

# Cultural Alterity: Cross-Cultural Communication and Feminist Theory in North-South Contexts

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*How to communicate with “the other” who is culturally different from oneself is one of the greatest challenges facing North-South relations. This paper builds on existential-phenomenological and poststructuralist concepts of alterity and difference to strengthen the position of Latina and other subaltern speakers in North-South dialogue. It defends a postcolonial approach to feminist theory as a basis for negotiating culturally differentiated feminist positions in this age of accelerated globalization, migration, and displacement.*

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This essay will address the issue of understanding cultural differences in the context of cross-cultural communication and dialogue, particularly those cases in which such communication or attempted communication takes place between members of a dominant culture and a subaltern culture. From an examination of these issues we can perhaps draw some ideas that will permit us to reach a fuller understanding of cross-cultural feminist exchanges and dialogues. The reason for focusing on the topic of cross-cultural communication is that recently, I have become increasingly aware of the levels of prejudice affecting the basic processes of communication between Anglo-American and Latina speakers, as well as the difficulties experienced by many Latin American immigrants to the United States. It seems to me that in these times of massive prejudices against immigrants and of extraordinary displacements of people from their communities of origin, the question of how to communicate with “the other” who is culturally different from oneself is one of the greatest challenges facing North-South relations and interaction. If the question before us is how to frame the conditions for the possibility of a global feminist ethics—or whether such an ethics is indeed possible—I see no better place to

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start than to examine the conditions of possibility for cross-cultural communication as such.

My methodology for understanding what is at stake in cross-cultural and intersubjective communication will depend largely on an existential-phenomenological concept of alterity. In this tradition, the breakthrough in constructing the concept of *the other* occurs when one combines the notion of the other as different from the self with the acknowledgment of the self's decentering that results from the experience of such differences.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the breakthrough involves acknowledging the positive, potentially ethical dimensions of such a decentering for interpersonal relations (as in Levinas 1979, Irigaray 1993, and Kristeva 1991), in contrast to simply taking the decentering one might experience in the light of the other's differences as a deficit in the individual's control over the environment. According to this understanding, interpersonal and social interactions marked by cultural (as well as sexual, racial, and other kinds of difference) allow us to reach new ethical, aesthetic, and political ground.

In other words, the other is not the one who passively confirms what I am predisposed to think about her; she is not the one who acts as the mirror to my self or the one whose image justifies my existing ego boundaries. If this were the case, the other would only be a stand-in for the self's narcissism. Just the contrary; the other is that person or experience which makes it possible for the self to recognize its own limited horizons in the light of asymmetrically given relations marked by sexual, social, cultural, or other differences. The other, the foreigner, the stranger, is that person occupying the space of the subaltern in the culturally asymmetrical power relation, but also those elements or dimensions of the self that unsettle or decenter the ego's dominant, self-enclosed, territorialized identity.

In addition to these presuppositions regarding otherness and difference derived from the phenomenological-existential and poststructuralist tradition, I will take into account recent methodological developments regarding the concept of cultural difference as represented in postcolonial feminist theory. Working against the background of the West's history of colonial enterprises and its exploitation of other societies and cultures, postcolonial theory, in its various manifestations, pays special attention to issues of language, class, racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender differences, and to the justification of narratives about the nation-state.<sup>2</sup> Postcolonial feminist theory, in turn, directs its attention to the lives of women and to the tensions affecting women whose voices appear in national narratives and accounts of diasporic migrations. At stake in these "post" theories is a certain loss of innocence with regard to narratives of identity because of a more critical awareness of the regulative power such narratives have in defining who we are, who we aren't, and who others are and aren't.<sup>3</sup> The regulative power of narratives of identity is something with respect to which we are, to some extent, complicit, but we are also

able to examine these narratives from some distance. Postcolonial and feminist critics have therefore used psychoanalytic theory to investigate further and to elaborate aspects of the relation between self and other in the light of accepted narratives of cultural identity and difference. In particular, Kristeva has studied symbolic analogies between the foreign other and the Freudian concept of the uncanny in the self—what she has called the stranger within the self (Kristeva 1991). Postcolonial feminisms, problematizing the Western concept of self, question the regulative use of gender in national and postnational narratives, but also the Enlightenment concept of individualism that fails to notice the complex, multilayered, fragmented, contradictory aspects of the self.

Finally, and on a different note regarding issues of alterity and identity, one more presupposition guiding these reflections is the belief that what we hold to be the nature of knowledge is not culture-free but is determined by the methodologies and data legitimated by dominant cultures. In other words, the scientific practices of a dominant culture are what determine not only the limits of knowledge but who may legitimately participate in the language of science. In everyday practices, outside of university environments, women are seen as particularly illiterate when it comes to having scientific knowledge or being able to discuss scientific issues with experts in the field. One does not need to have read Foucault to realize how very interconnected is the relation of knowledge to power. My point is that cultural (not just scientific) knowledge involves a highly constraining form of power. This power involves constraints over oneself and constraints over others. The type of constraints I shall try to examine and deconstruct to some extent are those dealing with a dominant culture's understanding of cultural differences. In addition, my analysis tries to understand sociocultural differences without subjecting them to masculine-dominant, gender-normative categories and maxims.

