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Creating Bonds and Respecting Differences Among Feminists

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Feminism was born wrapped in one great hope: that it would be good for all womankind, able to embrace all women, and dispel all national, racial, and cultural barriers. Because it was developed concurrently in many parts of the world—sometimes as a not well articulated groping desire, sometimes as a clear elaboration of much meditation—it had an apparent promise of universality that led many women and men to believe that some day it would be a global canon for all humankind. Time has proven that the femaleness of all women is not enough to achieve a unity of purpose that overcomes the many cultural factors that make gender a different reality in each society. Further, feminism, like any other ideological and cultural construct, is not held within a strict mold that remains impervious to chronological change. The aspirations of the first feminists, those who evolved roughly between 1900 and 1940, took new courses as new generations sought different routes to solve their problems, or some of the original goals were achieved. The meaning of women's or feminist needs vis-à-vis their own social environment therefore takes a myriad of subtle forms that demand careful attention to unravel.

A "universal" pattern of feminism does not exist now and has not existed historically. The definitions of feminism elaborated in European countries and in the United States from the mid-1850s onwards were, for some time, assumed to represent all feminist interests. We confront today many objections to a universal discourse, coming from areas that until recently were regarded as the periphery of intellectual debates, but where the needs and the cultural heritage of most women do not fit the parameters devised elsewhere. Thus, we face international feminisms with two problematic issues. One is whether Western European and North American interpretations of feminism can serve the needs of the rest of the world; the other is the possible breakdown of an ideology, one which has served so many women's causes well into a number of compartmentalized expressions serving local issues, but having lost the binding ties that permit the recognition of a common experience in womanhood.

Assuming that feminism is a cultural construct that does not accept unquestioned transference of thoughts and answers from one period to another

or from one nation or area of the world to another, is it possible to save its "international" character without losing the wealth generated by its internal diversity? This question has elicited many answers. Here I will simply outline some thoughts based on my knowledge of Latin American feminism, past and present, in the hope that it may facilitate further discussion of the theme proposed as a basis for a dialogue between North Americans and Latin American scholars. I do not attempt to cover all the potential ways of establishing bridges of understanding because my premises are that the bridges are "portable" and within each one of us, can take as many forms as we give them, and can be planted anywhere we decide to do so.

Since the First International Feminine Congress in Buenos Aires in 1910 and until the mid-1980s, when Latin American *Encuentros* or international gatherings began to be held with regular frequency, most of the discussions revolved around universal themes of family and labor, the elimination of male supremacy as expressed in the laws regulating gender relations (especially in the family), as well as a desire to come to grips with the meaning of feminism itself. Before the 1960s internationalism helped women's and feminist groups to examine their own situation in the light of the values and practices of women of other cultures who, nonetheless, shared common problems because of their gender. This was the case of Latin American countries that, in the 1920s and 1930s, carefully followed the developments of all other countries in the world in which "progress" for the emancipation of women could be detected. They became models from which they drew inspiration and learned some strategies for their own "struggle" at home. They constructed bridges of knowledge about other women to understand their own predicament and formulate their own answers to the issues relevant to them.

In that process Latin American feminists took what they saw fit and rejected what they understood would not help them. For example, early feminists were reluctant to adopt strategies of street demonstrations of the heroic kind that made British "suffragettes" well known worldwide. It was only in the 1970s that street demonstrations, based on political issues, lent feminists a visibility of the kind that their grandmothers had strongly rejected. Since its first definitions and again in the 1970s, Latin American feminists rejected any position that would place the individual in opposition to family and motherhood, and opted for "social" goals embracing family values, protection for working women, and welfare benefits. Throughout those years feminists also were reluctant to assume an ideological position that would generate strong antagonisms between the sexes, insisting on the complementarity of men and women under a system of equality. Such positions

were the result of an understanding that the challenge to patriarchal values had to be fought within the frame of their own cultural values, forged for several centuries and unlikely to be changed overnight. While these strategies were definitely different from those of feminists elsewhere, they cannot be said to have been less useful, less valid, or less meaningful than any other.

