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Who We Are and From Where We Speak

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As long as I have been a researching and teaching member of the academy, my central concern has been with what Enrique Dussel identifies as the question of “*who we are and from where we speak.*”¹ Indeed, my interest in the theoretical problem of identity has never been an interest in celebrating, reifying, or even subverting existing identities. Rather, I have wanted to take very seriously the political and *epistemic* significance of different kinds of identities in order to investigate how “who we are and from where we speak” matters for the kind of knowledge we produce. Specifically, I have been concerned with how our identities predispose us to see or not see; listen to or not listen to; read or not read; cite or not cite; concern ourselves or not concern ourselves with specific Other peoples, issues, and societal dynamics. Indeed, “who we are and from where we speak” is highly relevant for the intellectual projects we are likely to pursue. Generally speaking, for instance, Latin American scholars worry about the Global South, minority scholars attend to the dynamics of racialization, women scholars concern themselves with gender, scholars with disabilities write about access, and LGBT scholars focus on the problem of heteronormativity.

What I am pointing to here is that those who are most likely to attend to the dynamics of one of these kinds of oppression are usually those situated on the downside of some corresponding and relatively intractable power relation that serves to structure our global society, while those who do not attend to that oppression are usually those situated on the upside of that same power relation. Straight people rarely think seriously about heteronormativity—assuming they even know what the term means. White scholars, with some notable exceptions, fail to confront the life-shaping effects of racialization—preferring to overlook the effects it has had on their own personal and professional successes. North American and European scholars often do not think to study the work of scholars from the Global South (especially Latin America or Africa), and it is an extremely rare male critic who reads the work of his female colleagues with the same level of interest and care that he gives to the work of the men in his field. When such scholarly exclusions are objected to—which they rarely are—they are generally met with one of two reactions. Either the objection is dismissed as irrelevant to the production of real knowledge or the exclusions are rationalized on the basis of the fact that women’s studies or ethnic studies scholars are, after all, parochial or unsophisticated. (Of course, what constitutes parochialism or a lack of sophistication has always seemed suspicious to me, particularly since it seems to bear a close correlation to the number of times one does or does not cite European male scholars, in particular those of French or German origin.) It is in part because of the way scholarly production *is* structured by an unacknowledged logic of identity that I have been actively seeking ways to understand and to exploit the knowledge-generating potential of identities.

1. A Realist Approach to Identity

Because of the wide range of ways in which the term *identity* is used, and because the concept has come under a cloud of disrepute in the academy and beyond, I pause here to explain the term. *Identity*, in my understanding of the concept, refers to the nonessential and evolving product that emerges from the dialectic between how a subject of consciousness identifies herself and how others identify her. *Identity* is thus a kind of shorthand term that I use to refer to the complex and mediated way that situated, embodied human beings look out onto and interpret the world they live in. Insofar as identities track social relations, they are highly contextual and subject to change in response to the transformation of social relations; they come into being through the kinds of experiences we have, and they inform the way we interpret the world around us. Under this conception, identities are not reducible to social categories (i.e., woman, Black, Chicana, gay, etc.), nor do they refer exclusively to people's subjective (raceless, genderless, bodiless) "senses of self." Rather, they are socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world.²

In formulating my approach to identity, I begin with the presumption that *all* knowledge is situated knowledge: there is *no* transcendent subject with a "God's eye" view on the world who can ascertain universal truths independent of a historically- and culturally-specific situation. Having recognized that *all* knowledge is always situated, I see the importance of considering both from where a given knowledge-claim is derived, as well as whose interests it will serve, in any evaluation of its historically- and culturally-specific significance and truth-value. Moreover, I understand that even good, verifiable, empirical knowledge can be evaluated only in relation to a particular historical, cultural, or material context. Importantly, however, my view that all knowledge is situated does not lead me down the primrose path of judgmental relativism any more than my view that identities are socially constructed leads inexorably to the idea that they are arbitrary or infinitely malleable. I am a realist, and as such, I hold that there is a "reality" to the world that exceeds humans' mental or discursive constructions of it. While our collective understandings may provide our only access to "reality," and may imbue it with whatever meaning it can be said to have, our mental or discursive constructions of the world do not constitute the totality of what can be considered "real." The "real" both shapes and places limits on the range of our imaginings and behaviors, and therefore provides an important reference point in any sort of interpretive debate about the meaning of a text, a picture, or a social identity. The part of the "real" that exceeds humans' mental and discursive constructions of "reality" is also what occasions some "truths" to carry over across specific historical and cultural contexts.

