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Discovering Feminisms: A Cross-Cultural Analysis for a Deeper Understanding

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Introduction

At the start of my junior year this semester, Professor McCracken asked our class whether or not we identified as feminists. I hesitated before raising my hand. I knew that I wanted to be a feminist but I was afraid that if I was questioned further about what it means to be a feminist, I would not have a worthy answer. Having minimal background in the history and contemporary struggle for women's rights, I quickly glanced around the classroom to gather a reason why my hand should remain raised. I noticed some hands raised confidently and others at half-mast. Then I noticed the white board displaying the title of our class: *Gender, Race, and Sexuality in Marginalized Communities*. I really care about these issues, I asserted in my mind, and my classmates must too, if they chose to take this course. Looking into the faces of my peers and inside myself, I felt internal and external respect at the thought of discussing these personal topics; I began to feel reassurance with my fingers spread in the open air. I care about myself and I care about others who want to talk about what it means to be feminist or lesbian or black or homosexual or straight, white and male. Through in-class discussions, the classroom became first space outside of my internal pondering, the first "community" (in this case a community of eight college students and a teacher), where I began to interpret feminism. Now, at the end



of the semester, I am looking at how different communities define and discuss feminism. Reading about different feminisms helps me to have a broader understanding of what it means to identify as “feminist.”

The Rhetorical Process

The process I consciously use to think about feminism is rhetorical analysis. In *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Sonja Foss describes several ways in which we use rhetoric. Being new to feminist and rhetorical theory, my processes of researching and writing this paper are largely personal discoveries; thus, I chose to relate rhetoric as “a means of self-discovery and a coming of self-knowledge” (Foss, 5); a “process by which our reality or our world comes into being... [as] a result of communicating about it” (Foss, 6). I don’t hesitate to add that I see self-discovery as a continuous process in feminist and rhetorical theory, no matter how familiar one is with these thought processes. This idea of continuous mental development and change is also at the heart of feminism, “an evolving process that necessarily changes as conditions in the world change” (Foss, Foss, and Griffin, 3); an important idea to keep in mind as we recognize emerging feminisms in different contexts. “How people communicate ideas to particular audiences in a given time and situation” (?, 1), then, is central to understanding feminism cross-culturally.

As laid out in Foss’s article, the first step in rhetorical analysis is “the formulation of a question to ask that relates to rhetorical theory and selection of an artifact that can be investigated in order to provide at least a partial answer to the question” (Foss, 14). My question is: How does reading about indigenous women’s organizing in Chiapas change how I understand feminism? To begin to understand an answer to this question, I researched information on indigenous women who are gaining political power in Chiapas. A bulk of this information is related to women’s movements as a result of the Zapatista up-rising in Mexico.



Foss's next step in the rhetorical criticism process is the "selection of an artifact that can be investigated in order to provide at least a partial answer to the question" (Foss, 14). The artifact I chose to pay close attention to is the symbolic military violence played out against women in Chiapas. My research consists of recent ethnographies (1994-2009) done in Chiapas, such as those about women's cooperatives, effects of the Zapatista movement, and the 1997 massacre at the hamlet of Acteal. I will also incorporate articles on indigenous feminism by Native scholars, to understand how "feminist" is palliated by indigenous peoples on a wider scale. The most significant artifacts for this analysis, illuminating my question as to how we see and talk about feminism, are the interjections of accounts by indigenous women who have directly suffered the consequences of bringing feminist values into their particular realities.

The Social, Political, and Economic Background in Mexico

New Year's Eve, 1993, Mexico City: The Mexican elite were celebrating the election of Harvard-educated Salinas de Gortari, who was portrayed by the North American press as "an enlightened technocrat who would lead Mexico into a new economic era. Salinas de Gortari and the Mexican government chose to pursue the course most favored by foreign debt holders: capitalistic reform" (Collier, 155). The notion of "capitalistic reform" is part of an ideology of progress, which is maintained and enforced by Mexican elites. Capitalistic reform means industrial development and the need for industry laborers, so that Mexico can become a more powerful player in the world economy. Following the suit of becoming a more "developed" nation, Mexican elites adopt ideologies of development and progress from the Western world and incongruently apply them to the realities in Mexico. Mexico's signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which coincided with the new presidential election of 1994, for example, is a step towards Mexico becoming a more "economically reformed" or "developed" nation. While signing NAFTA is applaudable from above, it affects lives of approximately 1.6 million farm workers



who cannot compete with the cheap price of American corn pushed into Mexico. With no regard to human rights, the timeline of progress is carried out at the expense of those most vulnerable to notions of economic and social “progress”: the indigenous peoples of Mexico.

