border culture that placed me close to the United States and an ideological resistance that distanced me from it, I chose to study anthropology in Mexico City. Alone of the seven children, and going against my father's authority, I left home to find the roots of the "true Mexican culture" that was obscured for me by the border context.

It was the beginning of the 1980s, and at the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH) discussions about culture and power were dominated by Marxism. The success of the Sandinista Revolution and the struggles for national liberation in Guatemala and El Salvador kept socialist utopias alive, always conceived from a Latin American perspective in which peasantry played the lead role.

Anthropology took me to the Southern border, and it was with a mixture of Northern nationalism and faith in the potential of a peasant utopia that I first approached the realities of the indigenous communities of that region. However, my first encounters with the darker face of Mexican nationalism, arising from my

contact with Guatemalan refugees, led me to question many of the premises about that imaginary community we call Mexico.

The stories told about the northern border—of abuse on the part of immigration agents, of racism, of the trafficking of humans, of the absence of human rights in that strip of no-man's-land—are not very different from the realities faced by Guatemalan immigrants in the Southern Mexican border. After three generations born on Mexican soil, many Maya peasants are still afraid to speak their indigenous “Guatemalan” language, or to claim their family links in the areas around the Tacaná Volcano for fear of losing rights to their land or being deported to the neighboring country.

At the Southern border my northern nationalism was no longer a space of resistance; in this context it had a different connotation, and a very thin line separated my “Mexican pride” from the official discourse by which the cultural rights of border indigenous peoples of “Guatemalan” origin were being denied.

Questioning my own nationalism led me to search in the voices of the Southern border for a critique of cultural purism, of ethnic absolutism, and of the homogenizing and exclusive discourses and practices. My experience while living for several years among the Mam people, a Maya group whose history has been marked by border crossings, helped me to understand identity from a historical perspective that questions the limitations of cultural essentialism. Mam peasants crossed national borders between Guatemala and Chiapas, geographical borders from the mountains to the jungle, religious borders from traditional Catholicism to Liberation Theology and from Presbyterians to Jehovah's Witnesses, and cultural borders by identifying themselves as both *mestizo* and indigenous in different historical periods. The essentialist discourses that seek the roots of indigenous identities in ancient cultures are of little use to represent the border realities lived

by these Mayan people. To base the political recognition of indigenous peoples on them would eventually legitimize new exclusions in the name of “authenticity.”<sup>8</sup>

After moving from one Mexican border to the other, the words of the feminist anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing gained new meaning for me: “Border experiences are those which undermine the safe territory of cultural certainty and essential identities” (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 1993: 225). The border ceased for me to be a line separating two nations, and became instead an identity space, a way of being, staying and changing.

### **Colonialism / Decolonialization / Postcolonialism**

Although I claim the importance of the concept of border identity as a tool with which to confront cultural essentialism, I also recognize that it is easier to renounce “essential identities” when one is in a culturally privileged position, and that this is a position that as a Mexican *mestiza* I hold over the indigenous population. As a non-indigenous woman, of dark skin and European facial features, I grew up assuming and claiming a *mestizo* identity which to a great extent reproduced the biologic discourses of official nationalism and at the same time made me part of an “unmarked” identity in the Mexican context. In the United States I could perhaps be considered “Native American” because I descend from the Mayo indigenous peoples of Sinaloa, “Chicano” if I were the child of Mexican immigrants, or “Woman of Color” due to my phenotype. In a Mexican context, however, I am part of the “norm”—that which is assumed as invisible, unmarked and even universal, what Anglo-Saxons are in the U.S. or England, or what men are in the European project of modernity. I am part of that “National Average” that is assumed in the Federal Code of Penal Procedures (article 220b) when the right of an indigenous individual to anthropological expert opinion is granted in order to account for their *cultural*

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of these “border-crossings” and their identity implications, see Hernández Castillo 2001. The debate about political limitations of ethnic essentialism in the Mexican context can be found in Hernández Castillo 2002.

