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The Subalterns Dream and Defy

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SPECIAL FORUM

The Subalterns Dream and Defy

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Intersectional, postcolonial/decolonial, and communitarian feminism has had the greatest relevance to my activism, my research, and my ideals. These theories not only served to awaken me, they made me determined to try to grasp the specificities of patriarchy in my beloved countries. By the time I entered graduate school, these theories already informed my worldview. Thus, the ideals and critiques inherent in these feminisms became the backbone of my dissertation.

Intersectional Perspective

Intersectionality resonates with me because of my background. As a child, I remember vividly seeing my mother being mistreated on multiple occasions. Her black hair, hazel eyes, and caramel skin makes her status as a “woman of color” all too evident in a country which valued whiteness. Her impeccable, albeit heavily accented English, also meant that she is subjected to petty indignities. Luckily, her resilience is limitless.

Some of these issues are addressed by African American feminists who developed the theoretical underpinnings of intersectional feminism. Among these women, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work revolutionized my understanding of society and my status within it. Throughout her essays, she explores how discrimination can be based on gender, race, class, migration status, and English language competency (1994, 95). For the first time, I saw myself, my community, and the woman who has shaped me reflected in the literature.

Intersectional feminism establishes and examines other sources of injustices alongside gender. Grappling with multiple forms of discrimination is just as pressing since they contribute to extreme suffering. As a graduate student researching the consequences of the War on Drugs on incarcerated cisgender and transgender women in Guatemala, this perspective is pivotal. Far too often, the women who resort to crime are from extremely vulnerable backgrounds. They are non-violent first time-offenders who engage in the drug trade out of economic desperation (Safranoff and Tiravassi 2018, 7-10). Their incarceration is another dimension within the multi-layered violence they experience based on their gender identity, economic class, and racial and ethnic identity. While an intersectional approach is essential, it does not suffice. Although it provides an analytical framework for understanding social injustices, it remains rooted in an U.S. worldview.

There are other histories that remain unofficial and unexplored. These narrate the betrayed idealism and the brutal dictatorships. They allude to the unnamed ghosts and the coups sponsored by more powerful countries. There are many unseen oppressive dynamics at work. As I discovered, these

insidious dynamics are often unseen since they have not been adequately defined. They remain undefined because they affect the subalterns.

Unravelling Patriarchal Labyrinths

The academic and political discourse has been monopolized by the Global North. Feminism has not been the exception. It has been dominated by a white, western, middle-class perspective. Hence, *most* women in the world are excluded from the mainstream movement, which claims to represent and defend them. From the hegemonic perspective, they are merely secondary characters living out their lives in secondary social theatres.

Secondary Characters in Peripheral Theatres

Given these antecedents, Chandra T. Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" resonates with me. Her words explain phenomena, which I had sensed but not fully understood. Her examination of the struggle for dignity amidst the multiple and interwoven forms of oppression inspires me deeply. Besides patriarchy, class, and racism, there are the often overlooked "colonial" dimensions. The historic and contemporary domination by countries situated in the Global North adds another element to the varied patriarchal matrixes throughout the globe. It also dispels the myth that patriarchy is universal and unchanging. Patriarchy is a labyrinth with intersecting and embedded layers of colonial prejudices.

Understanding the power dynamics between global and local contexts is crucial for my research. International drug policy focused on interdiction and repression as advocated by the Global North, specifically the U.S., has far-reaching consequences. Since Guatemala is situated between the main coca producers (Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia) and the main cocaine consumer (U.S.), it has been dubbed the "corridor of cocaine" (Silva 2017). The rise of transnational drug-trafficking aggravates unresolved historical and social injustices. Given women's pre-existing social vulnerabilities, it is unsurprising the "War on Drugs has become a war on women" (Castillo 2012). Mass incarceration of women is inseparable from the larger geopolitical context. For this reason, Mohanty's words do not merely echo through my research, they remain a call to resist the imposition of an uncritical western gaze that serves to "erase" international power dynamics. Within graduate school, there is a greater openness to seeing research based on a critical lens rooted in postcolonial feminism.

In addition to acknowledging the global power dynamics, postcolonial feminists highlight the diversity of the lived experiences of women in the Global South. This may seem self-evident. Nevertheless, in academic discourses and the social world, women are portrayed as "monolithic" (Mohanty 1984, 333). Their stories are reduced to racist stereotypes. In a perverse update of the damsel and distress archetype, they are the ever-constant victim: silenced and subjugated by tradition and in need of rescue by liberated white feminists. I have experienced white majority spaces where feminists fret about what "we" have to do to make life better for survivors of domestic violence and impoverished women in my country. This motif is not limited to academia. The post 9/11 invasion of Afghanistan was justified, in part, by the need to "rescue" women from their own culture, making Afghani women damsels and secondary characters in peripheral theatres. Their efforts to resist and contest their circumstances are not part of the mainstream feminist imaginary. However, postcolonial and decolonial feminists work to denounce their exclusion, victimhood status, and racist stereotypes.

By Invitation Only

Even local resistance gets manipulated by a privileged few. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak (1989) points out that *within* India the academic and political discourse is monopolized by an external elite and then further monopolized by an internal elite in the aftermath of independence. Woefully absent is the voice of the subaltern. In spite of their diverse, varied and passionate voices, they are deemed unworthy of being included within the conversations dominated by elites (78-81). Relegated to the side-lines, their agency and their humanity is denied by the Global North. Despite the international and national elite’s refusal to acknowledge her voice, the subaltern has never been silent. Throughout colonization, the struggles for independence and within subsequent postcolonial states, she resists and continues to speak.

To this end, rather than treat incarcerated women as an object of study, my aim is to explore their lived experiences and listen to their insights. This means understanding how women cope and resist systems of violence within their different situations. From a methodological perspective in my work, it requires examining how women construct their identity as cisgender and transgender women, how they deal with the harsh conditions of incarceration, and how they seek out spaces that affirm their dignity.

Interwoven Dreams

Lastly, my research is guided by the decolonial feminists of TZK’AT, Red de Sanadoras Ancestrales del Feminismo Comunitario (Network of Ancestral Healers of Communal Feminism). Their theories and activism are rooted in a Mayan/Ixil worldview. They reject the individualism of hegemonic feminism and instead articulate their struggle through a communitarian perspective. Social and economic rights are emphasized and their right over ancestral lands (Cabnal 2017, 101-102).

Because the nature of oppression varies from one context to the next, the nature of resistance must vary as well. These activists are survivors of a cultural genocide stemming back centuries, as well as the postcolonial genocide carried out by the state in the 1980s and ongoing gender, ethnicity and class discrimination. Their movements have challenged and weakened the oppressive forces that attempt to determine the status quo. It is because of their defiance that little by little the social tapestry has been transformed. As the postcolonial and decolonial feminist rebels interweave more voices, more dreams, more inclusive societies are created.

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