There is a need to develop a model of ethical and philosophical understanding in which the meaning of sexual difference is not limited by a gender-normative bias regarding what constitutes "the female body" or the proper function of a woman's mental abilities. Similarly, there is a need to develop a model for the understanding of subaltern cultural differences. In other words, both the critique of gender-normative biases and the critique of cultural imperialism need to be taken into account. Nevertheless, given that quite a number of critiques of cultural imperialism are themselves based on masculinist (often highly authoritarian) models of liberation from imperialism, which in turn presuppose and reinforce the domination of men over women in liberation struggles, the critique of cultural imperialism should be tempered by some kind of pluricultural feminist perspective. All these considerations lead to a feminist postcolonial perspective that can balance the struggle against the legacy of colonial-imperial domination with the struggle for the creation of feminist and feminist-compatible societies.

## THE DISPARITY IN SPEAKING POSITIONS

These reflections begin with some of my personal impressions regarding the difficulties of cross-cultural communication when one culture circumstantially holds the upper hand over another. The culture with the upper hand will generate resistance in the group that fails to enjoy a similar cultural status, while the culture of the subaltern group will hardly be understood in its importance or complexity by those belonging to the culturally dominant group unless exceptional measures are taken to promote a good dialogue. Even so, it is my view that no two cultures or languages can be perfectly transparent to each other. There is always a residue of meaning that will not be reached in cross-cultural endeavors, a residue sufficiently important to point to what I shall refer to more abstractly as a principle of (cross-cultural) incommensurability.<sup>4</sup>

The most common way to point to this excess of meaning is to refer to the untranslatable aspects of a language vis-à-vis another language. In this case, one might think of incommensurability arithmetically as a kind of minus effect to cross-cultural communication—what I get from the differently situated speaker is the conveyable message minus the specific cultural difference that does not come across. Theorized in this manner, the way to maximize intercultural dialogue would be to devise a way to put as much meaning as possible into the plus side of the exchange, so that as little as possible remains on the minus side of it. But although creating more effective means of communication between disparate groups can help reduce social conflict and tension, I don't believe much is understood about cultural difference if incommensurability is thought of in this predominantly quantitative manner.

Another way to think of incommensurability, and one that is much more relevant and fruitful for our discussion, is to look at nodes in a linguistic interchange or a conversation in which the other's speech, or some aspect of it, resonates in me as a kind of strangeness, as a kind of displacement of the usual expectation. Cultural alterity requires that one not bypass these experiences or subsume them under an already familiar category. Even the category of cultural diversity is called into question when diversity is institutionalized so as to mask a more radical view of differences. Postmodern postcolonial discourse looks for the possibilities of using nontotalizing concepts of difference rather than "the consensual, ethnocentric notion of the pluralistic existence of cultural diversity" (Bhabha 1994, 177). In the establishment's view of diversity, the rules controlling the representation of diversity usually reflect the will of the winners in political and military struggles. As Lyotard's debate with Habermas makes clear, the rationality of consensus is only a few steps from the desire for one system, one truth—in sum, one rationality—to dominate human civilization. In its extreme, the will to one truth has yielded the totalitarian Reign of Terror.<sup>5</sup> The representation of the one system as

“pluralist” and favorable to cultural diversity must be called into question because of the sweeping power exercised by the system to harness the many into the yoke of the one (cf. Bhabha 1994, 152-55, 162-64). Even when the system is formulated as pluralist, the drawback is that only those differences are likely to enter the plural stage as are able to fit within the overall rationality that approves and controls the many as one.

Perhaps partly, though not exclusively, on account of this reason—because the new paradigm is born specifically out of the life experiences of many migrant and postcolonial peoples—some postcolonial critics have started to theorize the question of cultural difference in terms of what Homi Bhabha has called a “disjunctive temporality” (Bhabha 1994, 177) and Néstor García Canclini has labeled a “multitemporal heterogeneity.”<sup>6</sup> These categories refer, in the first case, to the splitting, and in the second case, to the superimposition of temporalities marking off cultural differences, speaking positions, and narrative timeframes. In Latin American societies, as García Canclini’s work demonstrates, African, indigenous, Spanish colonial, modern, and global narrative timeframes may intersect, simultaneously or disjunctively, a speaker’s discourse. Taking this thought further, I would note that when such culturally situated speakers enter diasporic locations—as happens when they migrate from their original societies to the United States—they will bring with them these forms of cultural difference and hybridity. It is not exceptional for many Latin Americans to become acculturated as a result of sociocultural influences criss-crossed by two or more incommensurable cultures, sometimes in literal juxtaposition. For example, in the Caribbean, because of the effects of colonization, some of the Yoruba deities gained counterparts in the Spanish Catholic roster of saints. We could say the Catholic and the Yoruba figures inhabit two very different kinds of temporalities. From the standpoint of the worshipers’ experiences, in some cases one of the temporalities would be superimposed on the other, while in other cases the two would become distinct.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa, speaking as a Chicana-Tejana-lesbian-feminist writer, juxtaposes the temporality of ancient indigenous myths with her postcolonial North American existence. The shifts from English to Spanish to Nahuatl in Anzaldúa are not just shifts in languages or “codes,” as she calls them, but in temporalities of perception and consciousness (Anzaldúa 1987, viii). These pluricultural temporalities create a disjunctive tension with the linear temporality of modernity governing the identities of producers and consumers in advanced capitalist societies. These multiple and disjunctive temporalities create a displacement in the relation between self and other, allowing the recognition of alterity both inside and outside the self. Their premise of selfhood begins with the acknowledging and appreciation of the nonidentical self. Anzaldúa’s multihyphenated *mestiza* self reminds us of Kristeva’s stranger within. More broadly, it exemplifies feminism’s notion of the differences not only among but within women. These multiple layers