Another way of explaining my approach to the concept of identity is to describe it, as Linda Martín Alcoff does, as an "interpretive horizon." A horizon, Alcoff explains, is a "substantive perspectival location from which the interpreter looks out at the world, a perspective that is always present but that is open and dynamic, with a temporal as well as physical dimension, moving into the future and into new spaces as the subject moves."³ Under this view, identity and experience are understood as mutually-constitutive, with both being relevant for, but not determinative of, the

production of knowledge. And so, while identity and knowledge are not coextensive, the knowledge we produce is nevertheless intimately influenced by how we conceptualize our shared social world and who we understand ourselves to be in that world. Our conceptual frameworks are inseparable from how we comprehend ourselves in terms of our gender, culture, race, sexuality, ability, nationality, religion, age, and profession—even when we are not consciously aware of how these aspects of ourselves affect our interpretive horizons. Our identities thus bear on how we interpret both our everyday experiences and the more specialized and expert knowledge we encounter and produce through our research and teaching. They influence the research questions we deem to be interesting, the projects we judge to be important, the scholars we choose to read and to cite, and the metaphors we use to describe the phenomena we observe. This is as true for those of us who have “dominant” identities as for those of us who have “subordinated” identities.

It should be clear that there is no argument, within this conceptual framework, for “transcending” or “moving beyond” identity. We cannot—nor should we want to—transcend our interpretive horizons. To do so would be to give up the framing assumptions and bodies of knowledge that guide us in any interpretive or dialogical situation. Not only is this impossible, but it is hardly desirable. How would we communicate at all if we were to give up our framing assumptions and bodies of knowledge? So, while we—as progressive scholars who are making the decolonial turn—might want to *change* our identities by altering our relations to, and interpretations of, society in a way that allows us to expand or delimit our sense of who “our own people” are, we should not seek to transcend or move beyond identities entirely.⁴ Indeed, as fundamentally social beings, we humans can no more escape the epistemic effects of our identities than we can escape the process of identification itself.

2. The Significance of Identity for Knowledge Production: Problem or Resource?

The idea that identities are useful for knowledge production is, I realize, controversial both inside and outside the academy. Identities are often thought, by right-wing, classic liberal, and even left-wing thinkers, to be pernicious, or at least not conducive to rational deliberation and the public good. Some critics of identity are concerned that an acknowledgment of cultural difference will lead inevitably to a situation of balkanization and irresolvable conflict. For others, the risk of marginalization on the basis of identity ascription is so great as to suggest that, rather than attending to identities, we should try to diminish or deny their significance. For still others, identities are seen as constraints that interfere with humans’ ability to understand and work with others. Such critics advocate a “color blind” or “identity neutral” approach that refuses to acknowledge the continuing salience of certain kinds of social categories (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, ability, class) for our everyday interactions and experiences. They call for a form of cosmopolitanism that requires us to transcend our identities by downplaying the significance of our situatedness.

The remarks of the critical theorist and intellectual historian Martin Jay, who participated as a respondent at the *Mapping the Decolonial Turn* conference held at UC Berkeley, illustrate this critical

tendency.⁵ In his response to the panel on which I presented, Jay had this to say about the salience of identity for knowledge production:

...those of us who may have come from traditions where we thought we were above that fray no longer can take that for granted. We're all involved in a kind of complicated dialogue about who we are, where we're coming from and what that may in fact do to the types of arguments we're making. Having said that, there is also a surplus beyond who we are, a surplus that allows us to create dialogue, translation, to be cosmopolitan, to be diasporic, to be in this world of global exchange which allows us to transcend the, uh, as a identity, uh, the situatedness that seems to constrain us.⁶

From these remarks, it is clear that, for Jay, situatedness is something that constrains rather than enables, while identity (or at least the recognition of it) is something that impedes dialogue rather than provides the conditions of possibility for it.

