Equivocation, Translation, and Performative Intersectionality: Notes on Decolonial Feminist Practices and Ethics in Latin America

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1. Introduction: Olympia, 1863

Olympia, a translation of Titian’s “Venus of Urbino” (which was, in turn, a translation of Giorgione’s “Venus of Dresden”), is an oil portrait on canvas signed by Édouard Manet in 1863. The painting was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1867 and was received with a mixture of shock and embarrassment by the public at this prestigious art space.

Contrary to what many say, the cause of so much scandal was not the nakedness of Olympia, but the gaze that her nudity embodies. Olympia’s
defying stare confronts ruthlessly those who look at her; she returns the (male) gaze with a fixed, disturbing look that makes the awareness of seeing and being seen to coexist uneasily. As noted by the painting’s critical reception, Olympia’s look gives her the power to rise above her gender and class. Besides, her hand draws attention to her sex at the same time that covers it. This dichotomy (to reveal and to cover) leads the viewer to feel the need to stare at her sex, but not without blame, as she hides it from public view. She refuses to be addressed as the peaceful courtesan of French modernity, and Manet, after having created Olympia, subverted forever the nude painting genre.¹

Why am I using Olympia’s image to begin my reflections on feminist theories’ decolonial turn in Latin America? I see the painting — which I appropriate here — as a metaphor for the debates on the coloniality of power. On the one hand, if we observe Ticiano’s “Venus of Urbino”, we can see that Manet’s translation of it brings to the forefront several elements constitutive of modernity/coloniality. On the other, from a feminist perspective, although Olympia refuses to be positioned as the object of the voyeuristic male gaze, to recall Mulvey, in constituting herself as the subject of the gaze, she subalternizes the other woman in the picture (the black servant) by not even acknowledging her presence. Olympia disdainfully ignores both the white flowers that are delivered to her by the maid and the maid herself. The whiteness of Olympia’s skin contrasts with the blackness of the maid in the faded pink dress, who, in turn, shares the space of the painting with the cat, also black, sitting lazily at Olympia’s feet. In quite a provocative way, bodies marked by gender, class, race, fabrics, flowers and animals, carefully arranged in a colonial narrative, intersect in the constitution of the dualism between the human (white woman) and the non-human (the maid and the black cat). I decided to use Manet’s painting as a trope to explore the challenges of contemporary feminisms face vis-à-vis the postcolonial and decolonial debates.

¹ There is already an extensive discussion about Manet’s Olympia and its visual rhetoric. My intention here is not to engage with this criticism, but to use the painting for other purposes.
2. Feminism and Cultural Translation

Postcolonial theories have exercised a significant influence on the reconfiguration of cultural criticism. By replacing dichotomous approaches of social-political conflicts for complex analysis of the in-between spaces of the social landscape — and, therefore, by emphasizing relationalities between hegemonic forces and subaltern contestations along with the proliferation of temporalities and histories — these theories constitute today an ubiquitous and profuse transdisciplinary terrain. In the pages that follow, I analyze the relationship between postcolonial criticism and Latin American feminist theories of difference from the perspective of cultural translation.

Latin American feminist theories, articulated by subaltern/racialized subjects, operate within an epistemological referent that is distinct from the analytic model that has historically structured the relations between center and periphery, tradition and modernity. An effect of transculturation and diasporic movements that create space and time disjunctures, the chronotrope of these feminisms is the interstice, and its practice is anchored in cultural translation in the constitution of other forms of knowledge (saberes própios) and humanity.

How do feminist theories in the Latin American context translate and decolonize the postcolonial critique? What kinds of mediation are needed in Latin American feminist translations of the postcolonial? These are some of the conundrums about contemporary theoretical trends within feminism that I will explore below in trying to map out, in a necessarily abbreviated and perhaps inconclusive manner, possible routes for gender and feminist studies in the south of the Americas.

I should begin by clarifying that my use of the term translation is borrowed from Niranjana’s deployment of the concept, that is, it does not refer exclusively to discussions about the strategies for semiotic processes in the area of translations studies, but to debates on cultural translation. The notion of cultural translation (drawing on debates on ethnographic theory and practice) is premised upon the view that any process of description, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas and worldviews is always already caught up in relations of power and asymmetries between languages, regions, and peoples.
In contemporary globalized formations, in light of the reconfiguration of knowledges and the remapping of all kinds of borders (geographic, political, economic, cultural, and libidinal, among others), the traditional categories of analyses can no longer provide an account of the profound geopolitical transformations we are witnessing. As Appadurai has argued, the technological, financial, ideological and media flows, followed by a variety of diasporic displacements that characterize current life, have established complex interconnections and fractures between the local and the global that cannot be grasped by our conventional disciplinary protocols of analysis. Postcolonial theories emerge as an attempt to fill the analytical void caused by the proliferation of new disjunctive temporalities, asymmetries of power and instabilities of capitalism. They also attempt to make visible the mechanisms that constitute our global reality and, in their larger project of social transformation, seek to move beyond the options offered by modernity and Occidentalism. According to Venn, echoing Young,

postcolonial critique therefore cannot but connect with a history of emancipatory struggles, encompassing anti-colonial struggles as well as the struggles that contest economic, religious, ethnic, and gender forms of oppression […], on the principle that it is possible and imperative to create more equal, convivial and just societies. It follows that the construction of an analytical apparatus that enables the necessary interdisciplinary work to be done is a central part of the task. (35)