within the self, responding to different perceptive fields and different, not necessarily commensurable temporalities, can predispose us psychologically to appreciate both the richness and the incommensurability of cultural differences. They lay the groundwork for cognitive, perceptual, and linguistically constituted relations between ourselves and others where the other's differences, even if not fully translatable into the terms of our own cultural horizons, can be acknowledged as sites of appreciation, desire, recognition, caring, and respect. I am speaking here of a psychological state in which the stranger is not abjected, derided, persecuted, shut out of view, or legalized out of existence, but—departing from the premise that the other is also human—neither is she subjected to the demand that she be the double, or reflected mirror image, of ourselves.

The question arises of how the principle of incommensurability applies to feminist ethics when feminist ethics is engaged in making and executing normative judgments cross-culturally. Will the feminist ethical claim or the normative judgment be impaired by the principle of incommensurability, and if so, to what extent? How are feminist ethical terms negotiated cross-culturally? Should they be negotiated at all? My first task is to try to explain how the principle of incommensurability works at the concrete level of everyday experience. I will address this issue from an existential standpoint based in part on my personal experience.

#### THE CULTURALLY DIFFERENT OTHER

What does it mean to be culturally different and to speak, at the level of culture, in a different voice? This question is generally answered by those with the power to mark others (or "the other") as different, rather than by those whose difference is in question in relation to the majority, or main members, of a given group. To be culturally different is not the same as being individually different or different by virtue of one's age or sex. If I am in a group among other women with roughly the same kind of education and occupational interests as myself and if we are roughly of the same age, what will mark me as culturally different is that I am, in today's terms, a Latina—a name that, while pointing to some aspects of my background, also erases important aspects of my individuality and the actual specificities of my cultural genealogy, which includes Caribbean, Latin American, and Western European background.

*Latina* casts me in a recognizable category, through which the meaning of my difference is delimited according to whatever set of associations this term may evoke. *Latina* is not simply a descriptive term referring to someone with a Latin American or Iberian ancestry currently residing in the United States. It is a signifier that both masks and evokes a range of associations—hot blooded, temperamental, submissive, defiant, illegal or illicit, sexually repressed or sexually overactive, oppressed, exploited, and so on. But the thread that draws

together all the stereotypical associations is one of invisibility as a producer of culture. One reason for this is that women in masculine-dominant societies, including Anglo-American society, are viewed primarily as transmitters rather than producers of culture. They are viewed principally as caregivers whose function in culture is to transmit and conserve, not question and create, cultural values.

Latinas in the United States are also invisible as producers of culture because the term *Latina* lacks a specific national reference and, in the mind of Western modernity, nation and culture are still tightly interrelated. (For example, the great national museums of art and science exhibit those works that illustrate the cultural standards and the aesthetic and scientific power of various nations.) As a concept, *Latina* exceeds the category of the national. Because as Latinas we are not tied to a specifiable national culture (in contrast to members of a culturally dominant group), to be culturally visible in the dominant culture we have to show that we know how to incorporate two or more cultures into our way of being. Furthermore, we must demonstrate that the way we bring such cultures together can benefit the Anglo-American public. In order to receive recognition as a cultural agent, I must show that I can be both a Latina and a North American; that I can alternate between these identities, so much so that in extremely "tight" cultural situations, I can perform, in my North American voice, a public erasure of my Latina voice, if need be. My white, Anglo-American counterpart is not called on to perform such a feat with respect to her own cultural background. She does not have to erase her Anglo-American cultural background to be legitimated as a member of North American society. If she comes from a working-class background, she may have to erase her class background to be fully accepted in some strata of society; and if she is a lesbian, she may have to erase her sexual orientation (keep it closeted) to be acceptable in some groups. But to gain recognition as a cultural agent she does not have to erase or dilute her Anglo-American background as such. Moreover, she does not need to combine her cultural background with, say, that of Middle Eastern, Asian, African, or Latin American people before being accepted as an important contributor to society and culture. If she is Jewish, she will face special problems the farther she is removed from assimilating fully into the Protestant, Anglo-American, Western European tradition.

Returning to the problem of the culturally successful Latina woman, an interesting phenomenon can be observed. Once I am able to perform the feat of representing my culture in some distinctive way in the context of the dominant Anglo-American culture, I am no longer considered only a culturally marked "other." To my favor, I am now recognized as an accomplished handler and knower of cultures. In this capacity, I earn a special place in the group. I have stepped out of the "immanent" place of the other. I have, to some extent, transcended the "Latina" object-position and claimed my position as a

cultural agent in terms recognized by the dominant cultural group. But in order to do this, I need to be knowledgeable in the language and epistemic maneuvers of the dominant culture, the same culture that in its everyday practice marks me as culturally “other” than itself. From a cultural standpoint as well as a psychoanalytical one, I have become a split subject. When I act as “myself” (in my reflexive sense of self, the “me” that includes and grows out of my early Cuban upbringing), my Anglo-American sociocultural environment will often mark me as “other.” When, alternatively, I discursively perform the speaking position expected of a subject of the dominant culture, I am recognized as a real agent in the real world.

