

Third World Women and Discourses of Domination

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Managua. Nicaragua. In the veranda a group of teenagers tell stories about the time of the insurrection in the neighborhood. One of them, a young woman turns to her mother who has been silent as if she had nothing to say about politics and asks: *Do you remember mother when we were very young and you made us kneel and pray to the Virgin that the wheels of the somozista police cars would explod?*¹

During my field work I shared the everyday life of women doing motherwork and came to understand their activities as a conscious social practice.² I also grasped their extended political knowledge and learned to respect the moral choices that evolve from them. Back home, I discovered that the most common representation within sociology of the women I had learned to love was as Objects, as the "Other". The women I met were represented as acting in the realm of necessity more than in the realm of moral and political choices. "Third World Women" are often described in the literature as lacking agency.

¹ From my field work in a working class-neighborhood in Managua, Nicaragua's capital city.

² I have grasped the experience of the Sandinist revolution in Nicaragua from the standpoint of actors whose position has been peripheral to mainstream political sociology. My focus has been on women's practice as mothers and their link to the field of the political.

For an overview of the literature on the sandinist revolution in Nicaragua see: Walker, T. (ed), 1985, *Nicaragua. The First Years*, Praeger. For a background of women in Nicaragua during the revolutionary period see: Criquillon, A., 1989, "La rebeldia de las mujeres Nicaraguenses" in *Construccion de la Democracia en Nicaragua*. UCA. Collinson, H (ed), 1990, *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, Zed Books.

Through these pages I will illuminate - in explorative and tentative ways - some aspects of the representation of women of the "Third World" as *Third World Women*. I will grasp the process through which *Third World Women* are produced as a field of knowledge and represented as a singular, unique object of analysis. I shall suggest that these representations are alive today in the language, the theoretical models and hidden assumptions of modern sociology itself. I will also reflect about my own positionality within feminist research landscapes. I will conclude by briefly illustrating the understanding of motherwork and politics that evolves from my research.

The Construction of Otherness

The pioneer works of George H. Mead (1934) within social psychology provide us with a pattern of understanding the relations between Self and Other. For Mead otherness is related to the process of interaction through which human beings learn their own location in their world, and learn to see themselves from other locations. While these contributions provide useful insights into understandings of "otherness" they share a gender neutral discourse, thus making invisible the relation between the construction of otherness and the construction of femininity and masculinity. Starting from an existentialist framework Simone de Beauvoir (1953) illuminated the difference between men and women by exploring and explaining the process of construction of women as object, as "what is not". Men, the author asserts, develop their freedom over and against women by treating them as "the Other" in the field of Immanence, placing her in the realm of non-productive, non-creative work, the realm of nature.³ Simone de Beauvoir also asserted that discourses of otherness define women in relation to each other but particularly in relation to the needs of men. Men transcend, by constructing themselves as Selves, while women became the Other not only different and separate from men but also inferior. There exists an ambivalent dimension in the work of Simone de Beauvoir and many questions remain: Are "self" and "other" primordial, fixed categories within an existential framework? Is my transcendence linked to others' immanence and in what ways?

³ For a feminist analysis of the works of Simone De Beauvoir see: Simons, M. & Benjamin, J., 1979, "Simone de Beauvoir: An Interview" in *Feminist Studies*, N. 5.

The concept of "Otherness" has been broadly used despite the fact that different authors locate the concept in different theoretical frameworks. Most researchers work with the term without specifying if they refer to a psychoanalytical, philosophical or existential "Other". I am critical to the "naturalization" of the concept, to a tendency to understand "Otherness" as an inherent part of human nature, as some "ontological" universal way of thinking about the world. I use the concept of otherness to illuminate *the construction of meaning within relationships of power*.

Several researchers have argued that the construction of a devaluated "Other" was the necessary precondition for the creation of a transcendental rational subject, the Subject who is the speaker of Enlightenment philosophy. The qualities of the "Other" are always constructed in hierarchical contrast to the qualities of the Self. According to Stuart Hall (1993) classification systems legitimate political economical and cultural practices that exclude people or groups of people through assumed "natural/cultural differences" from material and symbolic resources. Paradoxically, as these representations are perceived as "natural" they often reinforce the material conditions of subordination.⁴

Peter Hulme (1986) uses the concept of stereotypical dualism to grasp the ways of thinking and representing the "Other". Stereotypes are constructed through representing and explaining the world as divided according to dichotomies. A stereotype results from a simplification that makes invisible the complexity of lived worlds. It develops forms of representation that are monolithic and unified. Stereotypical representations of the Other are provided by binary oppositions through which the Other is always a mirror image, an image of what the Subject is not. Stereotypical representations based in binary oppositions are central to discourses of domination. The construction of the "Other" - the primitive, women, non-Europeans - express in fundamental ways the forms and content of Western self-construction.