Jay's further remarks in the same setting about the underdevelopment of Latin American philosophy *vis-à-vis* German and Anglo-American philosophy indicate that he understands identity as a kind of psychological crutch employed by racial or geographical minorities who have not yet completed the process of philosophical maturation. He explains:

And, what one sees, of course, is a pattern which will doubtless be replicated elsewhere in the world including those parts of the world that people in this room represent.⁷ A pattern of struggling past the identity of being a victim or stigmatized or being marginalized and seeing oneself solely in those terms and finally gaining a kind of, I don't know, security or sense of self-esteem or creativity which will allow one to feel less somehow insistent upon that identity and I think one already feels that. I mean I've lived long enough, I suppose, to see those changes occurring. . . . And so in a kind of, maybe overly optimistic way but I think with some warrant, I would say this is a very encouraging kind of discourse in which we can see moving beyond overly rigid identity politics, moving towards a sense of complexity within, complexity without, and a sense of learning which is more symmetrical if not yet—and I don't want to be overly Pollyannaish—fully symmetrical.

The understanding of identity that Jay relies on in crafting his remarks is neither original nor surprising; rather, it is one familiar to those of us in the academy working on the concept of identity. The problem with Jay's remarks in this forum—apart from the paternalism they imply, a paternalism that *is* detrimental to dialogue—is that they reduce a set of structural relations with significant material and epistemic effects to a psychological phenomenon that exists in the minds of a people who have not yet fully matured.

Contrary to what Jay implies, the primary problem Latin American academics face in their efforts to dialogue with white North American and European scholars is not that they *feel* stigmatized or marginalized (although that might, in fact, be part of the experience of being a Latin American academic). Rather, the problem is that transnational flows of goods and resources affect the process of knowledge production just as they affect the production of any other commodity.

Since its entrance into the emerging capitalist world-system some 500 years ago, Latin America is not and never has been situated as a *producer of knowledge*. The reasons for this are complicated, and have as much to do with the destruction of indigenous knowledge systems in the wake of the Spanish colonization of Mesoamerica as with Latin America's contemporary structural economic dependence on the United States. But the effect of this situation is that the knowledge that *is* produced in Latin America is much less likely to be published, disseminated, and attended to than the knowledge that is produced either in the United States or Europe. And the solution to this situation is not for Latin American and Latina/o academics to stop insisting on the salience of their identities, but for all of us, marginalized and dominant scholars alike, to recognize the existence of a geopolitics of knowledge so that we can figure out how we want to address it.⁸ The existence of a geopolitics of knowledge is, unfortunately, what is evidenced by Jay's insistence that he already knows the "pattern that will doubtless be replicated" in Latin America.

In contrast to views such as Jay's, others and I contend that identities should be considered to be important epistemic resources that are better attended to than dismissed or ignored.⁹ As a realist about identity, I understand that people are neither wholly determined by the social categories through which we are recognized, nor can we ever be free of them. Indeed, the intimate connection between the organization of a society and the available social categories that all people must contend with in that society accounts for why no transformation of identity can take place without a corresponding transformation of society—and vice-versa. This is true for everybody—Black, White, male, female, gay, straight, able-bodied, disabled, Latin American, European, or North American—but the stakes are especially high for those of us who are members of stigmatized identity groups. Because the identity contingencies people from such groups are likely to face have potentially debilitating effects on our life-chances, we ignore the dynamics of identity at our peril.¹⁰ To the extent that we, as scholars who are making the decolonial turn, are interested in transforming our global society into one that is more socially and economically just, we need to know how identities work in order to effectively work with them. To the extent that we wish to work for epistemic decolonization, we need to first acknowledge and then examine the link between our identities (of which our geographical origin is only one aspect), our scholarly practices, and the knowledge we produce.

3. Identities, Scholarly Practices, and Epistemic Decolonization

It is because I am a minority scholar who works with a realist conception of identity that I understand and appreciate the importance of being in dialogue with other similarly situated scholars who are working for epistemic decolonization. Because I take seriously the link between identity, scholarly practices, and the production of knowledge, I understand why the concerns of Latin American and Latina/o scholars are often judged by others to be less interesting, less significant, and more parochial than the interests of white North American and European scholars, and why our arguments can be so easily ignored or dismissed as tired and "overly rigid identity politics." It is not that our concerns actually *are* less interesting, less significant, and more parochial than the concerns

of white North American and European scholars, just as it is not the case that our views about identity are essentialist and lack complexity. Rather it is that *we ourselves* are judged to be less interesting, less significant, and more parochial than *those who hold the power to institutionalize their views* judge themselves to be. And since “who we are and from where we speak” matters both for how we understand the world *and* for how what we say will be received, the burden will always be on us, as minority scholars, to find a way to institutionalize—and in that way materialize—our marginalized views. Moreover, if we want to dialogue with those who fail to see how what we are saying might be different from what they already believe, it will be up to us to translate our concerns in a way that might challenge them enough to break through their intellectual complacency as well as their (often unconscious) sense of racial, gender, and/or geographic superiority.