In light of the remapping of all types of borders and in a context of the transnational transit of theories and concepts, the issue of translation has become a pressing concern, constituting, on one side, a single space for the analysis of the intersection (or transculturation) between the local and the global in the production of “vernacular cosmopolitanisms” (Hall, “Thinking the Diaspora” 11), and, on the other, a privileged perspective for the examination of representation, power, and the asymmetries between languages in the formation of social imaginaries. In postcolonial critique, the logic of cultural translation refers to the process of shifting the notion of difference from its common understanding (as in “difference from”) to the Derridean concept of *différance* that, according to Hall (“Quando
foi o pós-colonial?”), points to “a process that is never complete, but remains in its undecidability” (74). Viewed as différance, translation is always deployed whenever the self encounters the radical, unassimilable difference of the other. In the words of Venn, now resonating the ideas of Bhabha, translations across heterolingual and culturally heterogeneous and polyglot borders allow for the feints, the camouflages, the displacements, ambivalences, mimicries, the appropriations, that is to say, the complex stratagems of disidentification that leave the subaltern and the subjugated with the space for resistance. (115)

From the recognition of the incompleteness and incommensurability of any analytical or experiential perspective, Santos proposes, in relation to postcolonial critique, a theory of translation as dialogic negotiation, articulating a mutual — and non hierarchical — intelligibility of the world. The translational turn, so to speak, shows that the translation process exceeds the linguistic transfer of meaning from one language to another and seeks to encompass the very act of enunciation — when we speak we are always already engaged in translation, both for ourselves as for the other. If speaking already implies translating, and if the translation is an activity of openness to the other (a displacement from one’s location), then in such a transaction identity and alterity are inevitably intertwined, making the act of translating a process of continuous dislocation. In translation, there is a moral and political obligation to uproot oneself, to become temporarily homeless so that the other may dwell, albeit provisionally, in one’s home. To translate means to be always in transit (“world”-traveling, for Lugones [ “World-Traveling”]), to live in the entrelugar (Santiago), in the contact zone (Pratt) or in the border (Anzaldúa). In other words, it means to reside in exile. Deploying both the trope of translation and the notion of equivocation — the latter borrowed from Amerindian perspectivism (which I will elaborate below) — I would like to reflect on the feminist decolonial turn in Latin America taking, as a starting point, the debates on the coloniality of power and gender carried out by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano and by the Argentinian emigré philosopher María Lugones.
3. Power, Gender, and Its Colonialities

The coloniality of power, according to Quijano,
is a concept that accounts for one of the founding elements
of the current pattern of power, that is, the basic and universal
social classification of the planet’s population around the
idea of “race”. This idea, together with the (racist) social
classification on which it was based, originated 500 years ago
along with America, Europe and capitalism. They are the
deepest and most enduring expression of colonial domination
and were imposed on the entire population of the planet in
the course of the expansion of European colonialism. Since
then, in the current pattern of global power, these two
elements pervade each and every one of the areas of social
existence and constitute the most profound and effective form
of social, material, and intersubjective domination, therefore
constituting the universal basis of political domination within
the current model of power. (4)

In America, Quijano continues, the idea of race
was a way of legitimating the relations of domination imposed
by conquest. The subsequent establishment of Europe as a new
identity after America and the global expansion of European
colonialism led to the development of an Eurocentric per-
spective of knowledge … Since then [the idea of race] proved
to be the most effective, lasting and universal instrument of
social domination, which, in turn, depended upon another
one, equally universal but older, the intersexual or gender
system of domination. (203)

Two points should be emphasized about the above citations. First,
for Quijano, coloniality and colonialism are different, albeit related,
phenomena. Colonialism represents the political-economic domination of
some people over others and is, analytically speaking, anterior to coloniality,
which refers, in turn, to the universal classification system that has prevailed
for more than 500 years. Coloniality of power cannot, therefore, exist
without the advent of colonialism. Second, and more significant for the
purpose of my argument in this essay, the coloniality of gender is seen by
Quijano as subordinated to the coloniality of power when, in the 16th century, the principle of racial classification became a form of social domination. For Quijano, gender domination is subordinated to the superior-inferior hierarchy of racial classification.