Poststructuralist theory has re-shaped discussions on "otherness" by focusing on language, discourse, difference and

⁴ Radical feminists have shown that one of the most central aspects of the definition of woman is the construction of heterosexuality as "natural". See Rich, A., 1980, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". in *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, N.4.

deconstruction.⁵ However contested binary oppositions a series of dichotomies remained: mind-body, subject-object, reason-passion, form-content, culture-nature, civilized-primitive. In politics: state-individual, public-private, universal-particular. The Male-Female dichotomy is usually seen as the primary dualism and used to illustrate and give meaning to the rest. The relationship is not one of reciprocity but of hierarchy where the first term dominates the second. The philosophical deconstruction project of Jacques Derrida (1981) aimed not to reverse all binary opposition central to Western thought but to inquire the very notion of the existence of these opposition.

Michel Foucault (1979) influenced through the understanding of discourses the construction of "Otherness".⁶ His work has provided a landscape through which to think the relationship between the power of dominant epistemologies and scientific "truths".⁷ It has been central to many authors within the field of the study of "colonial discourses". Edward Said (1978) for example linked Foucault's ideas to the work of Antonio Gramsci in his classical work *Orientalism*. Said's strength lies in his capacity to shift focus: from the analysis of colonial openly racist writings to the objective writings of history and anthropology, supposedly without bias. He shows how through similar strategies (generalizations, ahistoricism) a dehumanizing text was produced that constructed the Orient as the "Other" and its inhabitants as "objects".

Sara Mills (1991) discusses the increasing criticism towards the influential work by Edward Said. Said fails - several critical voices argue - to take into account the efforts of those who are at the edge of specific hegemonies, by providing a non problematic analysis of the supposed unity of Western discourse on the Orient over a period of two millennia. Deconstruction projects share the risk of (re)constructing ideologies of domination as homogenous and static. They risk (de)constructing in ways that silence efforts

⁵ The field of literary criticism was one of the first spaces where feminist researchers developed a deconstructive project. See: Spivak, G., 1990, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York. Historian Joan Scott (1988) has played a fundamental role in introducing post-structuralist theory and debate to feminist research. See: "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or the uses of poststructuralist theory for feminism" in *Feminist Studies*, 14. n.1.

⁶ As I read Foucault, discourses are ways of representing and thinking about a particular subject. They are weaved in power relations and shape and constrain lived worlds through the legitimated knowledge they produce.

⁷ For a feminist re-reading of Foucault see: Diamong, L. and Quinby L., (eds), 1988, *Feminism and Foucault. Reflections on Resistance*, Boston.

on the margins that contest them and do not make visible frictions within hegemonic discourses. Laura Donaldson (1992) suggests that feminist researchers must learn to rephrase Albert Memi's existential search and ask the same question that Memi posed in his book "The Colonizer and The Colonized" (Memi, 1965) : 'Is there no alternative to colonialism except presence or absence?' (1992:66).⁸

Similarities may be traced in the discourses representing women and those representing Third World countries. Third World countries are often represented in similar ways that women are within patriarchal discourse: Irrational, unpredictable and chaotic.⁹ It is important to underline that classification systems are not closed systems and categories shift depending on the changing location of subjects. "White women" were often represented as the "Other" (female nature as irrational for example) in relation to white Western men at the same time as they came to symbolize Civilization in relation to women from the "Third World".

Another criticism of Said's work is his failure to recognize the central role women played in the construction of male colonial identities. Thus while his work provides a serious account of representations of *race* it is quite insensitive to constructions of *gender*.

Sexuality and Otherness

The production of what Norbert Elias (1978) defines as a civilized body emerges in Europe around the fifteen century and is modelled on the manners and the public gestures of the ruling class. This domesticated body aimed to be able to control what was conceptualized as animalistic bodily impulses.¹⁰ Sexual

⁸ In the Latin American case the colonial discourse of "Discovery" (with the implications that the people of the America did not exist until created by European eyes) and Conquest (with its connotation of European superiority) was first contested by the work of the spanish dominican friar Bartolome de las Casas that considered that the only appropriate way of describing the Spanish "conquest" was through the concept of invasion. In his account of the atrocities committed against the indian population he described the Spanish actions as lacking any "law" or "rationality".