My own efforts in the service of epistemic decolonization over the past few years have taken the form of changing my *own* scholarly practices, and working with other progressive scholars who are themselves committed to changing, and not simply playing, the academic game. I believe that only by creating alternative institutions that materialize alternative identities and foster more egalitarian scholarly practices can minoritized scholars hope to have a significant effect both on what kind of knowledge is produced and on the way it is produced. Up to now, my efforts have largely taken the form of working in close collaboration with a group of scholars from across the country (and increasingly outside the U.S.) who focus on different *and* intermeshing oppressions through a multi-generational, inter-institutional, and multi-disciplinary research group we call The Future of Minority Studies Research Project (FMS).¹¹ It is primarily through my work with the FMS project that I have developed and strengthened my own understanding of a realist conception of identity—a conception that I believe can play a critical role in the project of epistemic decolonization.

A realist conception of identity actually provides a compelling justification for why it would be important for North American and European scholars who are interested in creating a more just world to read and take seriously the work of scholars from the Global South—as well as why it would be important for male scholars who are working for liberation to read and take seriously the work of their feminist colleagues. People with different identities are likely (although not certain) to ask different questions, take various approaches, and start with distinct assumptions. Insofar as diverse members of a research team conceptualize their shared social world in dissimilar ways, they may view a shared problem differently. In situations where mutual respect and intellectual cooperation are practiced, the existence of such divergent perspectives can lead to the sparking of a productive dialectic that might lead to a creative solution or advancement in knowledge. Indeed, we know that advances in knowledge, as in cognitive development, require situations of disequilibrium. Complacency and too-easy agreement, by contrast, can lead to intellectual stultification. The presence of people who hold different perspectives, but who are able to respect each other’s intellect and creativity, increases the possibility that a research team will come up with an innovative solution to a shared problem that looked, from one point of view, unsolvable.

Solving a problem held in common is certainly not the only, and perhaps not even the best, explanation for why a diverse research group can lead to advancements and innovations in knowledge-production. In a disciplinary field like history or literary studies that takes as its object of

study human society or culture, for example, the existence of researchers with diverse identities increases the possibility that someone might ask previously ignored research questions that open up entirely new areas of inquiry. This is essentially what has happened with such subfields as women's history and African American literature. Importantly, when the object of study is human culture or society, paying special attention to the struggles for social justice of people with subordinated identities is especially crucial to the process of investigating the functioning of a hierarchal social order such as our own. This is because subordinated identities and perspectives are often marginalized and hidden from view. Unlike the perspectives of those who have the economic means and social influence to publish and broadcast their views, the views of people who are economically and socially marginalized do not form part of the "common-sense" of the "mainstream," or dominant, culture.

As I have argued elsewhere, the alternative perspectives and accounts generated through oppositional struggle provide new ways of looking at a society that complicate and challenge dominant conceptions of what is "right," "true," and "beautiful."¹² Such alternative perspectives call to account the distorted representations of peoples, ideas, and practices whose subjugation is fundamental to the maintenance of an unjust hierarchical social order. Consequently, if we as scholars are interested in having an adequate—that is, more comprehensive and objective, as opposed to narrowly biased in favor of the *status quo*—understanding of a given social issue, we will listen harder and pay more attention to those who bring marginalized views to bear on it. We will do so in order to counterbalance the overweening "truth" of the views of those people in positions of dominance whose perspectives are generally accepted as "mainstream" or "common-sense." Identities, and, in particular, subordinated identities, are thus key to the production of a more accurate and less partial knowledge about our shared social world. They are central to our collective ability to create coalition across difference.

It is because of the centrality of identity to both knowledge production and political practice that I see my work on identity and with FMS as contributing to Nelson Maldonado-Torres's stated goal for decolonial scholars of building new concepts and critically revising "constructed identities and political projects."¹³ As an international organization that exists outside the boundaries of any one institution of higher education, and as a collective of approximately two hundred scholars with many different identities from various institutions who are working for progressive social change, the FMS project represents an ongoing attempt to "see the world anew in a way that allows one to target its evils in a new way and that gives us a better sense of what to do next."¹⁴ Importantly, the scholars who are involved with the FMS project are not attempting to transcend human difference through a kind of identity-deficient cosmopolitanism or a specious universalism. Rather, we are concerned with using our identities as epistemic resources to foster a truer universal—a universal that I understand to be akin to the pluri-versal that Walter D. Mignolo suggests we should work for.¹⁵ FMS scholars are, in this way, involved in an endeavor that is fully consonant with the efforts of the contributors to the decolonial project.