Still, something fundamentally important is missing in this latter recognition (a misrecognition, actually). What my interlocutor fails to recognize is that delimiting my capacity to speak in my culturally differentiated voice will have an effect on what I say in response. When one feels rejected, one switches tracks, as it were, and enters the dominant discourse, not without realizing what is lost. What my interlocutor recognizes is not what I would have liked—an encouragement to communicate insights I offer from a standpoint of cultural difference—but only my ability to enter a standard Anglo-American speaking position, a position that exists in negotiated tension with my culturally differentiated, reflexive sense of self. In other words, the local masternarrative exists in tension with what the Latina knows and experiences, and the former shuts out the latter. This is why sometimes, when some interlocutor responds to me (say, at the office) in reference to the self I perform there as a speaking subject, I get the sense that this colleague is not speaking to me at all; that my interlocutor is missing something, because the “me” that is culturally different is ignored, shut off, or bypassed.

There is a sense of frustration but also of missed opportunity in these mishaps in cross-cultural communication. What remains to be understood in the statements of the culturally differentiated other—that is, the incommensurable something not subject to perfect cultural translation—may actually be the most important part of the message my Anglophone interlocutor needs to receive. As I perceive it, my interlocutor takes in a fragment of the message and discards the rest. But one suspects it is precisely because the discarded part of the message would require the radical decentering of the dominant Anglophone speaking subject that it fails to reach such a subject’s ears. Who or what is the other for the dominant, enlightened subject?<sup>7</sup> It is the one he would like to speak with occasionally, preferably in a foreign or distant location; it is the one he defends abstractly in arguments for democracy or against oppression. But let not the other (as other) make any demands in his everyday world, for in this case he might have to change his way of being. He might have to acknowledge his own split subjectivity, change his fixed way of life, welcome the stranger within, and perhaps alter his views and relations with others in ways he had not foreseen.

Cultural alterity therefore points to an ethics and to ways of knowing far deeper than the type of thinking wherein dominant cultural speakers perceive themselves to be at the epistemic and moral center of the universe, spreading their influence outward toward other rational speakers. Cultural alterity demands that the other be heard in her difference and that the self give itself the time, the space, and the opportunity to appreciate the stranger without and within. As Kristeva poignantly observes, "How could one tolerate a foreigner if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself?" (Kristeva 1991, 182).

If I may extrapolate from the kind of personal experience mentioned above to the situation of communication and dialogue among women North and South of the border, one sees how difficult it is for groups that are deeply entrenched in their own values, and that have the power to ignore the values of other groups, to attain any adequate understanding of cultural alterity. The reason for this is that people of different cultures do not speak the same (cultural) language and do not share the same cultural imaginary order. The science of anthropology has had to deal with the issue of cultural incommensurability for a long time. Why is this sense of incommensurability so hard to grasp for philosophy? Philosophers are often taught that philosophical claims can be stated in a language that is essentially outside of culture. This move essentializes philosophy, requiring an arsenal of conceptual weapons to police its boundaries, much as governments hire border patrols to keep illegal aliens outside the border. But isn't the language used to put forward philosophical claims—even the most formal and abstract language—already part of a culture? Aren't our conceptions of ethics, reason, and philosophy part of culture? Perhaps the issue should be put another way. Philosophers may acknowledge that incommensurability exists among various cultural formations and that it will impede the mapping of various cultural discourses exactly so that all of them match perfectly. The debate lies in whether such incommensurable elements should be assigned to what is irrelevant to philosophical meaning and knowledge, and thus irrelevant to the operations of reason; or whether, as I suggest, the incommensurable elements should be seen as inherent to the processes of reasoning itself.

In my view, cross-cultural (rational) discourse should be seen as limited by those elements of cultural difference that I have called incommensurable. That these elements of cultural difference cannot be fully apprehended in their "internal" intracultural meaning by outsiders, however, should not be taken as a sign that they are irrelevant to an understanding of cultural difference. Nor does it mean that acknowledging incommensurability will weaken the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue. Quite the contrary. Communication, including cross-cultural communication, involves two aspects, the second of which is often neglected. First, one must understand what is being said. Second, one must relate what is being said to a complex set of signifiers, denoting or

somehow pointing to what remains unsaid. It is because of this very important (open-ended) dialectic between the said and the unsaid that the principle of incommensurability in cross-cultural communication assumes considerable importance.

In cross-cultural communication, each speaker may “say” something that falls on the side of the “unsaid” for a culturally differentiated interlocutor. Such gaps in communication may cause one speaker’s discourse to appear incoherent or insufficiently organized. To the culturally dominant speaker, the subaltern speaker’s discourse may appear to be a string of fragmented observations rather than a unified whole. The actual problem may not be incoherence but the lack of cultural translatability of the signifiers for coherence from one set of cultural presuppositions to the other.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, the dominant speaker, relating only to fragments in the other’s narrative, may believe that the whole message was transmitted, when only part of it was. This asymmetrical, nonreciprocal gap in communication can be tested, for example, if a third party interrupts the conversation and the subaltern speaker tries to resume it after the interval. The dominant speaker, lacking the sense that some element in the communication was still missing and believing that s/he has already heard the whole statement, does not perceive that the interlocutor should have the space to complete what was left unsaid. The subaltern speaker, in turn, is at a loss to explain that she had saved the most important part of the message for the end. Now she realizes that the interlocutor wants to move away from the subject of cultural difference, not toward it.