⁹ For an illustration of these similarities see: Brock-Utne, B., 1989, "Women and Third World Countries What do we have in Common?" in *Women's Studies Int. Forum*, Vol. 12.

¹⁰ For the link between domestication of the bodies and Colonial medical discourse see: Vaughan, M., 1991, *Curing the ills. Colonial Power and African Illness*, Polity Press.

imagery is a central element in discourses of domination. Franz Fanon (1967) asserts that one of the central ways in which the construction of the Other is developed is through sexual objectification.

Laura Donaldson (1992) illuminates in her discussion of the film *A Passage to India* how the politics of desire construct the colonial encounter; interracial sex always leads to death in colonial fiction. In colonial discourses - and up to the present - white women are often represented in need of protection from dangerous sexual threat. Lynching as a form of racial terror grasps the tensions in the articulation of race and gender through the construction of the Black Man as the rapist. This representation legitimated white male violence to defend white womanhood.¹¹ The Spanish representation of Indian women during the colonization period underlined the wild, beautiful and dark "Amazon". This representation reinforced the overwhelmingly sexual image of the Male Conqueror and his practice: rape.¹²

Historian Francesca Miller (1991) reflects upon the representation of Spanish women as the core of civilization and catholicism, they were "the sheltered spanish ladies". Most of the women who came to the "New World" were not "ladies"; the first records on early European women in the Americas portrayed Spanish women in all kinds of activities. Their "Spanish blood" was, however, at the core of the construction of a social order based on racial hierarchies. The arrival of Spanish women to the Americas aimed to control what was experienced by the Spanish Crown as the dangerous "interracial" sexual activities in the "New World". The author concludes that the "mantilla" of the spanish Dona should be added to the Cross and the Sword that were the icons of Spain in America.¹³

¹¹ See: Vron Ware historical analysis of the struggles of white feminist women against lynching. Vron Ware, 1992, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*, London.

¹² The encounter between the Spanish colonizer and the Indian culture differ from region to region. It covered a large spectrum from total resistance to collaboration. However, to "conquest" America was for the spanish colonizer to conquer its women. My use of the term *rape* shall be understood in this context. For an analysis of the cultural products of these encounters see: Rowe, W. & Schelling, V., 1991, *Memory and Modernity. Popular Culture in Latin America*, Verso.

¹³ The Catholic Church prescribed that women covered their heads with a "mantilla" when entering the church. Mantillas, however, expanded from this religious function to become a symbol of status, femininity and an erotic signifier.

Representation of the "other's sexuality" is not narrowed to the period of colonial domination. "Third World Women" are up to the present represented as either promiscuous, hot-blooded and sexually available or sexually innocent and submissive to male desires. Gloria Joseph (1981:163) asserts that male culture has emphasized the desexualization of white women while at the same time the racist representation of black women constitute them as nothing but sexual. The politics of sexual and racial domination is weaved in otherness through the representation of women's bodies.

The Deconstruction of Women as the "Other": Feminist Critique of Science

The first phase of feminist critique pointed out that women were absent both empirically and theoretically from social science. Feminist researchers argued that the whole body of science should be reviewed in order to get an understanding of how male views embedded in our society and in the researchers themselves had influenced the comprehension of the situation of women. Important efforts were made to reinterpret the theoretical discourses within social science in order to make women's activities and social relations visible.

Feminist researchers further suggested that social science had a distinct problem in taking into account women as social actors. In fact, if women were treated at all it was as a residual category when issues of family and household were analyzed.

A concern with the relations of gender as relations of domination - Maria Maynard (1990) argues - has had a wide impact on our understanding of the sociological enterprise. During the first years feminist research - through the "additive" approach - aimed to bring women's lives and experiences into the landscape of sociology by including women in the existing body of knowledge about men. A second approach was to name and create new areas of sociological study in order to grasp women's lived worlds that had been considered non-important by mainstream sociology. Researchers have focused on a variety of themes from the notions of work to sexuality and heterosexism. Several sociological categories - such as work, family, leisure, private - have been reconceptualized in order to make women's lives visible within the sociological landscape.