*difference*: “When the accused belongs to an ethnic indigenous group, an effort shall be made to procure expert opinion to better understand the individual’s personality and to estimate the cultural difference from the *rational average*” [my italics].

The privilege that I have in belonging to this national average was not evident to me until I lived in Chiapas, a racist and racialized society in which relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous individuals continue to reproduce hierarchies of a colonial origin. The persistence of the right of “*pernada*” (not recognized by law, but socially accepted), which allows the employer or the family’s son to make “sexual use” of the indigenous servant, the fact that there exist “family girls,” indigenous girls adopted by *mestizo* families to serve for life and who often receive no other remuneration than a roof over their heads, food, and *padrinazgo*, are just a few examples which allow us to understand the concept of colonialism in operation in the Latin American context.

Parallel to this, the way in which indigenous peoples are still being constructed by the academia, the media, and the law as “different,” “pre-modern,” and “opposed to the values of progress” makes necessary an analysis of the discursive strategies of subordination that are being used to perpetuate these colonial relationships. More specifically, I consider that the concept of *internal colonialism*, developed in Latin American social sciences (see Stavenhagen 1969, González Casanova 1970), continues to be very useful in understanding the insertion of indigenous peoples into the modernizing projects of the *mestizo* elite. In spite of the constant migratory flow from rural areas to the cities, indigenous people—whether living in urban centers or not—remain marginalized and in relationships of economic exploitation and cultural colonialism. The concept of colonialism is thus not alien to Latin American realities, nor has it lost its explicative usefulness after the consolidation of post-independence nation-states. Quite the opposite is true: the concept of decolonialization is central to the contemporary

struggles of the Latin American indigenous movement and to the theoretical production of its intellectuals (see Bonfil Batalla 1981, Cojti 1991).

Regarding the concept of postcolonialism, those of us who use the term to refer to Latin American social processes have been accused of using it out of context, given the scant relation it bears to our colonial and modern history.<sup>9</sup> Critics point out that the term refers to cultures which emerged from British or French imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and respond to domination models that have little to do with those established by Spanish colonialism four centuries earlier. They maintain that the institutions, the system of economic organization, and the cultural policies of the British and French Empires, among other issues addressed by postcolonial studies, were very different in the Spanish imperial era between the fifteenth and eighteenth century. They apply the term 'postcolonial' only to the historical and political moment of which some theoreticians of this intellectual current write, not to their epistemological proposal to de-colonize knowledge and reveal the way in which textual representations of those social subjects constructed as the "others" in various geographical and historical contexts are converted into a form of discursive colonialism that not only narrates but also constructs reality. Colonialism as a historical moment of European expansion (extending from the fifteenth to the mid-twentieth century) is relevant insofar as it marks the genesis and consolidation of western *ways of knowing* that are established as part of the colonial system of capitalism.

Postcolonial theory confronts the epistemological foundations of these forms of knowledge, which have been hegemonic as much in Latin America as in South Asia, in spite of the differences between the Spanish and British colonial projects. In this sense, producing insight of a postcolonial perspective is a challenge as pertinent in Latin America as in the ex-colonies of the Commonwealth.

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<sup>9</sup> This criticism was made of my book *La Otra Frontera: Identidades Múltiples en el Chiapas Poscolonial* by Xochitl Leyva at the event in which the book was presented.