The productivity of the concept of coloniality of power rests in its articulation of the notion of race as the *sine qua non* element of colonialism and its neocolonial manifestations. When we bring the gender category to the center of the colonial project, then we can trace a genealogy of its formation and use as a key mechanism by which colonial global capitalism structured asymmetries of power in the contemporary world. To see gender as a colonial category also allows us to historicize patriarchy, emphasizing the ways in which heteronormativity, capitalism and racial classifications are always already intertwined. According to Lugones (“Heterosexualisms”),

Intersectionality reveals what is not seen when categories such as gender and race are conceptualized as separate from each other. The move to intersect the categories has been motivated by the difficulties in making visible those who are dominated and victimized in terms of both categories. Though everyone in capitalist Eurocentered modernity is both raced and gendered, not everyone is dominated or victimized in terms of their race or gender. Kimberlé Crenshaw and other women of color feminists have argued that the categories have been understood as homogenous and as picking out the dominant in the group as the norm; thus women picks out white bourgeois women, men picks out white bourgeois men, black picks out black heterosexual men, and so on. It becomes logically clear then that the logic of categorical separation distorts what exists at the intersection, such as violence against women of color. Given the construction of the categories, the intersection misconstrues women of color. So, once intersectionality shows us what is missing, we have ahead of us the task of reconceptualizing the logic of the intersection so as to avoid separability. It is only when we perceive gender and race as intermeshed or fused that we actually see women of color. (192-3)

For Lugones the concept of coloniality of power still rests on a biological (and binary) notion of sex, as well as on a heterosexual/patriarchal view of
power, to explain the way gender figures in power disputes for the “control of sex, its resources, and products” (“Heterosexualisms” 190). In colonialism and in Eurocentric global capitalism, “the naturalizing of sexual differences is another product of the modern use of science that Quijano points out in the case of ‘race’”. (195). Hence, to limit gender to the control of sex, its resources, and products entails, in itself, the very coloniality of gender. In other words — and this is a fundamental criticism of Quijano’s understanding of gender — the imposition of a binary gender system was as integral to the coloniality of power as the latter was constitutive of the modern gender system. Thus, both race and gender are powerful and interdependent fictions.

Furthermore, anchored in the writings of both the Nigerian feminist Oyuronke Oyewumi, and the indigenous feminist Paula Gunn Allen, Lugones argues that gender, along with race, were colonial constructs racializing and genderizing subaltern societies. These feminists argue that gender has never been an organizing principle or hierarchical category in tribal communities before the “contact”. The sexual division of labor did not exist, and economic relations were based on reciprocity and complementarity.

Contesting Lugones, Segato (“Género, política”), studying the Yoruba people, finds evidence of gender nomenclature in that culture, thereby arguing that these Afro-American and tribal societies reveal the existence of a clear patriarchal order which is, however, distinct from Western patriarchy. Segato calls it a lower intensity patriarchy or, in the words of the Aymara lesbian communitarian feminist Paredes, an entroncamiento de patriarcados (imbrication of patriarchal systems).

I would like to intervene in the discussion about the existence or not of gender classification systems in pre-contact societies by bringing to the debate the category of equivocation. To this end, I introduce two authors whose works are inspiring for a decolonial feminism: De La Cadena’s discussion of indigenous cosmopolitics, and Puar’s criticism of the notion of intersectionality. After exploring the arguments of both authors, I will return to the question of coloniality of gender and the translational turn in feminist theories. By foregrounding the coloniality of gender as a recalcitrant factor in theorizing about the coloniality of power, an important space for the articulation of feminism and post-colonialism
opens up, contributing to the project of decolonization of Eurocentric knowledge and the articulation of a pensamiento propio latinoamericano,

[i]n this sense ‘pensamiento propio’ is suggestive of a different critical thought, one that seeks to mark a divergence with dominant ‘universal’ thought (including in its ‘critical’, progressive, and leftist formations). Such divergence is not meant to simplify indigenous or black thought or to relegate it to the category or status of localized, situated, and culturally specific and concrete thinking; that is to say, as nothing more than ‘local knowledge’ understood as mere experience. Rather it is to put forward its political and decolonial character, permitting a connection then among various ‘pensamientos propios’ as part of a broader project of ‘other’ critical thought and knowledge. (Walsh 231)

Although Walsh does not make in her article any mention of the feminist theories that are emerging in Latin America as an integral part of a double movement for the decolonization of knowledge and the construction of “oppositional politics of knowledge in terms of the gendered bodies who suffer racism, discrimination, rejection and violence” (Prada forthcoming), I appropriate her discussion to include the intervention of a feminist politics of translocal translation in the alternative spaces of enunciation of other cosmologies and epistemologies emerging in Latin America.