However, according to sociologist Joan Acker (1989) the theoretical work about women produced by feminist research

exists in relative isolation from sociological theory. The many contributions made in research on women have not been incorporated into mainstream literature. Within most fields of social science feminist research is up to the present located as the "Other".¹⁴

The Deconstruction of Women as Subject: Feminism, Postmodernism and Third World Women

The relationship between *knower* and *known* and the preservation of the researched as an actor/co-writer - core issues within postmodernism - have been part of feminist scholarship from its beginnings. It is within this context that feminist researchers, focalizing in methodology, have weaved connections between feminism and postmodernity in suggestive ways.¹⁵

Postmodernism¹⁶ may be useful to feminism in the deconstruction of the categories of meaning shaping Western definitions of womanhood. The skepticism within postmodernism to universal claims may help feminists not to seek essential explanations and normative truths. The postmodernist potential lies in its capacity of de-centering experience. The disintegration of "the Subject" allows the inclusion of all subjects, inclusive the different voices of different women.

From the point of view of otherness, one of the paradoxes of postmodernism is its construction of Modernity (its rational project, its faith in progress; its search for Truth) as one monolithic discourse. The post-modern critic about totalizing narratives makes invisible the narratives from the margin that challenge Modernity (some of them produced by women from the "Third World"). The central tension from the perspective of Otherness is that the anti-totalizing theories of postmodernism

¹⁴ Actually, according to Harding (1986), one of the struggles most feminists share is the struggle against institutions and/or individuals who consider that the incorporation into science of the knowledge produced by the women's movement can only lead the scientific enterprise to political ideology and lower the quality of scientific research. Harding, Sandra, 1986, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London.

¹⁵ I want to draw attention to the (problematic) use of postmodernism as a synonymous to post-structuralism. I want also to draw attention to the great variation among these theories. I am, however, focusing on a predominant and influential approach. For further discussion see: Nicholson, Linda (red), 1990, *Feminism and Postmodernism*, London, Routledge.

¹⁶ The word postmodernism was originally developed in architecture and art as a reaction against what was experienced as the oppressive structure of modernism.

are framed in an intellectual discourse whose very language is closed to difference.

The resistance within postmodernism to define some accounts of reality as more important than others hinders the emancipatory project within feminist scholarship. Feminist critique of universal models and truth does not necessarily lead feminists to the claim that there is no truth. To acknowledge the existence of different and interconnected narratives - each one true in its own context - implies to silence once more the emerging voices of women from "Third World" countries and their own interpretation of the world. Nancy Hartsock (1987) suggests that the postmodern claim that verbal constructions do not correspond in direct ways to reality develops at the very point in time when women have begun to claim themselves as subjects.

That feminist theory has not succumbed entirely to the seduction of postmodernism may be explained according to Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989) by the theory's concern with women as the central category of analysis and with the feminist spoken goal of changing the power structures shaping women's experience. They further argue that postmodernism expresses the claims and needs of white privileged men of the industrialized West who have already had an Enlightenment and who are now ready and willing to subject that legacy to critical scrutiny. In other words, the postmodern celebration of "difference" - according to Marnia Lazreg (1988) - may make invisible the resistance to accept the right to sameness of oppressed groups.

Despite of the shortcomings of feminist theory construction its various attempts to discuss and illuminate the asymmetrical relations of power have undoubtedly paved the way for a continued critical reflection on women's conditions. The tendency to relativism, subjectivism and apoliticism within the postmodern as praxis and discourse may silence once more the voices of women from the "Third World". The postmodernistic discourse may turn out to be a discourse of disempowerment for them. Despite of the postmodern claim to difference "Third World women" remain in the realm of Otherness.¹⁷

¹⁷ For further discussion on the relation between "Third World Women", postmodernism and feminism see: Goetz, A., 1991, "Feminism and the Claim to know: Contradictions in feminist approaches to women in Development" in *Gender and International Development*, Grant, R. & Newland, K. (ed). Milton Keynes, Open University Press.

Visibility of Woman: Invisibility of Women

Feminist researchers succeeded in challenging the position of women as the "Other" within social science. They were able to shift the position of women from objects of inquiry to Subjects. However, they recreated "Third World Women" as the "Other" within feminist research. Thus, while trying to make WOMAN visible within the discourse of science, they made certain groups of women invisible, women of the "Third World" among them.