The speaker from the dominant culture is basically saying: communicate with me entirely on the terms I expect; beyond this, I am not interested. The ethical principle of cultural alterity must point to the inadequacy of such a speaker to engage in cross-cultural as well as interpersonal dialogue and conversation. Yet by the conventional norms of his own culture, the dominant speaker may never understand that he is silencing the culturally differentiated other because it never occurred to him to think that cross-cultural communication contains important, yet incommensurable, elements. Alternatively, he may be conscious of such incommensurable elements, but pay special attention to them only when the contrast between cultures involves a strong polarity, as in the cases of Asian or African cultures in contrast to Anglo-American culture. In this case, too, the Latina’s subaltern message will not be heard, because her closer proximity to the West will disqualify her from the neoromanticized picture of the more culturally distant other.

It is incumbent on those speakers of the dominant cultural language not to foreclose the meaning of statements to only those meanings that are readily available to them. Assuming that one could map the statements of the culturally differentiated other according to three categories—readily understandable, difficult to understand, and truly incommensurable—one should never close the communication at the level of the first category, but should

make the effort to let understanding reach into the other two domains. For example, if a Latina speaker alters the usual syntactical order normally used by English speakers, and if she also speaks with a heavy accent, these factors may make it harder for the native English speaker to understand what she is saying. With some effort, however, it is possible to figure out what is being said, if one is intent on paying attention and in engaging in followup questioning. Unfortunately, I have seen repeated cases of a Latina treated as if she were speaking nonsense, only because her accent, her sentence structure, and perhaps her vocabulary differ from that of ordinary English usage. Rather than taking the effort to listen to what the other is saying, the native speaker will treat the non-native speaker as if she were linguistically or intellectually incompetent. From the perception "I don't immediately understand what the other is saying," the dominant speaker will draw the invalid conclusion, "the other is speaking nonsense," "the other is incompetent," "the other does not belong here," and so on. The relegation of the culturally different "other" to a subordinate position, as this exemplary exercise shows, may itself be diagnosed as a lack of culture. Cultural prejudice of this sort is indeed a sign of a cultural deficit on the part of the dominant culture.

Furthermore, and with respect to the third category or level, placing a high stake on the incommensurable as that which requires recognition (rather than erasure or denigration in relation to a dominant culture) is fundamental to acquiring an understanding, even if only a partial understanding, of the culturally differentiated "other." If we hypothesize that incommensurability is largely manifested not only linguistically but in terms of disjunctive or heterogeneous temporalities, given the centrality of the concept of time in human existence, the very fabric of all social relationships will be affected by it. For example, intergenerational issues, productivity, leisure, and aging will not carry the same overall meaning for people of different cultural backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> Recognizing how culturally incommensurable clusters of meaning affect basic everyday interactions will bring culturally differentiated speakers one step closer to improved communication and understanding.

#### WOMAN AS "OTHER" OF ANOTHER WOMAN

Although in some of my examples I have been using the masculine pronoun to designate the culturally dominant speaker and the feminine to designate the subaltern, the relations of cultural dominance and subalternity can also obtain among speakers of the same gender or in the reverse combination. Basically, in coupled dualisms or binaries, the normative term "others" the nonnormative one (that is, the normative term subjects the nonnormative term to the subordinate position of "other"). This is one of the reasons why deconstructive feminist theory is so intent on moving beyond oppositional binaries and their corresponding forms of exclusion. For example, as Beauvoir and others have

shown, in the man-woman binary, *man* is taken as normative for the human species, while *woman* is cast in the position of “other” of the normative. But take other examples: if the lady of the house is considered normative with respect to domestic authority and values, the female domestic worker will be seen as “other”; if the white woman is considered normative with respect to social status, the *mulata* will be other, and so on. Conversely, in popular culture, if the barrio is considered normative, high culture will be considered “other.” In North-South and West-East binaries, if North and West are considered normative in terms of cultural standards, then South and East will be considered “other.”

In antiimperialist politics, the terms are reversed. The Northern and the Western aggressors take on a lower cultural status while the Southern and Eastern cultures are hailed. When Western feminist theory fails to take into account the issues of colonialism and imperialism, the dangerous outcome will be that women from Eastern and Southern cultures will see in feminism the mark of Western colonization. Feminism in this instance will be tied symbolically to Western (capitalist) modernity and will not be dissociated from its values. In contrast, if feminism is seen as a movement of women in different parts of the world getting together and joining forces to overcome social, political, economic, and gender oppression, then this movement of emancipation becomes normative and the “other” becomes the outsider to, or obstructor of, this movement.

Herein lies the point of vulnerability for Western feminism, for if feminism is defined too narrowly, it will make an “other” of women whose path to emancipation it may fail to understand or recognize. In particular, it may relegate to the status of “other” many women in Eastern and Southern countries whose views do not fit squarely into Western feminist categories. Moreover, if Western feminism defines itself too narrowly or in terms that women in Eastern and Southern countries may not quite understand or appreciate—given the factor of cultural incommensurability—women in these countries may reject Western feminists as “other.” This potential type of mutual exclusion takes us back to the impasse between feminism North and South, East and West. As Trinh Minh-ha notes in *Woman, Native, Other*, it is easy for conservative males in Third World countries to denounce feminism as a foreign, Western influence. When Western feminists try to denounce the conditions of women’s oppression in Third World countries in “terms made to reflect or fit into Euro-American women’s criteria of equality,” this indirectly “serves the cause of tradition upholders and provides them with a pretext for muddling all issues of oppression raised by Third World women” (Mihn-ha 1989, 106).