4. Equivocation, Translation, and Performative Intersectionality

In her influential essay on cosmopolitics, De La Cadena examines Andean indigenous communities’ articulation of the presence of earth beings, such as sacred mountains and animals, in social protest. In doing such a subversive gesture, that is, for the first time bringing other than human creatures into the human domain of politics, the Andean indigenous communities are undermining the ontological distinction between humanity and nature that has been a hallmark of Western modernity. Earth practices, such as considering the political needs and desires of earth creatures, enact the respect and affect necessary for maintaining webs of relationality between the human and its others (the non-human) in such communities. To introduce these earth practices into social protest (that
is, to express what earth creatures, such as sacred mountains, claim in the
wake of the social protests), invites us, in the words of Stengers, “to slow
down reasoning”,2 since it puts forth a very significant epistemic rupture.
The political sphere has always been configured as ontologically distinct
from the sphere of nature, and this difference was a key element conspiring
to the disappearance of pluriversal worlds, understood as partially connected
heterogeneous social worlds, politically negotiating their ontological
disagreements (De La Cadena). With the reintroduction of earth creatures
into politics, we witness the emergence of what this author will call
indigenous cosmopolitanism:3 we are able, first, to open up spaces for a
type of thinking that allows us to unlearn/undo the ontological violence
represented by the nature/culture dualism (hence allowing us to “slow
down reasoning”), and second, to understand that there are different
perspectives from different worlds — not different views of the same world.

It is at this point in the argument that I want to invoke the notion
of equivocation, a term derived from Amerindian perspectivism and
theoretically articulated by Castro. Equivocation signifies not only
deception, misconception, but failure to understand that there are different
understandings of different worlds. For example, class, race and ethnicity
are categories that belong to the colonial division nature/culture. However,
when deployed by indigenous peoples, they do not necessarily correspond
to the meanings they have been given throughout (Western) history. They
are, in other words, equivocations or equivocal categories: although they
appear to be the same (i.e., to have the same meaning), in fact they may

2 According to Stengers, “slow down reasoning” refers to the generation (might we say,
engendering?) of a new space for reflection by decelerating, thus creating the possibility
of a new awareness of the problems and situations that mobilize us.

3 Earth beings, in the political discourses of Western science, refer to beings or “natural
resources” that exist separately from the human sphere. In indigenous cosmology, the
term refers to those other beings living in nature and who have always interacted with
human beings, for they are a constitutive part of the latter. In De La Cadena’s article
“Cosmopolitics”, earth beings are the sacred mountains that demand respect from
both humans and non-human others, including animals, plants and other smaller
creatures, such as lakes, forests and mountains.
not be when signified by other communities. For the existence of heterogeneous worlds and equivocal categories, and the possibility of articulating partial connections between them, the work of translation becomes necessary. In other words, equivocation (in the sense of misinterpretation, error) calls for translation: it is from politically motivated and unfaithful translations that the pluralities of worlds are interconnected without becoming commensurate.4

Through the notion of equivocation, the engagement with translation, and the practice of “slowing down reasoning”, we have the ability, therefore, to undo the perversive dualism between nature and culture, inculcated by Western epistemology and, in itself, the cause of the disappearance of pluriversal worlds. At this point in the argument, I would like to revisit the issue of intersectionality of gender and bring it to the debate on decolonial feminism. How to reconceive intersectionality in light of the discussion about equivocal categories and unfaithful translation?

As we may recall, Lugones (“Heterosexualisms”), in criticizing Quijano’s notion of coloniality of power, argues that this concept brings in its wake a misconception regarding the gender category. For Lugones, missing from Quijano’s highly inadequate account of gender is a lack of understanding of the intersectionality of the categories that constitutes us as social beings. But how to interpret the intersectionality of gender in view of the fact that gender, race, class, etc., are necessarily equivocal categories? How to think about them from the notion of pluriversal worlds?

In her scathing critique of the intersectional approach, so prevalent in today’s feminist methodologies, Puar argues, first, that although intersectional analysis has emerged as an intervention on the part of hegemonic (white) feminists to challenge the all-pervasive rubrics of race, class and gender in Western feminism, it actually recenters the very white feminism that it sought to decentralize. That is to say, the intersectional analysis, in seeking to stress the difference of the other, in the end constitutes this other (woman) and gives her a color (non-white). The non-white women —

4 For a discussion about feminism and the politics of translation, see Costa and Alvarez et al. (“Translocalities/Translocalidades”).
a result of intersectionality — is always the white woman’s ‘other’. As Chow had already pointed out in relation to poststructuralist theories, difference produces new subjects which, in turn, in promoting inclusions end up exacerbating exclusions from the self-referentiality of the center.