4. María Lugones, Decolonial Scholar

One of the challenges we face is identifying, for ourselves and for those we want to be in dialogue with, work that actively participates in epistemic decolonization. Who are the “invisible” people whose critical reflections, if properly attended to, will cause us to fundamentally shift our perspectives? What are the scholarly practices that might interrupt academic business-as-usual? What new or reformulated concepts can we use to help us think otherwise? What are the insights that can be accessed only by those who take a view from below? These are some of the questions we need to ask as we move forward tentatively in our attempts to build a post-Eurocentric philosophy and critical theory. Some of these questions have already begun to be answered; scholars such as Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Walter Dignolo, Lewis Gordon, and many others have started to construct an alternative critical genealogy that includes such thinkers as Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, Enrique Dussel, and Gloria Anzaldúa. In the spirit of contributing to this project, I want to highlight the work of a philosopher whose scholarly practices and critical insights exemplify for me the sort of work decolonial scholars should be doing. There are, of course, many other thinkers who are equally crucial to this endeavor, several of whose work I have discussed in detail in other places.

The work of feminist philosopher María Lugones, who is Argentinean born and raised, provides one of the most compelling examples of the significance of knowledge produced by a thinker who has been marginalized in various ways throughout her life. Lugones’s insights about the dynamics of resistance to multiple oppressions, the collective nature of effective agency, and the logic of domination are highly original and brilliantly formulated. Moreover, they are insights that—while clearly emerging from what Lugones calls a “pedestrian” view—illuminate more fully the *whole* of a hierarchical and patriarchal social structure. Lugones’s work offers us guidance as we figure out what to do next, and it models a scholarly method that is particularly appropriate to the project of decolonizing our minds, our bodies, our critical theories, and our political practices.

In *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*, Lugones is concerned with the “tactical strategist’s” ability to enact, as well as to recognize in others, resistant intentionality for the purpose of forming political collectivities that can encompass heterogeneity and multiplicity (208-09).¹⁶ Toward that end, she aims to make visible alternative domains of intelligibility—or “worlds of sense”—within what we commonly understand as reality (20-26, 85-93). Lugones explains that there are certain kinds of acts that are accorded intelligibility *as political* within a hegemonic “world of sense.” Such acts might include organizing a rally, marching in the streets, or campaigning for elective office. At the same time, there are other acts that lack intelligibility *as political* within that same domain. These might include the disruptive calling attention to oneself of the person of low status who is expected to remain invisible, the lack of openness to being “cured” on the part of the person who is labeled mentally ill, or the inattention of the youth whose schooling is inimical to his well being. Such acts, according to Lugones, are *political* insofar as they are part of an *intentional* interfering with, refusal of, or resistance to the reductive and unitary logic of the hegemonic common sense. And while such intentions lack the kind of institutional support that would transform them into agency proper, Lugones nevertheless considers resistant intentionality

important insofar as it helps subordinated individuals “sustain themselves” by “keeping [them] from being exhausted by oppressive readings” (15). Furthermore, Lugones considers the ability to recognize resistant intentionality (in oneself and in others) as central to any political project that wishes to effectively alter the hegemonic organization of power. According to Lugones, resistant emancipatory intentionality is that which people struggling together must learn to make social in their efforts to create coalitions that might succeed against multiple oppressions (224-26).

Key to Lugones’s ability to make what is usually invisible or unintelligible both visible and intelligible is her careful explication of the way we all live within multiple, contemporaneous, and even overlapping “worlds of sense,” each with its own sociality. Lest we pass too quickly over Lugones’s achievement, we should recognize her account of “worlds of sense” as a theoretical advance in thinking about the dynamics of resistance. Indeed, Lugones’s account of “worlds of sense” can be seen as elucidating, extending, and deepening the Du Boisian notion of double-consciousness—even though Lugones does not draw explicitly on Du Bois. Her account elucidates the “worldly” context for double-consciousness, reminding us that consciousness presupposes a sociality—a set of values, characteristic ways of interacting, particular persons who actively inhabit a specific geographical and psychic space. Furthermore, Lugones moves us away from the us/them binary (often figured as a black/white, female/male, or worker/capitalist dichotomy) toward the recognition of ontological multiplicity. Finally, Lugones’s account of “worlds of sense” deepens the notion of double-consciousness by calling attention to the institutional structures and ideological frameworks that provide “back-up” to hegemonic worlds of sense, thus rendering them intelligible and visible. By calling attention to that institutional “back-up,” Lugones provides an explanation for why some worlds of sense are hegemonic—why, that is, that they have the power to define and enact “common sense,” while others are correspondingly rendered invisible or unintelligible, and consequently much less powerful.

