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Latin American Feminist Philosophy: Theory Meets Praxis: Introduction

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In her prominent overview of how we ought to identify Latin American feminist theoretical methods, Ofelia Schutte advocates that we look for “if not ... an explicit, at least an implicit move to connect theory and practice.”¹ For Schutte, Latin American feminist theoretical methods should be seen as involving a connection between theoretical feminist work and the “on-the-ground” efforts of feminist activists in the Latin American context. Importantly, however, Schutte warns against an uncritical endorsement of the connection between theory and practice. This is because one can easily put into practice morally unacceptable theories—theories that, among other things, serve to thwart feminist objectives. Schutte explains that such a “theory meets practice” approach, particularly in the context of Latin American feminist theoretical work, should only be implemented alongside, and in connection to, an additional set of aims.

These aims include (1) a critical conception of knowledge—one that is non-positivist and “can be critically appropriated or deployed by Latin American feminists and progressive ... theorists”²; (2) a concerted effort to use one’s methods to support a “generally progressive project of liberation”³ or *emancipatory projects*; and (3) the “enacting of a transformative politics of culture.”⁴ Such efforts of transformation should ideally take the form of feminist, decolonizing projects that serve 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.”⁵

While we cannot do justice to the full scope of Schutte’s project here, we introduce our special issue “Latin American Feminist Philosophy: Theory Meets Praxis” with Schutte’s words in order to articulate our overarching methodological inspiration for this volume. While we do not claim to have “fully lived up to” the ideals of Schutte’s framework, our goal has been to feature articles that indicate, in Schutte’s words, either an implicit or an explicit move to connect theory and practice. And we believe that the articles featured in this volume—all of which are focused on the lived experiences and sociopolitical circumstances of Latin American and Latina women—offer a critical conception of knowledge that is employed in support of emancipatory projects that serve to enact a transformative politics of culture.

¹ Ofelia Schutte, “Engaging Latin Feminisms Today: Method, Theory, Practice,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 4 (Fall, 2011): 791.

² Schutte, “Engaging Latin Feminisms Today,” 793.

³ Schutte, “Engaging Latin Feminisms Today,” 791

⁴ Schutte, *ibid.*

⁵ Schutte, “Engaging Latin Feminisms Today,” 800.

A second source of inspiration for this edited volume on “Theory Meets Praxis” has been Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez’s influential work on the nature of praxis. Sánchez Vázquez famously defined praxis as a human, intentional practice that stems from one’s profound sense of dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in the world. To engage in praxis, the dissatisfied person must imagine a way in which the world could be better, and then actively attempt to implement what she/he/they have imagined.⁶ Praxis, then, is necessarily a *certain type* of practice. It is a blending of thought and practice with the aim of (progressive) social transformation. Many of the articles featured in this volume focused on the praxis—that is, the theoretical activist work—of feminists living and working in Latin America.

In the methodological spirit of this volume, before turning to the articles themselves let us briefly survey at least some of the sociopolitical conditions that motivate the Latin American feminist work featured in this volume. While Latin American feminists have made remarkable achievements over the past decades, some of which we shall outline shortly, it sadly remains the case Latin American women continue to face considerable, explicitly gendered obstacles in their day-to-day lives.

One important source of Latin American feminist concern has been that of violence against women and femicides/*feminicidios*. A recent report of the UN Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean estimated that in 2014, 1,678 women were killed for “gender-based reasons” in 17 Latin American countries.⁷ The report, which defines *feminicidios* as “the most dramatic expression of violence against women,” notes that only eight Latin American and Caribbean countries explicitly devote resources from their budgets to upholding laws banning such gender-based violence. The UN has also reported that more than half of the 25 countries in the world with the highest rates of *feminicidios* are in the Americas.⁸

⁶ See Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *Filosofía de la Praxis* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 2003). For further discussion of Sanchez Vazquez’s theory of praxis, see Amy Reed-Sandoval, “Utilizando la filosofía de la praxis de Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez,” in *Repensar la Filosofía de La Praxis: Homenaje a Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez*, edited by Gilberto García, Ambrosio Velasco, and Víctor Hernández (Ciudad Juárez, Mexico: UACJ Press, 2017), p. 181-202.

⁷ See Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “ECLAC Warns About High Number of Femicide’s in Latin America and the Caribbean,” accessible at <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/eclac-warns-about-high-number-femicides-latin-america-and-caribbean>

⁸ See “Ending impunity for femicide across the Americas,” United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/EndingImpunityLAC.aspx>.