Second, for Puar the privileged categories of intersectional analysis, being categories of equivocation, to recall De La Cadena, do not travel easily across geopolitical boundaries without the work of translation. They have a genealogy that binds them to specific geopolitical places: for those located in the West, they are effects of Western modernist agendas and their regimes of epistemic violence. Third, and most significant for my argument, Puar notes that the main problem with intersectionality is its inability to deal with the non-representational referent, the material body. In the words of the author,

The literature on intersectionality has also been enhanced by the focus on representational politics […]. Rarely have scholars concerned with the impact and development of representational politics come into dialogue with those convinced of the non-representational referent of “matter itself” — Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, Elizabeth Wilson, Karan Barad, Patricia Clough, Dianne Currier, Vicky Kirby, Miriam Fraser, Luciana Parisi, to name a few. Divested from subject formation but for different reasons, these feminist scholars in science and technology studies, inflected by Deleuzian thought, have been concerned about bodily matter, claiming its liminality cannot be captured by intersectional subject positioning. They prefer instead the notion that bodies are unstable assemblages that cannot be seamlessly disaggregated into identity formations. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, foregrounding its spatial and temporal essentializations, calls intersectionality “a gridlock model that fails to account for the mutual constitution and indeterminacy of embodied configurations of gender, sexuality, race, class, and nation”.

Bodies are therefore assemblages and categories such as race, gender, sexuality, etc., should be conceived as events, actions in their constitutive performativity — and not regarded as attributes of individuals. In other
words, we need to get out of the linguistic system of representation (to escape its logocentric prisonhouse) to apprehend the fact that identities are events, assemblages, encounters between bodies in constant processes of deterriorization and reterritorialization. At this point, and drawing on the notion of performative intersectionality (Barad), I will return to Lugones’ discussion of the coloniality of gender and articulate it with the writings of some material feminists on the indeterminate and always already embodied configurations of gender.

5. Feminisms and the Return of Materiality

In an article entitled “Towards a Colonial Feminism”, Lugones states that the hierarchycal dichotomy between human and non-human is a central mark of colonial modernity:

Beginning with the colonization of the Americas and the Caribbean, a hierarchical, dichotomous distinction between human and non-human was imposed on the colonized in the service of Western man. It was accompanied by other dichotomous hierarchical distinctions, among them that between men and women. This distinction became a mark of the human and a mark of civilization. Only the civilized are men or women. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species — as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild. (734)

The civilizing mission of Christianity focused on the transformation of non-colonized human in man and woman. The colonized non-human female was not only racialized, but also reinvented as a woman through Western gender codes. Therefore, Lugones (“Toward Decolonial Feminism”) sees gender as imposition of modernity/coloniality: “The suggestion is not to search for a non-colonized construction of gender in indigenous organizations of the social. There is no such thing; ‘gender’ does not travel away from colonial modernity”. (746)

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5 For a discussion of non-representational paradigms, see Thrift.
However, why not think about gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, etc., as equivocations, that is, as categories with different meanings and interpretations from different pluriversal perspectives? If we decide to go down that track, then we have to engage in the difficult process of cultural translation, avoiding the pitfalls of the coloniality of language and colonial translation. Second, according to Mignolo, resistance to the coloniality of gender, as Lugones also observes, implies linguistic resistance. Furthermore, I would add that it involves opposition to Eurocentric representational paradigms, anchored on a dichotomous logic, through the practice of “slowing down reasoning”. I interpret these contestatory practices as the sine qua non elements for the project of decolonizing gender, being and feminist theories.

Without throwing the equivocal gender category away with the bath water, but articulating it in ways that challenge the modernity/coloniality binaries, perhaps we will be able to take a more productive path, one that has already been partially trodden by many feminists — Latin American indigenous feminists and Western feminists of science — who are rethinking the boundaries between the human and the non-human, between matter and discourse, bringing other earth beings into the conversation.

In the West, the most recent and fascinating discussion about the necessity of a feminist return to some notion of matter and materiality is in the anthology entitled Material Feminisms (Alaimo and Hekman). The essays published in this anthology, signed by renowned authors such as Elizabeth Grosz, Claire Colebrook, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway and Susan Bordo, among others, and situated in widely different disciplinary places, argue strongly for an approach within feminism and studies of science that brings nature back into culture. These authors creatively explore the complex links between the material and the discursive so as to allow feminism to reclaim the materiality of the body and of experience without giving up the fact that bodies/experiences are culturally/discursively constituted, but that they do not exhaust themselves in such discursivity.