Walter Mignolo (1998) and Fernando Coronil (1998) do not aim so much to point out the differences in historical moments as to emphasize the different discursive strategies that were used to subordinate America and the East. Without completely rejecting the proposals of postcolonial studies, they set out to further their critiques from a Latin American specific, substituting the term postcolonialism with postwesternism (posoccidentalismo). These authors point out that, in contrast to the processes described by Edward Said for the East, the colonizing strategy in the case of Latin America did not consist of “exoticizing” it or constructing it as an extreme “otherness,” but of integrating it as part of the Western Hemisphere and in this way negating its cultural specificity and its own civilizing processes. Based on this formulation there are three main intellectual responses to the crisis of European modernity: postmodernism in European and North American territories; postcolonialism and postorientalism respectively in India and the North European colonial territories in Asia and Africa; and postwesternism in the Spanish colonial territories of Latin America and the Caribbean. The notion of “postwesternism” would thus be the most adequate to refer to Latin American postcolonialism (Mignolo 1998). This proposal, although it may have a cohesive and identifying effect for Latin American intellectuals, does not recognize the specific ways in which the indigenous populations of our nations experienced their incorporation to the project of modernity. The post-independence Latin American States established different kinds of relationships with their indigenous populations, and although in many historical moments the acculturating integrationism leveraged denial of difference as a subordinating mechanism, at other times the discursive strategies for representing indigenous peoples wielded exoticism and the construction of an extreme “otherness” (what Said would call orientalizacion) to allow modern national societies to construct their identities through constant confrontation with the “savage in the mirror” (Bartra 1992). In the case of Mexico, the continued existence of these strategies was evident in the recent Congress debate about a new Act of Indigenous Rights and Culture, whose detractors, both in academia and politics, represented indigenous peoples as antidemocratic and

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backward, going so far as to argue that if given autonomy the indigenous could go back to “human sacrifice” (see La Jornada, march 4 1997).<sup>10</sup>

### **Transcultural Feminisms or Feminisms of Diversity**

If my experience at the Mexican borders influenced my theoretical perspectives on national identities, and my privileged identity as a *mestizo* sharing daily experiences with the indigenous population influenced my appreciation of the theories on colonialism and postcolonialism, my placement as a woman in a deeply patriarchal and misogynous society and as an anthropologist in an openly anti-feminist academia marked my prioritization of gender perspective and analysis of power.<sup>11</sup> During my undergraduate studies my Marxist education at the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH) gave priority to class over gender as analytical tool to explain social processes. Like many other female Marxist students, I considered feminism a bourgeois, alienating ideology which divided the “people.” It was not until the late eighties, when while living in Chiapas I found myself face to face with patriarchal violence that I began to consider gender relationships as formative of the structures of dominance that Marxism sets out to transform. It was a time of political effervescence, in which a significant peasant movement gathered indigenous populations from different parts of the state with demands for land distribution, credit availability, support for commercialization of

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of these discourses and of the obstacles that the indigenous movement has had to face in its struggle for autonomy, see Rus, Mattiace and Hernández Castillo 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Even today important sectors of Mexican Social Sciences consider feminism as an ideologizing position that hampers objective analysis of social processes. An example of this way of thinking is the response of well-known philosopher Alejandro Tomasini to an article written by me on Feminism and Postmodernism (see Hernández Castillo in press), in which he asks “If in effect the content of feminism is as accurate as its proponents want it to be, why does it lack popularity? Why does it fail to sway the masses? There is only one answer: the failure in practice implies the failure in theory” ( to be published in the anthropological journal *Desacatos* )

their products, and an end to state repression of their leaders.<sup>12</sup> My stake in helping raise the consciousness of the “people” was to participate in the popular education of Guatemalan refugees and Mexican peasants. Along with murder and kidnapping, rape was used as a tool of repression against several co-workers who worked in productive or educational projects with peasants and indigenous populations. When rapists were identified as members of the police forces, and the ineptitude and indifference of the authorities as well as the limitations of the law in use at the time were demonstrated, we were motivated to begin a fight against sexual and domestic violence through an ethnically and socially diverse organization, of which I was an active member for ten years.<sup>13</sup> Arriving at feminism through the back door—that is, through the provinces, through political activism in response to a very concrete situation, as opposed to theoretical and academic reflection—allowed me to stay at the fringe of the academic debate between the proponents of a feminism of equality and a feminism of difference that dominated the Mexican feminist movement at that time. However, many of the popular educational materials and materials of psychological and legal aids for victims of sexual and domestic violence that we used with the indigenous and peasant women who came to our center had been created by urban feminist organizations, which in turn drew on the experiences of North American liberal feminism in the struggle against violence. Located as we were in the Highlands of Chiapas, in the heart of the Tzotzil-Tzeltal zone of the Mayan region, we nevertheless failed to consider the cultural context as an important element in our fight against violence.