In the introduction, and throughout most of the book, Lugones tells us stories about her mother as a way of illustrating the sort of small gesture that might appear, from the perspective of a hegemonic world of sense, as nonsensical or irrational but that might be undertaken with resistant intentionality from within a subordinate world of sense. Part of Lugones’s aim in telling these stories is to help us “travel” to her mother’s world so that we might understand her mother as someone who is not wholly constituted by oppression, but who is actively resisting her oppression. Another part of Lugones’s aim is to drive home the point that we all exist, and our actions have meaning in, several different worlds of sense simultaneously. Consider the following story:

Whenever my mother would ask for something, she would say “It is on that thing next to that thing.” If you were not in the habit of following her in her moves maybe that was not what your relation to her asked of you or what you put into it—you would never be able to bring her “that thing.” My father was related to her in such a way that not knowing how to follow her in her moves through the cleaning and the cooking and the making of a life for us was to his advantage and part of his patriarchal position. He would not bring her “that thing.” ... But if you did follow her into her moves, as we kids had to, you could easily get her “that thing.” You see, she—someone who was to be unimportant, the perfection of whose makings was to lie in the making and not being visible—

managed to make herself important and to keep the makings both visible and invisible. “This,” “on that,” “next to it,” were stations in her path, she was the pivotal directional subject. (29)

Lugones’s point in telling this story is not that her mother does not live within a hegemonic world of sense, or that she can make herself immune to the depredations and demands of that patriarchal realm. Rather, her point is that the meanings attributed to her mother by a patriarchal world of sense do not exhaust her mother’s being. Although as a homemaker of her era and culture, Lugones’s mother was expected by the hegemonic world of sense to “make” a home in a way that did not call attention either to herself as a creative being or to the physical and cognitive processes involved in that making, she resisted that construction of herself and so found ways to make herself visible, important and central. She did so by creating an alternative—albeit subordinate—world of sense with its own codes, inhabitants, and modes of participation.

The alternative world of sense Lugones’s mother created was a world in which Lugones, her mother, and her siblings actively participated, but in which Lugones’s father did not. So, although Lugones’s father also existed within that world, he was a functional outsider to it—a non-competent, non-participant who may not have been even aware that it existed. Just as Lugones’s mother’s refusal to name what she wanted might have been interpreted from the perspective of Lugones’s father’s world of sense as verbal laziness, so *his* behavior would have been interpreted quite differently from the perspective of her world than from his own. Furthermore, while Lugones’s father would have been central to his own (hegemonic) world of sense, he was probably peripheral to Lugones’s mother’s (subordinate) world of sense. In essence, Lugones’s father was a different being—with a different positionality and valuation—in Lugones’s mother’s world than within his own. It is in this way that Lugones reminds us how the social is always heterogeneous; because there are generally multiple and overlapping worlds of sense co-existing within any given geographical and temporal space, “no one slice of ‘reality’ [can have] a univocal meaning” (28).

In addition to illustrating the point about social heterogeneity, Lugones’s stories about her mother illuminate her scholarly method. To understand where Lugones ends up in the book, her readers need to follow carefully “her moves.” It is only by doing so that we are able to “get” (understand) “that thing” (a particular point or even her argument as a whole). Moreover, it is this kind of “moving with” that most characterizes Lugones’s own work. Not only does Lugones require us as her readers to “move with” her in order to understand her, but also she approaches the theorists whose work she takes up in this same way—moving with them as she explores and explicates their argument before carefully delineating where she departs from them. Indeed, part of what makes *Pilgrimages* difficult to understand at times is that it is an enactment of the kind of resistance Lugones advocates.

As a decolonial scholar, Lugones works to resist not only specific acts of oppression, but also the very logic of domination itself. Toward that end, she takes aim at the institutions, practices, and even *vocabularies* that she sees as 1) facilitating the erasure of alternative multiple worlds of sense, 2) participating in the logic of fragmentation rather than multiplicity, and 3) conceptualizing oppressions as interlocking rather than intermeshing. To avoid theorizing/writing in terms that she

regards as reproducing familiar conceptual binaries (theory/practice, tactic/strategy, reason/emotion), Lugones introduces new terminology and insists that her readers recognize an all-encompassing relationality—both conceptually and at every level of human interaction.