Indigenous peoples have long been seen as an obstacle to the ideology of progress. Their ways of life, belief system, clothing, rituals, and type of agriculture have all been labeled as “backwards” or just plain ignorant. The notion of progress requires order; or, in other words, a means to control the population. The assumed need for order of communities that have been labeled “backwards” creates a breeding ground for violence. Throughout Mexican history, order has been enforced from above, by the elites, and within, by local bosses—*caciques* and *caudillos*—who may be indigenous themselves but choose to support the elite agenda, in order to gain personal benefits.

The indigenous peoples of Mexico are made up of rural communities located primarily in the southern Mexican states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Yucatan. In traditional communities, people are dependent on their land for physical survival and also have a religious tie to their particular environment. Land as subsistent and spiritual grounding is used by the government as leverage for manipulation—the government uses land to bribe people into joining paramilitary forces and expropriates land in order to remove indigenous people’s autonomy and place them in positions as laborers, peasants or *campesinos*. During the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Emiliano Zapata emerged as the leader of landless peasants, whose traditional land rights were being taken away. These *Zapatistas*, as they came to be known, attempted to re-gain autonomy—which meant re-claiming the right to their lands. Emiliano Zapata was assassinated by the government in 1919.

New Year’s Eve, 1993, Mexico City: Against the backdrop of the Mexican elite celebrating more capitalist reform to come, “Sub-Comandante Marcos and the Zapatistas burst onto the scene...they



drew international attention to the plight of those at the losing end of Mexico's economic globalization, particularly the indigenous groups who were losing both their livelihood and their hopes for self-determination" (Collier, 155). The public re-appearance of the Zapatista movement prioritizes the attainment of land and democracy for indigenous people in Mexico. This fight for indigenous rights is also important because it has created a space for indigenous women to publicly voice their struggles as women. Considering that marginalized peoples voices are silenced or ignored, the negotiation of these types of spaces is vital to their battles against oppression. In other words, although the Zapatista movement didn't begin with the specific purpose of gender equality, indigenous women were able to use this movement as a jumping off point—they re-directed a ray of the spotlight being shined on indigenous people to familial problems they wanted to address. Many indigenous women "not only demand cultural and political rights for their communities, but signal that the construction of a more just society must begin within the family itself" (Castillo, 40). This argument brings importance to feminists' fight for gender equality around the world—achieving egalitarian lifestyles should be a foremost battle of social equality because we have individual control of our private living spaces. As Rosalva A. Hernandez Castillo reasons, the analysis of gender and equality is important for understanding structures of domination.

"The public appearance of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in 1994 served as a catalyst in the organization of indigenous women in Mexico. Zapatista women became some of the most important advocates of indigenous women's rights" (Castillo, 40). The Women's Revolutionary Law, containing ten articles addressing rights of indigenous women, was written by indigenous Zapatista women along with indigenous women of different language dialects, and was made public on January 1, 1994. Some of the rights addressed in the charter are "the right to political participation and to hold leadership posts within the political system; to a life free of sexual and domestic



violence; to decide how many children they want to have; to a fair wage; to choose a spouse; to an education; and to quality health services” (Castillo, 40-1). This movement of indigenous women within the Zapatista movement has been termed Zapatismo. The emergence of Zapatismo is the outward, political expression of what indigenous women had been discussing and reflecting upon within their communal groups (such as in weaving or other daily tasks) for years.

Emerging Indigenous Feminisms

Prior to the 1990s, literature on indigenous feminists in Mexico is non-existent. This does not mean that issues pertaining to gender inequality did not persist; to speak of “indigenous feminisms” would have simply been unthinkable in prior years. Presently, some indigenous women “have opted to self-identify as feminists. A minority (but very important part) of indigenous women have made women’s rights the principal demand of their organizations” (Castillo, 40).