The exclusion and involuntary silencing of the particular experiences of the indigenous women in our organization eventually led to their breaking away from

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<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the peasant movement in Chiapas during the 1980’s see Harvey 1998 and Collier 1994.

<sup>13</sup> A history of the women’s group that with time came to be known as Grupo de Mujeres de San Cristóbal las Casas, and from 1994 was re-named COLEM (meaning “free” in Tzotzil), and its origin, goals and limitations can be found in Freyermuth and Fernández 1995.

the collective project.<sup>14</sup> In the same way, many of the indigenous users of our center found neither in our psychological support groups (which were in Spanish) nor in our legal battle with the state authorities a solution to the problems of violence that had originally led them to seek help with us. We assumed that our concepts of self-esteem and empowerment were shared by all women, that we understood how patriarchal oppression operated in every context, and thought we had the key to undo its subordinating mechanisms. In reality, we “limited the meaning of gender to the presuppositions of our [own] practices, and established exclusive gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic [and in our case, ethnocentric] consequences” (Butler, 2001:9).

Getting to know the work of postcolonial feminists as a graduate student in the United States helped me to improve the articulation of this critique and to reformulate the need, within and beyond academia, for a feminist practice that is more inclusive and considers the plurality of experiences that mark gender identities. Several postcolonial feminists have coincided in pointing out that academic feminist discourses reproduce the same problems as modernist meta-discourses when, through an ethnocentric and heterosexist perspective, they apply the experience of western, white, middle-class women to be the experience of women in general.(see Alarcón 1990. Alexander and Mohanty 1997, Mohanty 1991, Trinh 1978)

These ‘sisterhood’-promoting meta-narratives debilitated feminist struggle by excluding the experiences of other women, and, by focusing all their attention on gender as the main axis of domination, failed to create the necessary conditions to establish other kinds of political alliances. It is in response to these critiques that several theoretical proposals emerge from feminist perspectives recognizing

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<sup>14</sup> This was not the shared perception of the majority of the organization’s members, who gave different, personal explanations for the division of the group. A critical analysis of the relationship between counselors and non-indigenous feminists with indigenous women can be found in Garza and Toledo, in the press.

cultural and historical differences. Even though these critiques have been recognized in academic debate,<sup>15</sup> they have yet to make their mark on the strategies of the Latin American feminist movement—a situation discussed in greater detail below.

### **Contributions of Postcolonial Feminisms to Latin American Feminisms**

By including in this article part of my own story of political and theoretical searching I aim not only to *situate my knowledge*, but also to show that turning around to look at the thoughts and proposals of the feminists of the “Third World” who speak to us from their native countries or from their experiences of diaspora is more than just an “intellectual fad that de-contextualizes theoretical frameworks,” as some critics of postcolonial studies would have it. In fact it is an effort to establish constructive dialogue and to learn from similar searches and experiences that allow us to go beyond the repetition of schemes to the construction of our own paths and projects and to the possibility for a South-to-South joint struggle.

I would like to emphasize some methodological reflections from postcolonial feminism that seem relevant to me for our own academic and political practice as Latin American feminists:

#### **1.-Historicizing and contextualizing the forms that gender relationships take to avoid feminist universalism.**

The diverse group of feminists gathered under the term Postcolonial Feminists (a group that, to mention only a few, includes women of such varied origins and

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<sup>15</sup> The Mexican magazine *Debate Feminista* dedicated in 2001 a special issue to the subject of racism, and included the work of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa; the University Program for Gender Studies of the UNAM, has also translated the work of several postcolonial feminists in its collection *Debates Feministas Contemporáneos*.