A lack of historicity and a strong evolutionary thinking in feminist analysis constructed women of the Third World as more near conceptualizations of Nature and thus "more" oppressed. One source of difficulties for this first feminist effort was its search for universal and monocausal explanations to women's subordination cross-culturally. These pioneers were also hindered by a problematic conception of unified theory. Feminist researchers that had criticized and deconstructed the unity of abstract, universal, rational Man in fact searched for a unity of gendered human.

Patricia Collins (1990) defined three areas that can also be applied to "Third World Feminism" where black feminist thought have made significant contribution to a feminist sociology.¹⁸ The first one is the importance of self-definition and self-evaluation that involves contesting the knowledge that has resulted in externally-defined stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood. The second theme is that of the interlocking of oppression. Criticism has been raised to what was considered a Westernmiddle class privileged notion of patriarchy that provided a narrowed understanding of how gender, class and ethnicity are inclusive social relations constructing identity. Several authors have pointed to the fact that it is impossible to address the woman question in Third World countries without linking their process of subordination to the global capitalist model of accumulation and to the colonial enterprise. The third theme has been to reflect on the strength of many aspects of women's culture and experience and their role in resisting both imperialism, racism and sexism. This as a reaction to Western

¹⁸ My focus is on the contribution of this criticism to an understanding of otherness; for the variations, richness and tensions in theory constructions see: Hull, G., 1981, "All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men: But some of us are Brave", *Black Women's studies*, The Feminist Press. Moraga, C. & Anzaldúa, G., 1983 *This Bridge Called my Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Kitchen Table Society, New York. Russo, Mohanty & De La Torre, 1991, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Indiana University Press. Anthias, F. and Yuval, D., 1992 *Racialized Boundaries*, Routledge.

feminist representations of "Third World women" as living in a conservative domestic sphere detached from the public world of political struggle and change.

Criticism has developed in several ways. Black feminist researchers have shown that Afro-american women's experience of the family has been - in feminist studies about the family - made invisible by the same mechanism that feminist researchers had criticized when women as a group was excluded from science.¹⁹ They further argue that when black, minority or "Third World women" were included, their patterns of sexuality and family life were interpreted through the categories developed from the experiences of the family and sexuality of young, middle class educated women.

Researchers launching this criticism have further argued that despite breaks in an understanding of social science a continuity with old paradigms can be traced in both the themes and explanations provided by feminist researchers discussing Third World Women.

In their efforts to expose the conditions of oppression of these women, feminists did legitimate stereotypes of them as victims, as oppressed by religious tradition, and/or as "confined" to the domestic sphere.²⁰ While Western feminist researchers have been able to deconstruct myths about the "natural" place of women, they continue to reinforce those myths about women of the Third world as powerless and victims.²¹ When differences between women were acknowledged, the conceptualization of difference constructed women of the Third World as the exotic, the disreputable, the authentic. Researchers have shown an ethnocentric focus on what is experienced as exotic. Focus on

¹⁹ This criticism has been developed by feminist researchers from different cultures, communities, and societies in the "West" as in the "Rest" even if it is often named within feminism debate as the "black critique". I use the term black feminism not to name a fixed cultural identity but to grasp a theoretical position within feminist research.

²⁰ As with postmodernism, and despite claims of diversity, black feminist criticism seldom acknowledge diversity within "Western Feminism". There is a danger of overstating these arguments and converting western feminism into an eurocentric discourse by definition. By recreating Western feminist discourse as monolithic the different standpoints within Western feminist thought are silenced. Through this process the strength, the intellectual quality and the political commitment of much of these works focusing on women in the "Third World" is made invisible. When I refer to "West Feminism" I do not describe a geographical location but a theoretical position within feminist thought.

²¹ For further discussion see: Mohanty C., 1984, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse" in *Feminist Review*, N. 30.

"cultural differences" have made invisible the social and economic conditions that produce and require ethnic cultures. As Maxine Baca Zinn suggests (1989), cultural variation does not explain why families exhibit structural variation by race. Marnia Lazreg (1988:101) claims that anything can be said about women from other cultures, as long as it appears to document the difference from Western cultures. The Other's gender culture has tended to be interpreted within an evolutionary scale that ends in Western middle class definition of gender equality or within a cultural relativism that underlines the notion of difference. Lata Mani (1990) asserts that the predominance of this culturalist understanding of India - understanding religion, caste and the victimization of women - made it necessary for her having to explain the supposed anomaly of being an Indian feminist.