The emergence of indigenous women’s movements in Mexico in the 1990s coincides with the emergence of indigenous women’s movements throughout Latin America. Indigenous women throughout Latin America unite their struggles to “denounce the economic and racial oppression” (Castillo, 40). The racial discrimination that these women face results from national ideologies to create “white” “citizens.” Their ethnic identity is attempted to be made to disappear through processes such as *mestizaje* or the “whitening” and transformation of indigenous peoples into national “citizens,” in order to create a hegemonic nation. One form of economic oppression is that land and thus subsistence living are taken and indigenous people are pushed into wage labor.

At the same time as indigenous women unite as a discriminated race, they are working towards specific goals within their organizations and communities, to change traditions with which they are unhappy. Analyzing and critiquing their own culture is part of the reflection



process which also aims to revive important forgotten customs. The “bad” traditions that women from an EZLN base in one particular community want to do away with include drinking, adultery, preventing girls from going to school, denying women their land inheritance, and not planning how many children to have. They say that these traditions “are not ones that the ancestors entrusted them to carry on but practices that [they] came to accept or tolerate over time” (Eber, 149).

The participation of indigenous women in the political sphere of their own communities has challenged traditional roles of power. Within their important role in the Zapatista resistance they are also challenging the hegemonic project of the nation, which aims to dominate them and force them to disappear as a people. Individuals working in the opposite direction—those who support “bad” traditions and those who join government paramilitaries—have not let these women gain autonomy without them paying a high price.

The Dangers of Political Involvement

“Legally, the government cannot advance military on the Zapatistas under the terms of the law for dialogue passed by the federal congress in 1995” (Collier, 167). To counter acts of autonomy, the government instead works through paramilitaries. Indigenous men are lured into these paramilitary groups with a sense of camaraderie, a degree of power, and booty like animals and land. These men are vulnerable to military control because they don’t have hopes of ever attaining their own land otherwise plus their indigenous identity has long been illegitimated. The government keeps its hands clean as paramilitaries wreak hell and heinous crimes in indigenous communities.

In many communities, women’s meetings are seen as the result of Zapatista influence. Because of this presumed association, the women’s groups are frequently subjected to paramilitary aggression. The immediate reaction to the foundation of Las Abejas pacifist resistance group was “the gang rape, in December 1992, of three of the wives



of the founding members, one of whom was seven months pregnant. From then until now, violence against women has been the order of the day...The massacre at Acteal was the most violent of these series of aggressions; killing these women was an attempt to destroy a symbol of the Zapatista resistance” (2001: Castillo, 54).

On December 22, 1997, 21 women, 9 men and 13 children, all members of Las Abejas, were murdered at a refugee camp in Acteal. 60 men belonging to the paramilitary group La Mascara Roja, (The Red Mask), carried out the massacre with AK-47s in an all day event. Four of the women killed were pregnant and their fetuses were cut out of their bodies then thrown back and forth on the blades of the murderers’ machetes. “Kill the seed!” they shouted. “This symbolic violence synthesizes the policy of extermination towards these groups—marginalized and excluded from national progress—which has been sustained silently, unnoticed by many” (2001: Castillo, 57).

Claiming Indigenous Feminism

“We as indigenous women argued about whether we should claim feminism as an intellectual space in order to confront gendered and other concerns... feminist consciousness could cause conflict between indigenous men and women... Rather than viewing a Native feminist consciousness as a force that could cause internal conflict or as a white construct, it should be emphasized as furthering an essential goal.” (Ramirez, 23-6)

Renya Ramirez, enrolled member of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska and an academic. Teacher of Native American studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz

“And I started to be aware that changing one’s consciousness meant an important step for indigenous women themselves” (Castillo, 40).

Marta, Mixtec woman from the organization, Et Naaxwiihy (The Space We Live In)



“As an anthropologist trained in the Mexican Marxist tradition, I considered feminism to be a bourgeois ideology that “divided the people,” for many years. Women’s specific problems were not considered very different from those of marginalized groups as a whole. It was not until April 1989 when I was confronted with the darkest side of patriarchal violence, that I began to consider the importance of the analysis of gender for understanding structures of domination” (Castillo, 105-6).