histories as the Arab writers Fatima Mernisi [Morocco] and Nawal al-Sa'dawi [Egypt], whose work ranges from literature to theory; India's anthropologists like Mary E. John, Kamala Visweswaran, and Chandra Mohanty; Chicano writers and critics like Gloria Anzadúa and Norma Alarcón; and activists and cultural workers like Michelle Wallace and bell hook) nevertheless have one thing in common: in one way or another they have all contributed to expose the ethnocentrism of western feminism. In their critiques, postcolonial feminists confront the universalizing discourses of some academic feminists who have established a generalizing perspective of gender relationships based on the experiences and needs of white women in the First World, and as a result have silenced or exoticized those women whose experiences of subordination are marked by race and class. These postcolonial feminists have responded to the universalizing discourses about "women" and "patriarchy" with historically situated anthropological work (see Mahood, 2001, 2003, Abu-Lughold 1986, Mani 1999), with historical research (Chaterjee 1993, Hatem 1998), and with literary production (Mernissi 1993, Anzaldúa 1987). Their work confronts the binary and simplistic conception of power in which men are dominators and women are subordinated which until very recently hegemonized feminist perspectives in European and North American academia.

In their criticism of essentialist feminism, postcolonial feminists show us that these universalist perspectives of patriarchy and women go beyond making "inaccurate representations" of women who do not share the characteristics of the presumed "gender norm," to actually colonizing women's lives with the power effect of their discourses. Chandra Mohanty, in her already classic article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholars and Colonial Discourses" (first published in 1985 and reprinted many times both in English and in translation) shows how this discursive colonialism works, by making an account of different academic papers that have contributed to construct "Women of the Third World" as an undifferentiated block. Many of the works she analyzes assume that the category of women is something constructed and inherently homogeneous, independent of categories such as

class, race and ethnic group. This implies a concept of gender based on sexual difference. These strategies of discursive colonization tend to construct the Third World Woman as circumscribed to domestic space, victim, ignorant, poor, and bound to tradition—the alter-ego of the feminist scholar, who is liberated, modern and educated, who makes up her own mind and has control over her body and her sexuality.

The tension between westernism as a discursive strategy that integrates by silencing specificity (Mignolo, 1998) and orientalism, which exoticizes and excludes the “other” as alter-ego of the modern subject, are manifest also in Latin American feminist literature. To mention a few examples, texts such as *Mujeres e Iglesia: Sexualidad y Aborto en América Latina* (Women and the Church: Sexuality and Abortion in Latin America) by Ana María Portugal, published by Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholics for Choice) (1989), or *Los Intereses de las Mujeres y los Procesos de Emancipación en América Latina* (Women’s Interests and Processes of Emancipation in Latin America), by feminist Virginia Vargas (1993), still assume that all women in Latin America face the same reproductive health problems (in the first example) and that we all understand the same thing by “emancipation” (in the second example).

In other spaces I have analyzed how orientalism has worked in the ethnographical representation of “the indigenous woman” in Mesoamerica, pointing out the victimizing emphasis that has characterized much feminist ethnography (see Hernández Castillo 2001b).

The problem with these representations is that they translate into exclusive politics that fail to integrate the specific needs of black or indigenous women to the

feminist movement's agenda.<sup>16</sup> The history of the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encounters, which since 1981 have been convened in various nations of our continent, is a history of exclusions and silencings (Bogota, Colombia [1981]; Lima, Peru, [1983]; Bertioga, Brazil [1985]; Taxco, Mexico [1987]; San Bernardo, Argentina [1990], Costa del Sol, El Salvador [1993], Cartagena, Chile [1996]; Juan Dolio, the Dominican Republic [1999] and Playa Tambor, Costa Rica [2002]). The Afro-Dominican feminist Sergia Galván has documented these exclusions (1995) and has been one of the few who have dared to point out the racism that permeates Latin American feminism: "The feminist movement, like other social movements, has been configured according to racial prejudice. Racism permeates every aspect of our lives, both in the macrostructural dimension and the personal sphere, and to attempt to deconstruct it is very difficult. It is easier to deny it than to make a fuss and a problem of it. That is why the feminist movement feels threatened when racism is mentioned. Defensive arguments are promptly wielded, which explains why there is such a fierce opposition to Afro-centrist feminism." (1995:4) This situation led Afro-Latin American women to create their own political spaces, and organize the First Encounter of Black Women in Latin America in the Caribbean, held on July 1992 in the Dominican Republic. The pressure had some effect, and succeeding encounters featured some panels and workshops where the problem of racism was discussed.<sup>17</sup> At the seventh Feminist Encounter, which took place in Chile in 1996, for the first time one of the main three themes of the encounter was a discussion around "The discriminatory dimensions hidden in feminism: indigenous women, black women, women living in poverty and lesbians... among us." However, the differences and tensions between the self-defined autonomous feminist current and currents defined as institutional