My Own Positionality

One of the most challenging outcomes of the eighties, within contemporary feminist thought, has been the ongoing debate on the "Science Question", to use Sandra Harding's words. Through her outstanding and polemical writings Harding (1986) has had an influence upon the construction of an agenda for theory development, and in more than one way she has defined the axes of the debate. Many of the issues arising from this debate - the relationship between knowledge and power, the contextual nature of truth, the relation between academic discourses and society to name but a few - are not specific to feminists. Actually, they shaped the agenda of debates within philosophy of science since the early-seventies. To these debates, however, feminists add the claim that social processes are "gendered" and that this necessarily implies that the scope and context of science need to be redefined.²²

There is not one, but many feminist standpoints about knowledge and science. A lot of the confusion as to what should be a feminist science is grounded in different attitudes within feminist research towards different types and forms of knowledge as well as towards the hierarchies of various manifestations of knowledge.

²² For further discussion see: Harding, S. & Hintikka, M., 1983, *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, Dordrecht, Reidel. Barret, M. & Phillips, A. (red), 1992, *Destabilizing Theory. Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Cambridge. Polity Press.

I shall discuss several standpoints evolving from these debates that are central to my research agenda and particularly to my efforts in breaking the boundaries of otherness within feminist theory. Three of them *talking back*, *learning as equals* and *situated knowledge* construct the metanarrative of my research. My aim is to create a feminist landscape through which the experience of women can be named. I shall discuss them separately.

Talking Back

Bell Hooks (1990:5) explains that in the black community in the American South where she grew up to talk back was to address authority figures as equals. Talking back is central to the process of rebellion of individuals and collectives, it has been central to the praxis of contemporary feminist thought. Feminist researchers have criticized positivistic social science because the bias of dominant discourses on class, race and gender has been weaved into social research which is presented as objective. "Objectivity" is understood as "non commitment", an objective scholar is one who "disappears" from his/her texts.²³

Leaving the researcher outside of science "protects" him/her from examination and avoids the social, political and moral questions about the researcher's right to define reality. This idealization of objectivity also excludes from science personal subjective knowledge and imposes a hierarchy of knowledge between researcher/researched and subject/object.

Dorothy Smith (1987) asserts that the first premise of a sociology of woman is the understanding that sociology is a part of what she defines as "the ruling apparatus". The exclusion of women as a group from the discipline has to be understood in terms of the process of domination of those that have the power to define the agenda of the discipline. The right that the hegemonic trends within sociology have to objectively define what reality is, who knows and what counts as knowledge, is structured by the exclusion of the experience of oppressed groups from the writing of sociology. It is also related to the process of construction of these groups as "objects of study", as "Others". Kathryn Pyne Addelson (1991) uses the term "cognitive authority"

²³ Alvin Gouldner (1973:3) suggests that the myth of a value-free sociology was created by Weber when trying to bridge two different western traditions: that between reason and faith, between knowledge and feeling, between classicism and romanticism, between the heart and the head. Weber did not - according to Gouldner - negate the importance of feeling, romanticism, heart he only located them in a different sphere of life than sociology. Gouldner, A., 1973, *For Sociology. Renewal and Critique in Sociology Today*, Penguin Books. London.

to describe the power of those who are 'significant communicators within science'. This power is of an epistemological character. It is a power of definition. For her talking back is to produce a more "rational" science, one that takes into account the metaphysical commitments of the scientist as well as the social arrangements of doing science. Bell Hooks (1984:42) asserts that central to an understanding of the oppressor/oppressed relationship is an understanding that those who are dominated are seen as objects.

Talking back means for Dorothy Smith - as I understand her - to break the boundaries between the abstraction of the sociological discourse and the every day experience²⁴ of knowing in the particular forms of social relations which construct it. Most feminist researchers work in a different tradition than the one assuming there is something "true" (the facts) out there to be discovered by individual researches trained in and universalistic tradition (where the sex, class and race of the research is unimportant). The inclusion of the researcher as agent of the research, as it has been developed by feminist researchers among others, does not construct sociology as a subjective narrative of experience. On the contrary it reinforces the objectivity of the research by making its actual agency visible in the research product.

I have focused on speech and I shall now shift to silence. For most feminist researches the journey is not one of speech but of discovering silences. Dominant definitions of reality are selective definitions of reality. Johanna Esseveld (1988) suggests that there exists a discrepancy between the experience of most women and the analytical tools available for understanding these experiences. Definitions of reality are not about what people do, but about what is considered sociological relevant in their doing. Most of the social processes feminist researches work with are worlds that do not "exist" and (sociologically speaking) have never been named.