To begin with, Lugones asks us to make the “epistemic shift” necessary for acknowledging the dynamic *movement* that always attends the “oppressing/being oppressed ↔ resisting” relation (11-12, 208). In Lugones’s view, to talk about “the oppressed” is to reify conceptually those who suffer under oppressive logics, while to participate in conceptual reification is to participate in the logic of domination. Moreover, to represent one party as “the oppressed” while representing another as “the oppressor” is to binarize a complex relational web in which multiple different parties interact within multiple different relations of power with each other. Lugones also introduces the notion of “active subjectivity” as a conceptual alternative to late modern agency (6, 210-20). Modernist agency is, Lugones reminds us, “a mirage of individual autonomous action” in which the social, political and economic institutions that back up the successful agent are effectively obscured (211). Active subjects, in contrast to agents, must move tentatively, with care, aware both of the lack of institutional back up and of the possibilities for creating the coalitions necessary for bringing their intentions to action.

Finally, Lugones introduces a new kind of subject, a subject she calls the “I → we” (6, 226-29). According to Lugones, the “I → we” presupposes “neither the individual subject [nor] ... the collective intentionality of collectivities of the same” (6). It is, rather, a subject who works/theorizes from what she calls the “pedestrian” view: “the perspective from inside the midst of people, from inside the layers of relationships, institutions and practices” (5). In this way, the “I → we” is a subject who recognizes her interdependence with others, but who never loses sight of her own and others’ individual needs and predilections. She is an activist who crafts her political practice in relation and reaction to the people with whom she is in struggle, even as she situates the people and the struggle within larger institutional relations and structures. Recognizing ourselves as existing within the subject position of the “I → we” is, I believe, crucial for our success as scholars who wish to work together for progressive social change both in the academy and outside it.

In engaging with Lugones’s work, and in elucidating what I find to be so compelling about it, I am intentionally providing her ideas with whatever “institutional back up” I have to give. On my own, that back up cannot amount to much. But if others similarly recognize the importance of engaging with scholars such as Lugones—scholars who draw their insights from interaction with, and orient their work toward, people who exist in situations of multiple oppression—the “back up” we collectively provide can help institutionalize her ideas. Moreover, by altering our scholarly practices so that we engage with and cite scholars like Lugones—who besides being a brilliant thinker, a complex individual, and a fully fleshed-out human being who cannot be captured by any one identity category, is nevertheless identified in the academy as a Argentinean American lesbian feminist philosopher—more often than we engage with and cite the usual (white, straight, male, American or European) theoretical suspects, we may be able to effectively “shift the geography of reason” away from the already familiar center of power toward the epistemically rich margins.¹⁷ Such a shift can help make available to us the kinds of alternative perspectives that will call to account the

distorted representations of peoples, ideas, and practices whose subjugation is fundamental to the maintenance of our unjust social order. We will then be better positioned, as knowledge producers, to provide an adequate—that is, more comprehensive and objective, as opposed to narrowly biased in favor of the *status quo*—understanding of the one world in which our many “worlds of sense” can coexist.¹⁸

5. The Politics of Citation in the Struggle for Epistemic Decolonization

I take seriously the opportunity given to us by the organizers of the *Mapping the Decolonial Turn* conference to collectively shift the geography of reason through this shared scholarly endeavor. Like Dussel, I am interested in forging a philosophy of liberation that “takes place between philosophers within a community of horizontal communication who are respected as equals, as colleagues, but who nevertheless demand to be recognized in their alterity.”¹⁹ Toward that end, I suggest that scholars interested in epistemic decolonization should be even more conscious than they already are about working to avoid what Lewis Gordon has called the “dialectics of dominant recognition.”²⁰ Rather than—or perhaps in addition to—concerning ourselves about who is not listening to us (i.e., scholars who work primarily in European critical theory), we should be worrying about who we are not listening to. Whose scholarship are we engaging with? Which scholars inhabit our works cited lists? What kind of audience do we orient our essays toward? Whose books are we taking the time to read and review? Who do we invite to give talks at our institutions? Who are the students we mentor and support?