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<sup>16</sup> I believe this is not the case for lesbian women, who have played an important role in the movement and have managed to integrate their interests in a more effective manner into the feminist movement's agenda.

<sup>17</sup> These workshops, however, have had little attendance. On this subject see the reflections of Silvia Marcos about the Taller sobre Feminismo y Diversidad Cultural at the VIII Congreso Latinoamericano and del Caribe, in Marcos 1999<sup>a</sup>.

dominated the whole encounter and brought Latin American feminism to the verge of schism.<sup>18</sup> Once again, the issue of racism was pushed to the back burner, and remains today a pending matter in Latin American feminism.

A worse exclusion has been that of indigenous women, whose participation at feminist conventions has been practically nil, often being represented there by their organizations' advisers. Like black women, they chose as of 1995 to construct their own spaces: the first Continental Convention of Indigenous Women was celebrated in Quito, Ecuador; the second in Mexico City (1997), the third in Panama (2000), and, enjoying a larger attendance from indigenous women from other continents, the Americas Indigenous Women Summit, in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2002. Based on these conventions, the Continental Coordinator of Indigenous Women was formed by indigenous women from Latin America, the United States, and Canada.

These new voices have made more evident the exclusions of the Latin American feminist movement and have obviated the urgent need for re-thinking the organizational structures and political agendas from a perspective that can articulate the various struggles of women in our continent.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For a description of autonomous and institutional feminist positions and the implications of these divisions, consult the excellent accounts of the encounters, written collectively by Sonia Alvarez, Elisabeth Friedman, Ericka Beckman, Maylei Blackwell, Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, Nathalie Lebon, Marysa Navarro and Marcela Ríos Tobar (2002). A more descriptive history of the feminist movement in Latin America can be found in Vargas Valente (2002), the specific case of the Mexican Feminisms can be found in Marcos 1999b.

<sup>19</sup> Examples of these new voices of Indigenous Feminists can be found in Delgado Pop (2000) Pop Bol (2000), Willis Paau (2000) Sánchez Nestor (2001), Duarte (in press).

## **2. - Considering culture as a historical process to avoid cultural essentialism**

At the same time as postcolonial feminists warned of the dangers of universalism, they have also recognized that the concern to recognize and respect difference can lead to cultural essentialisms that many times serve the patriarchal interests within national and ethnic collectives. The ahistorical representations of cultures as homogenous entities of shared values and habits free from power relations gives entrance to cultural fundamentalisms that see any effort on the part of women to transform the practices that affect their lives as a threat to the collective identity of the group. Historicizing cultural practices such as the sati (the immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands) (Mani 1987, Oldenburg Veena 1994) or infibulation or genital mutilation (Koso-Thomas 1987, Mama 1995, Mari Tripp 2002) have allowed postcolonial feminists to show that many “traditional” practices that affect and violate women’s lives have changed with time, that they often have their origins in colonial contexts and that their modification or elimination does not affect the group’s identity continuity.