Latin America is not, however, a political or cultural unit within which one may expect a set of unified harmonious purposes, even if we write about the continent as a unit for the sake of comparison with other areas of the world. Its internal diversity is useful as an experimental field to study a wider global reality, a case that I have argued elsewhere.¹ Diversity within has created a unique history of women for each country, a unique path for its feminist manifestations and yet, historians and other academicians can also see patterns of similarities, and feminists themselves have constantly exchanged ideas in search of mutual support. Not that this has been accomplished at all times. After a history of fruitful "encounters" or intra-national meetings in which points were argued and counter argued, but usually finished in solidarity, the feminist *encuentro* in Chile (1996) began to show the stress of internal tensions. Feminists left divided in two groups: one that wished to continue the former line of a global feminism, and another that felt that international agencies and NGOs paid by such institutions were taking over the idiosyncrasy of "their" movement and making them members of an act choreographed from abroad. This was a divisive issue that did not win the support of all participants and left a bitter taste for many. This break reiterates the need to respect the "pluralism of difference" and acknowledge that centripetal forces constantly force feminists to re-examine themselves to maintain the pull to the center that will save their idiosyncrasy and aspirations to sustain an ideology capable of maintaining a dialogue over universal values.

Since the premise of the *Encuentro* organized by the University at Albany, SUNY, and the Inter American University of Puerto Rico, San Germán (1998) was how to come together, how to establish bridges that would allow comfortable walks between two or several worlds, the constant exchange of ideas either through publications, networking, net-surfing, conferences, etc. remains essential. What should we do with the communication tools that we have today? Above all: study each other and think deeply about recognizing, admitting, and understanding differences and common threads in different "national" and "cultural" feminisms. This simple statement seems to be one of those self-evident truisms, yet it is perhaps its simplicity that makes it difficult to accept. The assumed validity of values and concepts emanating from centers of political and economic power is an illusion that

is already creating numerous internal tensions among feminists. The acknowledgement of splits caused by class, race, religious affiliation, even sexual orientation, are just as hard to accept. Once acknowledged, however, I think we will have in our hands the key to open the gates to more effective and vibrant feminisms.

First and foremost we will have to get to know much better than we do today our own cultural differences, not to become more alienated from each other, but to understand our differences and delineate our similarities to the extent that it is possible within the intrinsic complexity of humanity. Culture is that imponderable mass of accumulated experience converted into behavioral norms, remembered, codified, and enacted throughout time, imposed mostly by the male sex, and accepted by women sometimes for lack of a choice, most times through educational indoctrination. To assess the impact of culture on our behavior (and therefore on all forms of feminism) we must be aware of our historical experience, the memory of how issues have been confronted in the past, the ways it binds us to patterns of thought and behavior that we must attempt to break if we are to challenge some of its premises. History gives us the memory of how this has been done and how much remains to be done. It also help us to see the difference between true and assumed idiosyncratic differences that separate women and feminists, and obscure the common issues of gender.

As an example of how to begin to construct new and fruitful curricula in women's studies and about the history of feminisms, I would like to examine briefly some cultural assumptions that may be universalized and some universal presuppositions that should be discarded. The end result should hopefully strengthen our ability to understand the multiple features of women's status and socioeconomic conditions in today's world.

Among the historical experiences that are believed to be specifically Latin American are oppressive military regimes, pervasive poverty, the lack of legislated reproductive rights, and the encoding of engendered forms of mostly male-oriented behavior and values in the national codes of law. These also have been described as "Third World" or "non-Western" and applied to other areas of the world. While some of these features become more specific the closer we look at some situations and areas, it is possible to find their "universality" and understand that some of these so-called non-Western features have a lot in common with problems faced by nations and women of the so called "First" and "Western World." When we check history we find that in the 19th and 20th centuries, European women of several nationalities including those to be believed the core of Western culture—France, Germany, and Italy—experienced war, rape, poverty, famine, phys-

ical abuse, pogroms, genocide, and state controlled legislated reproductive norms. Some European countries continue to experience such conditions today. Therefore, when we talk about "Western" and "non-Western" we are creating artificial boundaries of experience based on a few chosen examples of the so-called "First World" which do not even apply to all countries theoretically comprised in that definition.

The nature of politics and the type of state emerging from the internal forces of a given political culture are absolutely essential to analyze the possibilities of feminist agendas. Anywhere in Latin America, attempts to enact feminist politics must contend with national politics, given the centrality of the state and the nature of the political systems. Unlike countries with stable electoral systems, Latin America (past and present) presents an assortment of political regimes which include democracies, nations subject to violent internecine political wars, local or national *caudillismo* [bossism], populist and revolutionary regimes, one-party dominated regimes, and others debilitated by the continual fragmentation of dozens of parties. This variety of political circumstances have demanded and continue to demand feminist expressions and activities suited to meet such peculiarities. As we take such factors into consideration, we must never forget that we must do the same for other feminisms across the world. The need to challenge patriarchal power and to establish authority and recognition within the established parameters of the national state creates for each national feminist movement a problem that cannot be replicated elsewhere and yet, must be faced everywhere. Therein, the commonality of the problem and the differences of the means to solve it. The viability of feminist organizations depends on the degree of internal political freedom, as well as the admission of women to the national dialogue as equal partners of men, and this applies to all feminisms and to all women no matter where they are in this world. Unfortunately, this universal premise has not always been heeded in studies of comparative feminisms and has been the source of misunderstanding certain peculiarities of other than "Western" feminisms.