LGBTQ individuals, communities and activists in Latin America must also contend an ever-present threat of violence in addition to other challenges. While there has been a steady, significant increase of LGBTQ rights provisions like the legalization of gay marriages and adoptions throughout Latin America—particularly since 2005, when same-sex marriage was legalized in Spain—the region was, according to the UN, “scene to 78 percent of murders of transgender and gender-diverse people documented worldwide between 2008 and 2014.”⁹ Homophobic hate speech, while controversial, remains relatively common and accepted. For instance, consider the continued (though controversial) popularity of the scream/grito “*puto*” (or “faggot”) on the part of many Mexican soccer/football fans intending to antagonize players on the opposing team. Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa stated that “it will be a long and difficult path until Latin America liberates itself from those deeply rooted defects that are *machismo* and homophobia—two sides of the same coin.”¹⁰

In addition, a great deal of Latin American feminist praxis has also focused on reproductive rights in Latin America. Abortion rights are highly restricted throughout most of Latin America, and abortion is *completely outlawed*—even in cases in which the woman’s/pregnant person’s life is endangered by the pregnancy—in Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Honduras. It is estimated that in 2008, about 95 percent of the approximately 4.4 million abortions conducted in Latin America were illegal—and that approximately 2,000 Latin American women die each year as a result of these unsafe and illegal abortion procedures.¹¹ Poor, rural, and Indigenous women in Latin America are most likely to die both from unsafe abortions and during childbirth (in cases of “wanted pregnancies”).¹²

Many Indigenous women in Latin America must regularly fight for the sovereignty,

⁹ See Natalia Koper, “LGBT rights in Latin America, Caught between Progressive Laws and Widespread Homophobia,” *Lifegate*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.lifegate.com/people/news/lgbt-rights-in-latin-america>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Haley Florsheim and Joan Caivano, “Challenges for Women’s Rights in Latin America,” *The Dialogue: Leadership for the Americas*, December 21, 2015, <https://www.thedialogue.org/blogs/2015/12/protect-womens-rights-hold-latin-american-governments-accountable/>. Also “Abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean,” Guttmacher Institute, accessed January 10, 2017, <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/abortion-latin-america-and-caribbean>.

¹² See Dan Collyns, “Indigenous Women Remain Invisible in Latin American Society, Warns UN,” *The Guardian*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/nov/01/indigenous-women-latin-america-un>.

health, and well-being of their communities against the environmental threats that foreign extractive industries impose upon Indigenous communities of Latin America—in addition to a range of other forms of state-sanctioned violence. In 2016, Honduran Indigenous environmental activist Berta Cáceres was assassinated at the age of 44 after facing years of death-threats, stalking, and harassment in response to her efforts to keep the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam from being constructed on the traditional land of Lenca people. In Mexico, Nestora Salgado, whose mother hailed from the Indigenous Tlapanec village in Guerrero, famously headed a community police force in Olinalá in response to the violence imposed by drug cartels and the Mexican military on that community. Salgado was eventually charged with kidnapping by the Mexican government; she was imprisoned for nearly three years before being declared innocent. Meanwhile, along (and on both sides of) the Mexico-U.S. border, Indigenous women resist the militarization of the border in defense of Indigenous sovereignty. As Margo Tamez explains, “...within the U.S.-Mexico border region ... Indigenous women are engaged in collective movements for self-determination, autonomy, and to disrupt wars and the violations of human rights against Indigenous peoples.”¹³

In academia, one hopes things would be different for women, but it’s not really the case. Female teachers and researchers are largely outnumbered by their male counterparts in most universities, and many middle- and high-income families still believe education—and certainly higher education—should be reserved for men. Of course, some women are given access to jobs in the academy—seldom in the real positions of power, though: there has never been a women President of the largest public university of Mexico, UNAM. Very recently, Mexican writer and journalist Sabina Berman wrote an article that went viral, “El Colegio Nacional o el privilegio de nacer hombre,” [“El Colegio Nacional or the privilege of being born a man”] in which she denounced that the honorary academy, which is supposed to bring together Mexico’s most outstanding artists and scientists. However, of its 102 members, only four women have been included since it was founded in 1943.

Yet in the face of these extraordinary material, structural, and epistemic barriers, Latin American feminists and scholars are engaging in feminist *praxis* and achieving success. In Argentina, Mexico, and throughout Latin America, feminists are campaigning in creative and forceful ways against *feminicidios*—as evinced, at least in part, in the global popularity of the twitter hashtag #NiUnaMenos (not one [woman] less). There has also been an emergence of women’s self-defense groups in places like Mexico City and Bue-

¹³ Margo Garcia Tamez, “Our Way of Life is Resistance: Indigenous Women and Anti-Imperialist Challenges to Militarization Along the Mexico-U.S. Border,” *Works & Days* 29 (2011): 281.

nos Aires. In July 2017, in Chile—where abortion had, since the reign of Pinochet, been illegal under all circumstances—political leaders like Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, and feminist activist groups like Miles Chile, convinced the Chilean Senate to narrowly pass a bill that legalizes abortion in cases of rape, fetal non-viability, and when the pregnancy threatens the woman's/pregnant person's life. Meanwhile, in Honduras, Afro-Indigenous Garifuna women are receiving international attention for organizing against and calling attention to the ways in which neoliberal land privatization initiatives are undermining Garifuna women's traditional, matrilineal land claims. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, LGBTQ activists across Latin America have been gaining ground in terms of marriage and adoption rights. Mariela Castro, the niece of Fidel Castro and daughter of Raul Castro, has emerged as a leader of the Cuban LGBTQ community in the aftermath of Fidel Castro's notorious labor camps for gay men.