Fortunately, thanks to the insistent voices of women from developing countries and ethnic minorities and to the growing sensitivities of Western feminists when it comes to conveying feminist messages in the light of cross-

cultural differences, these difficulties are better handled now by feminists engaged in worldwide activism and politics.<sup>10</sup> What is less clear to me is whether Western feminists (as they pursue philosophy, for example) view themselves as one of many voices in the struggle for women's social, political, economic, and gender emancipation on a worldwide scale. It seems to me that Western feminism still harbors the hope that its own views of emancipation are universally valid for all the world's women, if only because Western thought generally does not mark itself as culturally specific. Instead, it engages in the discursive mode of a universal *logos*, which it takes to be applicable to all rational speakers. Here the issue of colonialism must be brought up, even if it is unpleasant and even if it interrupts the discussion about the criteria for recognizing rationally competent speakers across cultures. Without reference to the historic conditions of colonialism, it is impossible to understand fully the Western mind's presumption of speaking from the privileged position of universality.

The Western colonial enterprise and its impact on the Americas were such that there was no way to understand the disparity of Western and non-Western cultures in an ethically responsible, reciprocal way. The conquest of America offered no reciprocal way of accounting for the differences among Western and non-Western cultures and peoples. To those people who were judged "less developed" in Western European terms it brought the forces that colonized and enslaved them. While the racial composition of the Americas has changed since the conquest and colonization, the problem persists that the people who have not reached the West's level of material development are often considered inferior. The impoverished Mexican migrant to California and the Haitian migrant to South Florida become, more than five hundred years after the conquest, the targets of the combined historical effects of colonialist, racial, linguistic, class, and, where applicable, gender prejudices.

Is it possible for contemporary Western feminism to disentangle itself from the historical forces of Western colonialism and from the erasure of otherness that such forces entail? What are the points of contact today between feminists from developing countries and Western feminism? Is there reason to place hope in a new way of looking at things, the recently developed approach of *postcolonial feminisms*?

#### POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISMS

Postcolonial feminisms are those feminisms that take the experience of Western colonialism and its contemporary effects as a high priority in the process of setting up a speaking position from which to articulate a standpoint of cultural, national, regional, or social identity. With postcolonial feminisms, the process of critique is turned against the domination and exploitation of *culturally* differentiated others. Postcolonial feminisms differ from the classic

critique of imperialism in that they try to stay away from rigid self-other binaries.<sup>11</sup> In addition, an intense criticism is directed at the gender stereotypes and symbolic constructs of the woman's body used to reinforce outdated masculinist notions of national identity.<sup>12</sup> Postcolonial feminisms call attention to the process of splitting the culturally dominant subject in terms of the demands placed on the dominant subject by culturally disadvantaged others. These feminisms hypothesize, at the psychosubjective level, that the unity of self or mind felt by the dominant subject is a totally artificial one, and that the oneness of his or her subjectivity (covering the fragments that make up his or her personality) is made possible only by adherence to a philosophy of colonialism, whether the adherence is owned up to or only enacted indirectly. In other words, postcolonial feminisms propose the view that we are not born a unified self, that the sense of being "one," of being a self, is something derived from language (becoming a competent speaker in a language), and that language itself is part of culture and reflects certain arrangements of cultural constructs with respect to how to understand cultural differences.

When a child is given a name, for example, Caroline, she is not told that the culture giving her this name is one that had a history of colonizing other people and of imposing its values on them. The psychological process of decolonization involves the attempt to unhinge the genealogy of one's name, of one's identity, from the inherited colonial culture. One must learn that one could not be oneself without a relationship to the other and that such a relationship ideally must not be wrought with injustices. While one cannot make time go backward, annulling Western culture's colonialist legacy, it is possible partially to deactivate this legacy by establishing alternative practices and values with the intent of reversing the effects of colonialism. A coordination of heterogeneous elements with a special emphasis on undermining colonialism's understanding of cultural difference becomes the alternative route to the construction of identity in what we would like to call a *postcolonial* perspective or context.

If the postcolonial perspective entails acknowledging the reality of colonialism (or the fight against it) in the construction of cultural values and personal identities, what does a postcolonial feminism entail regarding the problem of cross-cultural communication? Postcolonial identities put in question the belief in the neutrality of the sign and the separation of the subject and object of knowledge, as accepted by the Enlightenment. They point out that these semiotic and epistemic assumptions will ultimately have repercussions on women's bodies and on women's affective well-being. As literary critic Nelly Richard observes from Chile, feminist (postcolonial) criticism should be able to uncover the concerted interests of the dominant culture hidden behind "the supposed neutral transparency of signs and the model of mimetic reproduction propitiated by the market through a passive consumption" (Richard 1996, 744).

Moreover, as Gayatri Spivak aptly illustrates by allusion to the status of indebted families in India, the interests of transnational global capital hiding behind the purported neutrality of global consumption are not gender-neutral.