These studies have shown that it is when the transformation of certain traditions affect the interests of the power sectors that the arguments about the dangers of cultural integrity are brought out, as was the case in the debate about women’s rights to land in Africa and in several countries of South Asia, where the argument in “defense of tradition” has been used to delegitimize women’s demands for land (see Mari Tripp Op. Cit., Agarwal 1995, Khadiagala 1999). To confront the uses of the cultural argument Uma Narayan proposes that “Anti-essentialist feminism can counter this static picture of culture by insisting on a historical understanding of the contexts in which are currently taken to be “particular cultures” came to be seen as defined as such ... Thus an anti-essentialist understanding of culture should emphasize that the labels that “pick out” particular “cultures” are not simple descriptions we employ to single out already distinct entities. Rather, they are fairly arbitrary and shifting designations, connected to various political projects that have different reasons for insisting upon

the distinctiveness of one culture from another” (2000:87). Deconstructing the way in which certain traits (and not others) are selected as representative of a culture or an integral part of identity allows us to see the network of power behind the representation of difference. The same author points out that the historical perspective of identities allows us to appreciate the way in which certain traits in a culture change without anyone considering such a change a threat to cultural integrity (for example, the incorporation of cars, agricultural technology, communication media...) while others are selectively chosen as cultural losses: “Feminist attention to such aspects of cultural change can help call attention to a general process that I call ‘selective labeling’, whereby those with social power conveniently designate certain changes in values and practices as consonant with ‘cultural preservation’ while designating other changes as ‘cultural loss’ or ‘cultural betrayal’.” (Narayan Op.Cit 89)

From the point of view of anthropology, the cultural relativism of some thinkers who validate “cultural survival” has contributed to the idealized representations of indigenous peoples, and has left out the voices and questionings of women within those groups. These representations have been used by the power groups of these collectives to legitimize their privileges. At the other extreme of this perspective are those who reject all the institutions and practices of these collectives based on their colonial origin, stereotyping their cultures also through a “selective labeling”

These two perspectives have been present in the debate over the cultural rights of indigenous peoples in Latin America. On one side there are those who from academia or political struggle have represented indigenous cultures as homogeneous entities independent of power relations and have asserted the need to suspend any judgment of value regarding their cultures, and at a political level have often idealized their practices and institutions (reminiscent of Rousseau’s Good Savage which the west still looks for in its ex-colonies). At the other end there are those who through liberalism deny the right of indigenous peoples to a

culture of their own and reject autonomic demands justifying acculturation and integration through a discourse of republican values of equality, assumed as universal. These polarized visions, the first essentialist and the second ethnocentric, leave indigenous peoples with few options to construct their future and re-think their relationship with the nation-states. Nevertheless, there are others who, from political practice and every-day resistance are trying to break free of this bond and are proposing more creative ways to re-think ethnical and generic identities and build a policy of cultural respect that is able to consider diversity within diversity.

In the context of Mexico, an incipient indigenous women's movement has assumed the job of confronting both the idealized and the stereotyped excluding visions of their cultures. In the struggle for the recognition of the autonomic rights of indigenous peoples women have played a key role by defending the collective rights of their groups at the same time as they claim their specific gender rights. Through their participation within the national indigenous movement a new definition of autonomy based on a critique of ahistorical visions of indigenous cultures and a rejection of the veiled racism of universalizing liberalism has gradually begun to take shape. Before the State, indigenous women have questioned the hegemonic discourse that still holds the existence of a monocultural national identity, and at the same time, before their own communities and organizations, they have expanded the concept of culture by questioning static conceptions of tradition and working to re-invent tradition. (see Artía Rodríguez 2001, Hernández Castillo 2001b)

The proposals and experiences of organized indigenous women, together with the intellectual output of postcolonial feminists give us a few tips on how to re-think the politics of cultural recognition from a gender perspective, a proposal that goes beyond a liberal universalism that in the name of sameness denies the right to equality, and of a cultural relativism that in the name of difference justifies the exclusion and marginalization of women.