For the most part, these are the sorts of questions that scholars in this special issue are asking and responding to as they map the decolonial turn. However, I believe we still have a good way to go before we can truly achieve epistemic decolonization. I am dismayed when I read an article about epistemic decolonization that is oriented toward a Eurocentric audience, just as I am discouraged by articles written by men (and women!) that lack a substantive engagement with—as opposed to a mere mention of—the work of feminist scholars. I contend that while our *ideas* regarding liberation are critically important, our scholarly *practices* are perhaps even more important for the way they materially transform the world in which we live and work. Do not misunderstand me: I am quite willing, on occasion, to dialogue with and cite scholars of all genders and races who work in European critical theory, and I even understand the necessity of doing so. European critical theory is like a “trade language” that female and minority scholars like myself must use in order to be legitimated by the academy and understood by those who stand outside our particular circles of concern.²¹ Moreover, I acknowledge that there are some very good ideas that have come down to us from mainstream traditions of thought like European critical theory—ideas that both cannot and should not be neglected. However, I am not interested in simply reinforcing the academic structures that buttress the hierarchies of knowledge to which we have all become accustomed. Accordingly, I want to be sure that any attention I give to European critical theory does not cause me to exclude from my own dialogic situation someone who has identified a dynamic of exclusion to which I

have—by virtue of my race, gender, class, sexual, or geographical privilege—turned an inattentive or uncomprehending ear.

Notes

- ¹ See the very first paragraph of Enrique Dussel's "From Critical Theory to the Philosophy of Liberation: Some Themes for Dialogue," published in this special issue.
- ² Paula Moya, *Learning From Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), esp. 86 n. 2, 13, 133. See also Paula Moya, "Introduction: Reclaiming Identity," in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1-26; Paula Moya, "What's Identity Got to Do with It?" in *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, eds. Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael R. Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M. L. Moya, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 96-117.
- ³ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 95.
- ⁴ Michael Hames-García, "Who are our own people? Challenges for a Theory of Social Identity," in *Reclaiming Identity*, 102-29.
- ⁵ *Mapping the Decolonial Turn: Post/Trans-Continental Interventions in Philosophy, Theory, and Critique*, April 21-23, 2005, UC-Berkeley.
- ⁶ Martin Jay, "Response to 'Latina/o Philosophy,'" *Mapping the Decolonial Turn*, April 23, 2005. Jay's remarks quoted in this essay were transcribed from the video of the conference proceedings.
- ⁷ The majority of the conference participants were either Latina/o, African American, or from the Caribbean or Latin America.
- ⁸ Walter Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 10.1 (2002): 57-96.
- ⁹ Moya, *Learning*; Moya and Hames-García, *Reclaiming Identity*; Alcoff, Hames-García, Mohanty, and Moya, *Identity Politics Reconsidered*; Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Michael Hames-García, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- ¹⁰ Claude Steele, "Not Just a Test," *The Nation* 278.17 (2004): 38-40. Steele defines identity contingencies as the specific set of responses that a person with a given identity has to cope with in specific settings.
- ¹¹ For more information about the Future of Minority Studies Research Project, see our website at <http://www.fmsproject.cornell.edu>.
- ¹² Moya, *Learning*; Moya, "Introduction," *Reclaiming Identity*.
- ¹³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Post-Continental Philosophy and the Decolonial Turn," *Mapping the Decolonial Turn*, April 21, 2005. Part of these comments now form part of the introduction to this special issue.
- ¹⁴ Maldonado-Torres, "Post-Continental."
- ¹⁵ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁶ Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). Page references will be cited in parentheses in the text.
- ¹⁷ Lewis Gordon, "Shifting the Geography of Reason in an Age of Disciplinary Decadence," in this special issue.
- ¹⁸ I intend here to invoke the Zapatista saying, "Queremos un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos." This translates to "We want one world that can accommodate many worlds" or "We want one world in which many worlds coexist."
- ¹⁹ Dussel, "Critical Theory," 1.
- ²⁰ Gordon, "Shifting."
- ²¹ Sean Teuton, *Red Land, Red Power: Grounding Knowledge in the American Indian Novel*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). Teuton analogizes the professional theoretical languages that he, as an Indian scholar, has recourse to in the academy to the "trade languages" that were at one time used in the colonial Southeast by both European and Indian

traders to engage in diplomacy as well as to exchange objects, information, and knowledge: “Like the currency attending wampum or treaties, trade languages enable us to communicate across cultural differences and to trade in intellectual capital, without diminishing our cultural autonomy or ‘authenticity’” (28).

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