For the organizers of the anthology, the emphasis on social constructionist models have directed feminists to focus too much on the discursive pole of reality and prevented it from sufficiently exploiting what Barad calls the “intra-activity” between the material and discursive. For Barad,
despite knowledge of the fact that phenomena do not exist independently of the instruments that observe them — as they are in part produced by these instruments — we must understand how the phenomena (in this case, matter), in turn, interfere with the instruments observation, also materializing them. Instead of seeing nature passively receiving the culture’s agency, we need to interpret them in their ontological inseparability (natureculture, for Haraway), thus challenging the perverse boundaries between the human and the non-human worlds. In the words of Barad,

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretive turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing” — even materiality — is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. (801)

Going against the grain of these turns, Barad proposes an onto-epistemology (study of knowledge practices) that integrates the advances of social constructionism and post-structuralism with a new understanding of materiality, which she calls agential realism. Her study of the production of images of the fetus from the intersection of technological, discursive and material practices serves as an illustration of this approach. The technological capacity of the fetal image makes it possible to see the fetus at a very early stage of its development. From this vision, which is a product of both technology and theory, the fetus — an aspect of nature — acquires agency in several meaningful ways. First, it becomes matter; it did not exist as matter before technology has allowed it to be seen. Second, it becomes politically relevant. The fetus, now able to be visualized, acquires a political meaning that it did not have before gaining its status as matter through technology. In other words, the technology that allows us to see the fetus at an early stage has political, ethical, and material consequences that are real and meaningful. Moreover, the arrangement of fetal imaging is made possible, and partly conditioned, by a political discourse that presupposes the autonomy of the fetus. In summary, for Barad the fetus is the result of the complex and situated interactions of material apparatuses and discourses in the production of bodies — the intra-actions of discourse and technology.

There is no doubt that the “material feminists” are reacting strongly to the Butlerian notion that material bodies are effects of discourses. To
Alaimo and Hekman, Butler failed to transcend the dichotomy between nature/culture, remaining within the constraints imposed by the language.⁶ Even Foucault, with all the emphasis on the discursive configurations, had already undermined the dichotomy language/reality in his theory of bio-power, highlighting the very real consequences of discourses that construct bodies. For Foucault — and for material feminism — we cannot separate “the discourses on the bodies from the bodies we inhabit” (Hekman 101). The material turn, along with the onto-epistemo-logical approach, points confidently to the fact that there is a world out there, even though our access to it is through language. It is through our concepts — always equivocations — that we know the world. However, the world also acts in the formation of our concepts, molding and limiting them, with material/real consequences.

I see significant affinities between what material feminists are theorizing and the proposals of decolonial feminism. By introducing earth beings and agential materiality in Western epistemology — and subverting the colonial dichotomy nature/culture — these authors produce a “slowing down [of] thinking” that, in turn, in decolonizing perception, provides an opening to other worlds and other knowledges. In the following pages, I will return to the problem of cultural translation as a key element in the decolonization of feminist knowledges.

6. Feminism and Translation: Toward the Decolonization of Knowledge

As Alvarez (“Construindo uma política”) argues, a translocal feminist politics of translation is crucial to the decolonial turn and a key strategy in building “connectant epistemologies” (Láo-Montes 132) in order to confront the equivocations or mistranslations that hinder feminist alliances, even among women who share the same language and culture, such as latinas living in the U.S. and Latin American women. Translation — based not only on a linguistic paradigm, but more importantly, on an ontological

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⁶ Butler, in her more recent work, *Undoing Gender*, admits the need to reconceptualize bodily matter.
one — therefore becomes a key element in forging political alliances and feminist epistemologies that are pro-social justice, anti-racist, anti-imperialist and decolonial. If women’s movements in Latin America and other parts of the global South share a common context of struggle, as Thayer claims, then “their conflicts with the ‘scattered hegemonies’ represented by the states, industries development, global capital, religious fundamentalism and market relations create powerful, even if only partially overlapping, interests and identities that make the translation project between them possible and even more pressing” (n.p.). According to Alvarez (“Construindo uma política”), Ruskin, in her “The Bridge Poem” that opens This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, reminds us that we all “translated more/ than the damn UN” (xxi).

Moreover, in the interactions between Latina and Latin American feminisms, the travels of discourses and practices across geopolitical boundaries, disciplinary and others, encounter formidable roadblocks and checkpoints migration. As Klahn argues, to understand the coloniality of power, one needs to grasp the unequal travels and translations of feminist theories, texts and practices, as well as their reception. In a lucid analysis of the place of women’s writing at the time of latinoamericanismo and globalization, Klahn shows that testimonies (as well as autobiographical fictions, novels, essays and poetry) written by women and linked to political struggles and social mobilization were instrumental in constructing a sui generis feminist practice. Klahn argues that through cultural translation, Latin American and Latina feminists readapted feminist liberation discourses from the West, resignifying them in relation to self-generated practices and theorizations of gender empowerment that have emerged from their lived experiences, particular histories and contestatory politics. (n.p.)