Let us examine, as another example, the application of the concept of human rights to both national and feminist politics. The close association of Latin American feminists with the issue of human rights is not surprising, given the nature of the regimes that emerged in some nations in the 1970s. Human rights are a recent addition to the catalog of feminist concerns, an issue not present in earlier feminisms, but by the 1990s an essential part of the feminist agenda almost anywhere in the region. The now world-known Argentine Madres de Plaza de Mayo [Mothers of Plaza de Mayo] and their lesser known counterparts in Chile, Uruguay, Nicaragua, and Honduras,

became icons of mobilization in the name of motherhood against political oppression and disregard for human life, activating political power from the ubiquitous domestic space. The denunciation of torture and murder by plain women theretofore regarded as “apolitical” had a deep ethical content and gained respect precisely because the archetype of selfless motherhood was above political commitments and had deep cultural roots.

Ironically, while the agenda remained, the Madres have received much criticism in the 1990s, especially from theoretically-oriented feminists for whom the Madres perpetuated the polarity between women-femininity-mother and men-masculinity-state. The specificity of their demands—always presented within the framework of the individual experience and the temporality embodied in their precise personal complaint—has been deemed insufficient to alter the power relationship between men and women. Others disagree, seeing in the Madres a potential venue for the discussion of large national problems at a pragmatic level, meaningful for those who participate in it and enhancing the power of the alliance of motherhood and human dignity in an effective way, an example worth studying by feminists elsewhere. After all, the Madres obtained global visibility and respect, and helped to weaken the military’s arrogant disregard for human rights. They may not have been “true” feminists, but they gave others a lesson in activism that will never be forgotten. Departing from the family locus, the Madres opened a route that allowed other feminists in the 1980s to focus their attention on the international issue of female abuse under military regimes. Until then the call for human rights was enunciated in terms that represented men and only rarely women. Feminisms worldwide have profited from the adoption of human rights as part of their agenda. The struggle against oppressive and/or criminal political authority could and should be taken into the realms of the family, sexuality, and the struggle for gender equality at all levels. I was recently reminded that mothers outside Latin America had organized for similar purposes even though they have received much less attention than those from Argentina.

Latin America has had the dubious honor of being noted as the cradle of *machismo*. Yet, one does not have to go to the Middle East, India, or China to find *machismo*, understood as the glorification of male values and the control of women and non-conformist men by formal and informal means. To a greater or lesser degree there is *machismo* in all “Western” societies, whether deftly hidden under subtle covers, or more openly expressed in forms of popular culture. If we also survey the control of political power there are only a few exceptional Western countries in which women have a fair degree of participation in the legislative branch of government and even

fewer in which they have achieved an effective measure of power within parties or political venues. Closer to our own occupation, academia remains, despite major breakthroughs, an arena controlled by men, even in the United States, where today we have the largest concentration of women in higher education. One only needs to take a look at other "proper" Western nations such as Germany, England, and France to come with excellent examples of this situation. Equally, it is widely assumed that some religions are intrinsically misogynist and that others are less so. The fact is that the three most widespread religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have their fair share of misogyny. These religions are controlled by men and have been historically defined by patriarchal values from which women are struggling to emerge. Ironically, it is in some Eastern religions where the ultimate achievement of spirituality is neither male nor female. The conclusion to which we must arrive is that no region, no culture, and no nation has greater compassion for women than the other, or a better developed vocation for developing a privileged conceptualization of how to liberate women from economic, behavioral, ethical, or religious oppression.

If we are posed to think on how to strengthen the ties that bind us and understand and respect our differences we must also begin the process of tearing down a number of linguistic "props" as our first task to find common grounds of understanding. Current analyses of feminism are not achieving those purposes, despite being rich sources of reflection. A proclivity to tear apart all molds and make all situations relative is leading us into a Thomist methodology that has no connection with reality and has much of intellectual elitism. We are constructing a world of academic feminisms in which language is so dense and so encoded that it serves only the initiated few and has no connection with the practical needs of women without high levels of education.

In order to become a bit closer to those realities, let me suggest here a few points for reflection that may be helpful in establishing the grounds for a more fruitful dialogue.