Rosalva Aida Hernandez Castillo, anthropologist and a member of a non-governmental organization involved in the fight against sexual and domestic violence towards women. San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas

Situating Myself

I am a twenty year-old, middle-class, white, female, undergraduate Anthropology student from Saint Petersburg, Florida. I am a feminist. How does the indigenous women’s struggle in Chiapas affect how I now understand feminism? The first truth that came to light for me was the amount of social power and security I have within society. I can wear a t-shirt that says “female power!” I can create a women’s activist group at my college campus or I can sign up for women’s studies classes or receive a doctoral degree in the history of women’s movements. I can do any of these things without the thought of death threat crossing my mind. Indigenous women in Chiapas are being killed, raped and maimed for their outward expression of wanting a change—and many do not identify as feminist. To me, this particular fact reinforces my position of privilege, that I fit the racial profile of a citizen of a developed nation. Despite women’s freedom to speak out in the U.S.A. culture, thousands of women are raped every day. Now what does this statistic have to say about the amount of power and security I have?

Rape is symbolically used by military groups in Chiapas to “put women back in their place” and to effeminate men for failing to “protect” their



women. Survivors of the Acteal massacre continue to be threatened by paramilitary groups. "Civil society has the responsibility to pressure these new authorities" (Castillo, 14). Rape. The word alone makes me cringe. I have never been raped but I keep the safety button off my portable can of mace and never walk alone at night. I remember my college's list of places for women to caution "predators," including stair wells and parking lots. If I have the freedom to demand that I be treated as an equal gender, how is it that I am still afraid of and vulnerable to male sexual aggression which strips women of that very freedom? Has our civil society taken on the responsibility to pressure rapists? Violence against women does not cease because women are allowed to hold positions of power. Nor does the violence cease because women are white or colored or upper-class or indigenous.

As an indigenous feminist I intend to recover the philosophical principles of my culture and to make them fit into the reality of the twenty-first century. That is to say, to criticize what I don't like about my culture while proudly accepting that I belong to that culture. Indigenous feminism is to me part of a principle—women develop and make revolution to construct ourselves as independent persons who become a community that can give to others without forgetting about themselves. The philosophical principles that I would recover from my culture are equality, complementarity between men and women, and between men and men and women and women. That part of the Mayan culture currently does not exist, and to state the contrary is to turn a blind eye to the oppression that indigenous women suffer. The complementarity is now only part of history; today there is only inequality, but complementarity and equality can be constructed. I would also recover the double vision, or the idea of the *cabawil*, the one who can look forward and back, to one side and the other and see the black and white, all at the same time. To recover this referent, as applied to women, implies knowing one's self with all the sad and terrible things that are part of my reality as a woman



and to reconstruct myself with all the good things I have. It means to recognize that there are women different than me, that there are ladinas and indigenous women, that there are black, urban and campesina women (Castillo, 38).

Alma Lopez, Quiche woman, council member of the City of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

I noticed that as I read about the struggles of indigenous women, I look for signs of approval that my participation in learning about women's movements in Chiapas is welcomed, needed, or important. I am sure that a large part of how I identify with and within the situation in Chiapas is shaped by where and how I am approved as a participant. I was deeply moved by Alma Lopez's insight as an indigenous woman who self-identifies as feminist because her words reached out to me as a woman, despite that I am white. The claiming of "indigenous feminist" and indigenous women fighting for gender equality who do not identify as feminist, have equally made me see the importance of feminism as a shared consciousness. I have learned that it is necessary to couple social inequalities that further marginalize women, such as race, profession, sexuality, etc., with feminism, to remind us that women struggle on very different forefronts—some of which we may be unaware.

I believe that understanding feminism and women's struggles through a multi-cultural lens deepens our knowledge of what we are all struggling against and brings attention to unseen elements that we should be struggling for. I think one of the elements that hinder our process of creating a feminist consciousness is religious beliefs and the severance of women from their tie to nature. The indigenous women in Chiapas are in a process of resurrecting forgotten egalitarian traditions. Learning from these women's cultural past, we can envision a future feminism that has broader, stronger roots.

The 45 massacred in Acteal are not buried in a mass grave but a communal plot. "There are no headstones marking the exact spot where



each body lies, nor the names and ages, but nobody fears forgetting. In these latitudes the collective memory is more tenacious than the written word” (Castillo: 2001, 34). “Harvest Time” is written above a wooden cross. In the indigenous Tzotzil language, “wooden cross” translates as “sacred tree.” “It is at the cross that [people leave] harmful things that [they have] come in contact with on the trails, “in the world,” away from [their] people” (Guiteras-Holmes, 294). The cross is related to the earth, and it’s prolongation of her.



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