### **3. - Recognizing the way in which our local struggles are inserted in global processes of capitalist domination**

Although one of the criticisms made to Postcolonial Studies has been precisely that their emphasis on the narrative strategies of power has neglected the material level of domination, many postcolonial feminists have replied to their critics by distancing themselves from postmodern relativism with which they are some times identified (for the use both make of deconstruction and discourse analysis) and positioning themselves in reference to strategies of anti-capitalist struggle.

In a recent article published by Chandra Mohanty (2002) in which she revises her arguments against the ethnocentrist feminism she developed in "Under Western Eyes..." in 1986, the author explains that at that moment she considered it important to warn against the dangers of feminist universalism, a view she still holds, but at the present moment her warning has been very well developed by postcolonial feminism and, in her opinion, it is now necessary to work not only at the deconstructive stage of discourses but also at the constructive stage of struggle strategies. She says: "Now I find myself wanting to reemphasize the connections between local and universal. In 1986 my priority was on difference, but now I want to recapture and reiterate its fuller meaning, which was always there, and that is connection to the universal. In other words, this discussion allows me to emphasize how differences are never just difference. In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities, because no border and boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border-crossings better and more accurately, how specifying differences allow us to theorize universal concerns fully. It is this intellectual move that allows for my concern for women of different communities and identities to built coalitions and solidarities across borders." (Mohanty 2002:505)

I consider this call by Chandra Mohanty to build coalitions and alliances beyond the borders through an anti-imperialist feminism to be particularly pertinent at times such as this, when economic globalization and the civilizing project of a few is being imposed by the use of force. The military powers have not only massacred hundreds of children, women and elderly Iraqis, but is endangering the survival of humanity by unleashing an arms escalation in the name of disarmament, by trampling over any international form of legality in the name of democracy, and by legitimizing the use of violence in the name of peace. The link between discourse and power that postcolonial feminists have emphasized is especially relevant in this context, in which language, through the media, is becoming an important weapon to mask murder and impunity. This is a war being fought also in the area in which social scientists have extensive experience. All of us who participated in this book earn our living writing and teaching, and have enough weapons to counter the global discourse that tries to convince the world that justice means revenge, that democracy means authoritarianism, that war is the previous stage to peace, that freedom means submission. This is about the “collateral damage to language” which John Berger describes as one of the consequences of military aggression against Iraq and the “war on terrorism” unleashed by the United States after the events of September 11. The English writer points out that we are witnessing a loss of meaning of words that leads inevitably to a diminishing ability of the skill to imagine, and that imagination needs solid and precise categories in order to be able to jump from one to the other and not over them (Berger 2002). The discourses on Absolute Freedom, Infinite Justice, Enduring Freedom and Axis of Evil are emptying the concepts of meaning and damaging the ability to imagine; these “collateral” damages impact also on the ability to imagine other possible futures.

In contrast to the simplistic visions that are held about deconstruction as a methodological tool that necessarily imply total relativization and demobilization, in contexts such as the present, in which globalized discourses are colonizing our bodies and minds, language and deconstruction become important political

weapons. But I think it is important to go beyond the reduced spaces of academia and the obscure weavings of theory to recover the trenches of language by creating bridges of communication between us and the people on the streets. It is of outmost importance to give meaning back to words, to remember that when “accidentally launched missiles” kill forty six people in a neighborhood of Baghdad, this is not “collateral damage”, but a massacre; that when children die of dysentery because a missile has damaged the waste water treatment system, it is not the “enemy’s infrastructure being destroyed,” but murder. That when American citizens, many of them the children of Latin American immigrants, die for the economic interests of their governments, it is not victory, but crime; that when military action of allied forces is mentioned, it is not in reference to an international coalition such as the one that defeated Hitler but to Anglo-American aggression. Postcolonial feminists, who have made language their fighting trench, and who have a long experience revealing the textual strategies of power, can bring important contributions to stop these deadly global discourses.

Leaving behind the stage of intellectual exclusions and working to build communication bridges South-to-South is a fundamental step towards building the networks of solidarity that are needed if our local struggles are to have a more profound impact on global powers.

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