Taking the example of the testimony, Klahn shows how this literary genre was mobilized by subaltern subjects, such as Menchú and Chungara, aiming, from the intersection between gender, ethnicity and social class, to destabilize a Western feminism still centered on the notion of an essentialized woman. In deconstructing the dominant feminist discourse, Latin American testimonies not only constitute other places of enunciation, but also break with the Hispanic surrealist paradigm (magical realism) in favor of a realist aesthetics that brings the referent back to the center of
symbolic and political struggles, documenting the violence and oppression of representation: life is not fiction. These texts, “translating/translocating theories and practices”, imagine forms of decolonization of the coloniality of power. I read Menchú and Chungara — through Klahn — as feminist and Latin American translations of the post-colonial that offer new epistemological proposals from the South.

Discussing the circulation of Anzaldúa’s writings in the Bolivian plurinational context, Prada explains that any translation, without adequate mediation, runs the risk of becoming a double betrayal: first, that any translation already implies a betrayal of the original, and, second, a betrayal is also perpetrated to the extent that the translated text is appropriated as part of a sophisticated theoretical apparatus from the North. The work of mediation is necessary so that the translation of these texts — coming from other latitudes in the North — can engage with local texts and practices, thus challenging the ways in which the South is consumed by, and conformed to, the North, thereby placing postcolonial critique not only in North/South conversations, but also South/South.

Prada develops a provocative analysis of how the Bolivian anarchist feminist group, Mujeres Creando — who describe themselves as cholas, chotas, and birlochas (racist terms used in reference to indigenous migrant women in cities), and also adopt other designations of abject subjectivities (such as bitch, rechazada, desclasada, extranjera) — converse with Anzaldúa in transporting Borderlands/La Frontera to a context of feminist politics beyond the walls of the academy (where this author had originally been read), hence establishing affinities between the two political projects. Thus, the language of Anzaldúa, enunciated in the south of the North, was appropriated by the south of the South, and “in fact incorporated in the transnational feminism which (as Mujeres Creando since its beginnings stipulated) has no frontiers but the ones which patriarchy, racism, and homophobia insist on” (n.p.). As the author explains,

Translating, then, becomes much more complex. It has to do with linguistic translation, yes, but also with making a work available (with all the consequences this might have, all the “betrayals” and “erasures” it might include) to other audiences and letting it travel. It also has to do with opening scenarios of conversation and proposing new horizons for dialogue. It
also means opening your choices, your tastes, your affinities to others — which in politics (as in Mujeres Creando’s) can compromise (or strengthen) your principles. Translation in those terms becomes rigorously “strategic and selective”. (n.p.)

However, according to Prada, we know that in the travel of feminist theories throughout the Americas, especially in its counter-hegemonic routes, there are several checkpoints (e.g. publications and academic institutions) and mediators (intellectuals, activists, academics) that regulate their movements across borders, facilitating or hindering access to texts, authors and debates. To exemplify how these controls operate, I would like to refer to an example that the Aymara postcolonial theorist Silvia River Cusicanqui gives us, and which speaks directly to the question of the decolonization of knowledge.

Speaking in favor of a political economy — rather than a geopolitics — of knowledge, Cusicanqui examines the material mechanisms operating behind discourses, arguing that postcolonial discourses in the North do not only entail an economy of ideas, but also of wages, privileges and values. Universities in the global North ally themselves with research centers in the South through networks of intellectual exchanges, and become empires of knowledge appropriated from subaltern subjects, now resignified under the sign of the Theory. This creates a canon,

The ideas run through, like rivers, from South to North, and become tributaries of major streams of thought. But as in the global market of goods, ideas also leave a country like raw materials, only to return regurgitated and in a jumbled package as finished product. A canon is constituted as a new area of socio-scientific discourse: “postcolonial thought”. This canon makes visible certain issues and sources, but leaves others in the shade. (Cusicanqui 68)

Cusicanqui refers above to the vexing problem of internal colonialism, formulated in the 1980s under the influence of the 1960s pioneering work of Fausto Reinaga, which in the 1990s was (re)formulated by Quijano under the rubric of “coloniality of power”. Subsequently, it was taken up by Mignolo and deployed as the notion (with new shades) of “colonial difference”. Cusicanqui explains,
my ideas about internal colonialism in terms of knowledge-power had arisen from a personal trajectory, enlightened by other readings — like Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory, Franz Fanon on the internalization of the enemy, and Franco Ferraroti on life stories — and, especially, by the experience of having lived and participated in the reorganization of the Aymara movement and the indigenous insurgency in the seventies and eighties. (67)

With rhetorical force, this Aymara thinker shows that, for the decolonization of knowledge to occur, it is not enough to articulate a decolonial discourse, but we must above all develop translational ethics and practices.