1. Let us stop labeling from political, economic, and cultural power centers. Such labels as Third World, non-Western, women of color, etc. are at best superficial, at worst, a form of reinforcing the alterity of others, of imposing the viewpoint of those who have created such definitions, which are definitely not shared by those to whom they are applied. Such labels must be dropped and substituted by the use of universal terms that address human female issues rather than creating stereotypes in the name of universalization. The use and abuse of such labels is another form of cultural hegemony. For

example, who invented the use of the term "women of color" for all women of non-European descent? Why and for what purpose? The issue is whether this most superficial epidermal identity should divide women in different categories, perpetuating the basis of racism. Should feminists continue to use labels that take as its point of departure an accidental feature of the human body? Shouldn't we go beyond the outer surfaces of gender? Feminism has to avoid conflating poverty and color under gender, and assume that the latter will be strong enough to iron out differences that while not ignored, have not been addressed. By itself, gender self-consciousness does not enable women to overcome negative individual circumstances stemming from their race or ethnic affiliation. However, in the search for justice we should stop repeating or reiterating *ad infinitum* those limiting definitions and tried to endow race, ethnicity and/or poverty with dignity, demanding a social awareness of respect for such differences. Since the late 1980s Latin American feminist groups have proclaimed the need to broaden their social base to ensure that class and race are taken into consideration in the construction of an inclusive movement. Feminists in Latin America do not use or care to use labels to identify issues of race, even though the problems of race are acknowledged and are currently under frank examination. The understanding of specificities should not obstruct the more important process of understanding the problems created by the multiplicity of gender constructions. Naming or labeling (as in the case of "Third World") should be a choice, not an imposition. The so-called Third World should have the opportunity of naming itself.

2. We must exercise caution when grouping women in geographical areas without considering cultural nuances. A geographical definition does not necessarily contain a cultural definition indiscriminately applicable to all its human components. Everybody knows that the Middle-East, for example, contains a broad spectrum of cultural specificities and the same can be said of Europe and Latin America. It is primarily culture, not geographical boundaries that defines the experience of women and it is culture that determines the circumstances under which feminisms develop. Our willingness to see beyond national or artificial boundaries should create a rich feminist dialogue based on a *multidirectional flow of cultures* not bound by mere geographical bases.²
3. Start paying attention to religion and religious groups. The extreme secularism of the so-called "Western" feminisms simply will not

help to understand cultures in which religion has a close association with the state or has radical vocal fundamentalist wings. Religious organizations have been a neglected element within the study gender constructions and gender awareness. We continue to assume that conservative or traditional groups lean on the church and reject feminism outright, and that feminism is "lay." It is true that organized religion has created the most oppressive conceptual boundaries for women and gender relations, and sustained the most acid campaigns against changing gender roles. Yet, in a significant number of countries religious organization mobilize women, create spaces for them, and attract a large membership. Feminists must acknowledge this fact and attempt to open a dialogue which may bring traditionally-oriented women to a closer understanding of the meanings of feminisms, while feminists may learn that not all traditions are necessarily negations of female self-assertiveness or agency. A dialogue with beliefs and churches is necessary to create a broader social and political base for feminisms.

In order to create a curriculum that may help tighten the bonds that unite us, I would like to make the following suggestions:

1. To identify and study the deficient representation of women in national and international politics and political institutions which at present are depriving women from access to sources of power that could help change their status and destiny. Feminism can only thrive on exercised citizenship.
2. To identify and study sexist attitudes, violence against women, pornographic or denigrating use of the female body, sexual abuse of young women and girls, and of married women. This happens as much and as frequently in the "Western" world as it happens elsewhere.
3. To identify and study women's triple day as heads of household, family nurturers, and wage earners which affects women of the so-called First World as much as those of the Third World.
4. To identify and study the exploitation of women's work through low salaries, unenforced social benefits, non-recognition of ability, and seniority. These forms of maintaining subordination are expressions of political cultures in which male exercise of power successfully resists feminists' efforts to obtain legal and socioeconomic equality.
5. To identify and study the stereotyping of personal and group behavior according to factors such as race, age, ethnic affiliation