In modern "India," there is a "society" of bonded labor, where the only means of repaying a loan at extortionate rates of interest is hereditary bond-slavery. . . . [Below family life at the level of survival] there is bonded prostitution, where the girls and women abducted from bonded labor or *kamiya* households are thrust together as bodies for absolute sexual and economic exploitation. (Spivak 1993, 82)

The deceptive transparency of signs, the growing expansion of passive consumption, the recourse to loans as the concrete mechanism for maintaining consumption, the exorbitant rates of interest imposed on already subaltern populations, and the woman's body as "the last instance in a [global] system whose general regulator is still the loan" (Spivak 1993, 82) are interconnected forms of exploitation that only postcolonial feminisms can fully address at this time. Whether in Chile, in India, or much closer to home, postcolonial feminisms alert us to the voices of split subjects deconstructing the logic of the totality in the light of cultural alterity.

#### FEMINIST AGENCY AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE IMAGINARY-SYMBOLIC ORDER

These comments on bonded labor illustrate a final and nevertheless familiar point for feminists; namely, that the ultimate oppression a human being can experience is to be bereft of any meaningful agency. African American feminist bell hooks has described oppression as the lack of choices.<sup>13</sup> I take this to mean that oppression involves conditions in which persons are deprived of agency, or that their options are limited to those that effectively fail to promote their own good.

If we look at the conditions that would empower women around the world to promote their own good, we see powerful interests set against women. There are powerful religious fundamentalisms all over the world and in various cultures that seek to define for women in categorical and absolutist terms what their own good is and to constrain women to act accordingly. These fundamentalisms also define the meaning of "nation" and "family" in categorical terms, promoting self-sacrifice and often war, while impeding those who are influenced by these ideologies from acting on their own desires for personal fulfillment and happiness. Some government and private institutions, moreover, derive enormous material benefits from women's cheap labor and from women's traditional family caregiving roles. There are forces in society that

benefit from women ending up in prostitution, remaining illiterate, or being confined to economic and social conditions which, from girlhood on, subject them to recurrent violence and abuse. It seems that nothing could be more ethical than a universal feminist ethics designed to identify and correct such problems. How this is done, however, requires careful rethinking of how to employ the concepts of gender, identity, and oppression.

In my view, feminist ethical thinking needs to be “negotiated” cross-culturally. Such negotiation can be conducted on a case-by-case basis by individuals, or collectively by groups. The presence of so many mixed unions among people of different cultures offers some hope that effective cross-cultural communication in matters that pertain to intimate details of peoples’ lives is not some sort of utopian fantasy. But people in mixed unions that are based on parity, as compared to the practices of dominant cultures with regard to subaltern cultures, are very strongly motivated to understand each other, as well as to communicate with each other so as to deepen and strengthen their understanding. Such individuals commit themselves to lifestyles in which giving of one’s time to reach out to the other, as well as making space for the other’s differences, are part of the very fabric of daily existence, neither a forced nor an occasional happening. People in mixed unions have also presumably experienced the positive benefits of their association to the extent that they would rather affirm what remains incommensurable in their distinct cultural horizons than shut the other out of their intimate life and feelings. No doubt, individuals who either work or live successfully with culturally differentiated others are highly skilled communicators, making optimum use of opportunities for cross-cultural, interactive engagements. The postcolonial feminist perspective highlights these interactive realities, deconstructing the traditional binarism of self-other paradigms, in which each side lays claim to either mutually exclusive or equal but separate realities.

Collectively, feminists can do much to promote cross-cultural understanding. Whether these groups are all-women groups or whether they include female and male feminists, perhaps their basic contribution is building and strengthening networks of solidarity. Although *solidarity* is an old term, long familiar to activists, the present circumstances at the turn of the century demand that we rethink and reawaken its meanings. Feminists from dominant global cultures and better-off economic sectors need to connect more closely with projects involving women and feminists from the periphery. We need to lobby actively for the inclusion of voices from the periphery so as to shake off the weight of colonialism and other oppressions that still mark the center’s discourses. This is not to say that the voices from the periphery are not marked by the effects of colonialism, racism, and other oppressions, but that when such voices attempt to address these oppressions or engage in avant-garde cultural criticism, there is a common bond between us, despite our differences. It is up to us to recognize the centrality that this (other) bond represents and to help

it assume its long overdue and legitimate place in the West's symbolic order and cultural imaginary. There is no other recourse but to destabilize and displace the subject of modernity from its conceptual throne and to sponsor alternative ways of relating and knowing that no longer shut out from "home" the realities of Latino, Asian, African, and other culturally marginalized peoples.

I believe that Western feminism cannot reach a point of maturity in this age of global, transnational, and diasporic ventures unless it openly adopts a postcolonial perspective. If it does, we will switch our identities away from subjects of a totalized notion of culture and will come to view ourselves as subjects of cultural difference. The West needs to learn how to step out of its colonial boots and start experiencing the reality of its subaltern environment and the cultures of the peoples it has disenfranchised and continues to disenfranchise. A challenging but not impossible task lies ahead. This is why the struggle continues.

## NOTES

1. Although Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, Heidegger, and Lacan function as key background figures for the concepts of the other and alterity, it is Levinas who is remembered primarily for formulating an ethics of alterity. With the advent of poststructuralism, important new perspectives have been offered by Irigaray's feminist ethics of sexual difference and Kristeva's psychoanalytic-semiotic studies.