7. Conclusion, or Olympia Again, Translated

How could we read and translate Olympia from a decolonial — and queer, I would add — ethical and political perspective? How, from

the notion of reading as performative translation (i.e., a translation that generates more effects than meanings), could we deconstruct Manet’s Olympia and, in doing so, reveal its colonial genealogy? Morimura’s performative translation of Olympia above, coupled by Brody’s inspiring discussion of several of Olympia’s contemporary mimicries, indicate a fruitful path toward these goals.

According to Brody, Morimura, enacting an irreverently queer double reading and performance reminiscent of the photographs of Cindy Sherman (and I quote at length),

appears as both an idealized nude and a realized fantasy of the West. His female impersonation places him within and against such traditions of Western representation that stereotypically feminizes Asian men and sees Asia itself as feminized. […] As in Herb Hazelton’s Marilyn Monroe parody of Olympia, Morimura’s Olympia is blond. The roots of the dyed blond (dumb and dead) are black — part of the traffic in nineteenth-century eroticism. The infamous black cat here looks like a hard, shiny black plastic “Hello Kitty” bank, its petite paw coyly clawing the air. Morimura’s double image (Futago means twin in Japanese) evokes Lorraine O’Grady’s and others’ understanding of whiteness and blackness as “two sides of the same coin”. […] The artist here is not just a painted, objectified woman; rather, he performs as both subject and object of the painting (and subject and object again in recreating the nude and the maid). In this sense, he resembles contemporary performance artists who stage themselves as a representation. Morimura’s multiple crossed-cast image performs as a “queer”, canny counter-reading that nevertheless resembles the “original” oil painting’s violent reception at the Salon of 1865. (116-117)

Recalling the discourse on interspecies by some material feminists, we may argue that the black cat has a central role in the subversion of Olympia’s colonial discourse since, occupying a seemingly marginal, barely visible place, it reveals itself to be the heterotopic (and histrionic) element of Manet’s visual rhetoric. For Brody, citing Foucault,
Unlike a utopia, heterotopia is “disturbing, probably because [it] secretly undermines language... destroys the syntax which causes words and things to hang together... dissolve[s] our myths and sterilize[s] the lyricism of our sentences”. In this case, the cat kills desire [...]. The cat makes a mockery of the situation at hand. (107)

But it is not only through parodies that the heterotopic elements subvert the exclusionary utopia of Eurocentric narrative. Boldly trafficking feminist theories in contact zones (or translation zones), Latin American and Latina feminists residing in the United States, for example, are developing a politics of translation that uses knowledge produced by women of color and post-colonial feminisms in the north of the Americas to cannibalize them, thus shedding new light on theories, practices, politics, and cultures in the south and vice versa.

Other places in the Latin American context occupied by these subaltern/decolonial subjects can be found in the testimonies of indigenous Guatemalan human rights advocate Rigoberta Menchú and the Bolivian miner Domitilla Barrios de Chungara. It can also be found in diaries of the Afro-Brazilian garbage picker Carolina Maria de Jesus, in the writings of Afro-Brazilian feminist activist Lelia Gonzalez, in the autobiographical novels by Afro-Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo, as well as in the poetry, graffiti and street performances of the Bolivian anarcho-feminist group Mujeres Creando, to cite just a few examples. A preoccupation with not forgetting, with our “memory alleyways” (Evaristo) and the telling of other stories is undoubtedly one of the most important decolonial practices. Writing about decolonial methodologies among the Maoris, Smith makes this clear when she argues that knowing the past is a crucial part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. According to her,

To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things. Transforming our colonized views of our own history (as written by the West), however, requires us to revisit, site by site, our history under Western eyes. (Smith 34)
Echoing Smith’s words, on the other side of the world, Paredes warns us, to refer to our own memory, to our ontogenetic and phylogenetic memory connects it to our first real rebellion of wawas, when we resisted and fought against the sexist and unfair rules of society, connects it to the rebellion of our great-grandmothers, who resisted colonial and pre-colonial patriarchy. (10)

Performative translations, queer readings of colonial texts, dissemination of onto-epistemo-logies and naturecultures, invasions of the arena of politics by the most unusual earth beings, “slowing down thinking”, and rewriting memories and histories in the articulation of other knowledges are, therefore, ethical and political practices that decolonial feminists have already initiated in many locations of our vast and dense Latin American territory. Now it remains to be seen when the academy will awaken from its long torpor to take advantage of the “decolonial gaps” (Segato, “Brechas descoloniales”) erupting unrelenting across its walls.

**Works Cited**


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