While we wish to emphasize community and grassroots feminist political activism, we should note that there has also been a significant upsurge of female heads of government in Latin America and the Caribbean: from Dilma Rousseff of Brazil to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina to Kamla Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago, and Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica. Recently, Carmen Yulín Cruz, the mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, gained fame for publicly criticizing the Trump administration's response (or lack thereof) to devastation that Hurricane Maria inflicted about Puerto Rico. And in Mexico, Indigenous Zapatista woman and traditional healer María de Jesús Patricio is running for president on an Indigenous rights platform.

While it is without a doubt beyond the scope of this essay to survey the entire landscape of women's experiences in Latin America, we intend for this concise overview to indicate the very serious structural, material, and epistemic barriers that Latin American feminists must regularly face. We hope that this will enable readers unfamiliar with feminist praxis in the Latin American context to put into perspective the articles featured in this volume.

The issue begins with a series of articles devoted to recovering, defending, and exploring the under-celebrated work of Latin American feminist thinkers. In "Writing to Be Heard: Recovering the Philosophy of Luisa Capetillo," Stephanie Rivera Berruz carefully engages the writing, activism, and personal biography of Luisa Capetillo, who has been celebrated as the first feminist writer of Puerto Rico. Rivera Berruz wishes to "recover the philosophy of Capetillo as part of a Latin American and Caribbean philosophical tradition centered on radical praxis which placed sexuality at the center of class politics." She further explains that "at the intersection between gender equity and class emancipation is the liberatory possibilities of education, which served as the key to unlearning the

social norms that ensured the marginalization of working people and working women.”

In the next article in this series, “Notes for an Ethical Critique of the Histories of Philosophy on Mexico: Searching for the Place of Women,” Fanny del Río employs Miranda Fricker’s innovative concept of ‘testimonial injustice’ as a way to explore what she considers to be another form of violence against women: the silencing of their voices by denying them existence in historical records, academic curricula, and classrooms (where the work of male philosophers is daily discussed). She also proposes some practical measures to revert these injustices.

The third article in this series is Angela Boitano Gruettner’s review of the important edited volume *Filosofas en con-texto* (“[female] philosophers in/with context”). Edited by Patricia González, Pamela Soto, Cecilia Sánchez, María Isabel Peña, Valentina Buló and Giannina Burlando, the book itself focuses on the work of thirteen Chilean feminist philosophers. Boitano Gruettner provides an excellent overview, in Spanish, of the ways in which Chilean feminisms engage various philosophical works and traditions as they philosophize about their lived and embodied experiences.

The next series of articles in our special issue are concerned with activism, violence against women, and feminist resistance in the Americas. First, María Pía Lara explores in “A Genealogy of Rape” one of the most common forms of violence that women suffer from early childhood to adult life. Because our conceptions of what constitutes violence are historically shaped, she frames the concept of rape within a historical genealogy of our moral views in order to “understand how violence and gender violence are related to specific conceptions of political and sexual sovereign,” and to see in what way the moral filters that configure our “feminist imaginary” have changed our views about rape.

Second, in “Fronterizas en resistencia: reivindicaciones feministas en los movimientos sociales” (“Borderlands women in resistance: feminist vindications in social movements”), authors Ana Laura Ramírez Vázquez and Luis Rubén Díaz Cepeda employ both philosophical and social scientific research methods to “document, analyze and theorize the patriarchal practices affecting women working in social organizations/movements in en Ciudad Juárez, as well as the forms of resistance they have put into practice.”

Finally, in “Una subversión en femenino” (“A Feminine Subversion”), Ángeles Eraña explores the connection between Zapatista feminisms and Indigenous metaphysics—focusing, in particular, on “disjunctive oppositions” and the idea that “*todo está en par,*” or that everything is part of a pair, as the basis of a feminist and Zapatista worldview. Using the idea of constructing a new house/*una casa nueva* as a guiding metaphor, Eraña

explores the relational ethics of Zapatista women and the ways in which their “feminine subversion” demands a complex reconfiguration of our social and political worlds.