- or "national" traits. Those that we have stereotyped have counter-stereotypes of us. We must understand the meaning of that double-gaze; our reflection in somebody else's mirror as part of the agenda of universalization.
6. To identify and study nationalisms as sources of potential antagonisms in developing universal bonds among feminists. All feminisms are encased in national politics and this is rarely addressed in university courses on feminism and women's issues.
 7. To advocate a breakdown of women's internalized self-image that all that is feminine or female is to be neutralized to validate itself as a worthwhile representation of intellectual achievement and equality. Many Latin American writers and women deny being feminists and desire that their writing and behavior be regarded as asexual and universal, and therefore "liberated." This is, unfortunately, an attitude not at all uncommon among women in the most "developed" countries, fanned by the negative media image of a feminist who is a "man hater" or a misguided female.
 8. To identify and study cultural constructs as well as the material world they help to shape. To address development or poverty without reference to beliefs or behavior dictated by the predominant culture is useless. Maintaining a dialogue and open communication with women of all social strata will permit academic feminists to understand that "their" universe is not the only universe of feminism. I find as much distance between some academic feminists and their own fellow citizens of less education and economic position, as there is between a well-meaning but national-bound feminist and women in other cultures.
 9. To study and reject binary conceptualizations that reduce social analysis to polarities lacking in nuances and contrary to the universalism that feminisms should pursue. Universalism does not eliminate the consciousness of particularities.
 10. As a historian, I strongly suggest the study of the development of feminism in a wide worldwide frame and, if possible, tying this history to that of women in those regions. How words were uttered; what behavior meant; what the concerns were for women at a specific place and time is the essence of historical understanding. Without it we are committed to consciously or unconsciously re-enact our own stereotypes and misperceptions. Despite the noble effort made by some outstanding journals in the United States and some European countries to include information on other countries, there

are enormous gaps of knowledge about each other and the consequent perpetuation of ignorance dressed up as willingness to see and understand others. I still remember giving a public lecture in a mid-West university on the history of Latin American women and its feminist manifestations, and feeling good at the end of what I considered a satisfactory presentation. I believed that I had made a small contribution to broaden the view of its undergraduate body. On the following day, a student journalist assigned to the lecture reported in the campus newspaper how "far behind" women in Latin America were compared to those of the United States. On another occasion I was featured in a radio show in Phoenix in which I talked about the Beijing Women's World Conference and at one point alluded to the historical and already defunct practice of foot binding, among the many changes from the past. A caller to the program, which was carried out in Spanish for the Spanish-speaking community, expressed her dismay at the state of "primitiveness" of Chinese women. In each instance the commentators were centered in their own experiences and each continued to live their own experience as central, even though one came from someone who could have been considered a "subaltern" within U.S. culture. She did not think so; she saw other subalterns elsewhere, even though she neither knew the meaning of the word nor used it. Regardless of who we are and how others see us, we in the teaching profession have to fight this tendency among our students and the public in general to see other women as less developed and lagging behind. It takes more than one lecture or a radio show, and more than casual acquaintance to break through deeply-rooted mental patterns of thinking about "others."

Feminist academicians have a tall order: to work toward the creation of a new curriculum based on the identification of cultural factors that lead to subordination, marginalization, or negation of opportunities for women worldwide, and includes a discussion of those issues in such manner as to allow teachers and students to recognize the gender ties that bind all women, despite cultural, class, racial, and economic differences, and fosters respect for such differences. I am sure that we are all trying to do all the above suggestions and even more, but we also know that we have not met our goals.

For feminists in general: we are leaning more and more towards accepting the diversity of peoples, situations, and cultures, as the only way to reconcile the enormous differences between women of different nationalities,

racess, classes, and educational levels. It is clearer every year that we must do away with homogeneity; despite its essential importance in defining the most basic human differences, there is no fixed meaning to gender but a series of historical perceptions produced by historical circumstances. Equally, excessive attention to the differences of particular identities may lead to a hopeless fragmentation. There is risk in "collectivizing" the experience of "non-Western" subjects for the sake of a "Western" understanding. A broad and flexible awareness of the primacy of gender will allow us to study specific cases without losing sight of the fact that we are attempting to write on women and talk to women in the broadest pluralistic sense. I like Fred Pfeil's suggestion of engagement with others driven by a sense of solidarity.³ Today feminism is multivocal and allows us to appreciate the beauty, worth, and humanity of the experiences of individuals as well as of groups. There are no centers and no margins. Let us try to see all women's experiences as legitimate and try to find and celebrate general patterns. To maintain plurality while studying individuality and vice versa is a worthwhile project for a new century of feminisms.

Notes

1. Asunción Lavrin, "International Feminisms: Latin American Alternatives," *Gender and History* 10:3 (November 1998), 519-34.
2. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994), 8.
3. Fred Pfeil, "No basta teorizar: In-Difference to Solidarity in Contemporary Fiction, Theory, and Practice," in Grewal and Kaplan, eds. *Postmodernity*, 217-30. For a perceptive analysis of the need to fully understand the meaning of terms invented by "Western" cultures when juxtaposed to contradictory situations in other cultures and within the U.S., see Inderpal Grewal, "Autobiographic Subjects and Diasporic Locations: *Meatless Days* and *Borderlands*." in Grewal and Kaplan, eds. *Postmodernity*, 231-54.

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