2. For a concise overview of postcolonial theory see Sagar (1996). For classics from the Caribbean region see Fanon (1963) and Fernández Retamar (1989). For contemporary poststructuralist postcolonial criticism see Spivak (1990, 1993) and Bhabha (1993). For postcolonialism and Latin American literary criticism (in Spanish) see the special issue on Latin American cultural criticism and literary theory of *Revista Iberoamericana* (1996); for postmodern studies in Latin America see Beverley et al. (1995) and the special issue on "Postmodernism: Center and Periphery" of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1993).

3. This point is made by Sagar (1996, 427) with specific reference to the work of Spivak, but it applies generally to deconstructive and poststructuralist feminisms.

4. I will not be using the term *incommensurability* in the Kuhnian sense of two incommensurable scientific theories that explain the same phenomena. By this term I try to designate the lack of complete translatability of various expressions or blocks of meaning between two or more linguistic-cultural symbolic systems. It may also refer to incommensurable ways of thinking insofar as the differences are culturally determined.

5. "We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation . . . of the transparent and the communicable experience" (Lyotard 1984, 81-82).

6. García Canclini (1995, 46-47). Using Latin America's elites as a reference point, García Canclini describes "multitemporal heterogeneity" as a feature of modern culture resulting from modernity's inability to superimpose itself completely on Latin America's indigenous and colonial heritages. I am using the term somewhat differently

because my primary references are neither to the perspective of modernity nor to that of the elites. My primary reference point is the existential-phenomenological sense of two or more experienced temporalities as manifested in the lived experiences of members of the population, including the economically disadvantaged, the popular sectors, the racial minorities, and, yes, extending to the middle and upper classes, where relevant.

7. I refer to the dominant enlightened subject in the masculine gender here because this account is based primarily on my concrete experience; in a later section, I address women's assumption of this voice.

8. It would help to be acquainted with the underrepresented culture in order to appreciate this point. For example, feminists know that all too often, the patterns of gender socialization and the power one gender (the masculine) holds in the overall legal-ethical system of thought over the feminine will make it appear that a woman's reasoning is fragmentary or insufficiently coherent in comparison to the reasoning of successfully socialized males. Asymmetrically given cultural differences can have a similar effect. A Latina feminist must communicate with her Anglo audience not only as a feminist but as a Latina, because she is already marked as such by the dominant culture. If she draws too heavily on her own cultural imaginary to explain her views, an account that is perfectly coherent to her may simply not carry over as such to her audience. The audience might complain that at times it could not follow the speaker or that the speaker was not sufficiently organized. This is not a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with the content of the speaker's message but of failing to connect the various aspects of the message into a fully coherent account. In my view, this could mean (though it does not necessarily have to mean) that the grounds for the speaker's reasoning are not readily available to speakers located in the dominant culture. Again, this could show how asymmetrical relations of power are reinforced between culturally differentiated speakers when one of the cultures is fully dominant over the other. Many different examples could be given of this phenomenon, not all of them similar. For especially racist dimensions of such asymmetry, consider Frantz Fanon's charge that a characteristic of the racism he encountered in France was the expectation that as a black person from the Caribbean, he could not speak French coherently (Fanon 1963, 35-36). Compare also Homi Bhabha's example of the Turk in Germany who feels he is being looked down on as an animal when he tries to use the first few words he has learned in the German language (Bhabha 1994, 165).

9. Obviously, there may be some overlap among people of different cultures regarding certain values, just as there may be differences in values among people of roughly the same cultural background. For example, political values can vary significantly among people of similar cultural backgrounds. Strong variations and disagreements can occur even among members of the same family just as, where such opportunities exist, a person can develop an affinity with the values of people from distant cultures. Agreement or disagreement on such *values* is a separate issue from the argument I am making about the principle of incommensurability as a factor to be reckoned with in cross-cultural communication between speakers from dominant and subaltern cultures.

10. Since the opening conference in Mexico City sponsored by the United Nations' Decade on Women (1975-85), Western feminists have learned that women from other parts of the world, including the West's own minority populations, have views of their own that require specific attention. These views cannot be assimilated into those of the Western feminisms, because the way a woman looks at her condition in the world will

depend on many factors, including her cultural and economic location. Theoretically, a helpful orientation toward greater acknowledgment of diversity came with the wave of “feminisms of difference” in the 1980s. Compare Olea (1995).

11. I offer a broad characterization of postcolonial feminisms so as to include different kinds of feminist critiques and my own voice in these debates. Racial, ethnic, class, and other differences are often incorporated, along with cultural and gender differences, into postcolonial feminist work. For some differences of opinion on the use of “postcolonial” as a category, see Sagar (1996). I read Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* as postcolonial, though it is not clear she would accept this term, given the Chicana practice of not subsuming this identification under others. But the fit is quite clear: she talks about the land of ancestors that has been taken over by several different countries, as well as the different cultural formations emerging there over time. Moreover, she states, “I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory)” (Anzaldúa 1987, vii).

12. Grewal and Kaplan’s *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994) addresses this point, as do Anzaldúa (1987) and Spivak (1993, 77-95).

13. “Being oppressed is the absence of choices” (hooks 1984, 5).

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