To argue that women know is not to assert some ontological privilege of knowledge because of sex, but to construct a theory which illuminates how knowledge is produced through specific social relations and to prioritize the privileged epistemological position of those that actually are creating and changing the world we live in. I share with other feminists the standpoint that

²⁴ I understand the term *experience* in a broader sense than personal and subjective experience. Experience of social reality is always shared experience. I use the term as describing collective praxis and memories of collective praxis.

women "know". The powerful extent of their knowledge is what I hope I shall transmit in the following pages.

Learning as Equals

Learning as equals is a project fraught with contradictions. The emphasis on collaboration between researcher and researched may mask the fact that feminist researchers have the power over the research process and product, as argued by Judith Stacey (1988). The challenge is to respect "the other" not within a relativistic conception of sociology that accepts different world views but within a hierarchy of knowledge, where scientific knowledge is considered superior. An awareness of the ethical problems evolving when feminist researchers have themselves the "cognitive authority" to define the reality of other women is needed.

Sue Clegg (1985) argues in her article *Feminist Methodology Fact or Fiction?* against the existence of specific feminist methodology. She suggests that the effort to reconstruct a new epistemology risks to obscure one of the most important contributions of feminism to methodological issues: the commitment to reflexivity. The difference between what happened, what was seen to happen and what was written, is a vital part of any feminist research agenda. One of the central aspects of this ethics is the assertion that the knowledge produced should not be divorced from the research process and from the researcher herself.²⁵

In the Enlightenment orientations the world is a world of facts in which researchers find the truth. Discussing her research process Sara Ruddick throws light on what she defines as the part of the research process in which researchers "make it up":

But finally, as mother, reader and observer, once again I make it up. When I say mothers know, mothers acquire, mothers learn...I mean that this is how I now remember, hear and then invent maternal thinking. (1989:63)

Many of the women I met talked about 'being a mother'. My understanding of mothering, a "sensitizing" concept through my research process is *also* shaped by sociological constructions, and by my own search for meaning within sociological practice.

²⁵ For further discussion on feminist methodology see: Fonow, M. & Cook, J. A., 1991, *Beyond Methodology. Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, Bloomington.Indiana, University Press.

'Translation', argues Donna Haraway, 'is always interpretive, critical and partial' (1988:589). On the other side, I have tried to show my thinking process, tried to make visible my own way of 'making it up' as much as possible.

The insistence on the need of making visible the research process itself within feminist thinking is strongly related to feminist acknowledgment that scientific truths are located ones. In my case, other feminist researchers surely would have asked different questions and met different mothers, or might not have been interested in mothers at all.

Situated Knowledge

Feminist researchers have shown that claims of objectivity and universality have been made from a particular location mostly that of white, Western heterosexual males. They have explored questions of positionality and location and their role in the production of knowledge. According to Donna Haraway (1988) feminist researchers must move away from the production of "disembodied knowledge" towards "situated knowledge" that recognize the ways in which race, gender, class and sexuality create the worlds from which researchers speak. The answer to the question *who speaks* and *how* is central to understand the relations of power mediating claims to know.

I use the terms "Western feminism" as well as "Third World feminism" and "Black feminism" with quotations marks. I want to underline my ambivalence to closed systems of thought based in fixed identities.²⁶ My point of departure is a feminist epistemology that acknowledges and affirms the plurality in and among women.

Several are the dilemmas for a woman researcher from the "Third World" living in the "First World" and writing about "Third World Women". I carry to my research the experience of how stereotypes constructed within feminist research constructed my life and the life of many of the people I love. In this sense the issues I discuss and the arena I choose for my research is strongly permeated by my experience of being an Other in Europe.

²⁶ "Black Feminists" covers the criticisms against mainstream Western feminism developed in the USA by Afro-American feminist researchers. "Chicano" feminism is commonly used to grasp the theoretical production of feminist researchers with Mexican/Latin American background in the USA. "Third World Feminism" should not be understood as geographical living located only in the Third World. Many of the feminist researchers directing "Third World criticism" to feminist research are "Third World women" (paradoxically) located in the "West."

Another dilemma is about the reception of my work in the "West". The politics of "translation" operate very often in academic settings when I am asked to mediate and represent the voices of "Latin American Women". Feminist researchers from Third World countries, I would argue, remain always something in between a researcher and an object of study. A paternalism may be traced in the ways many feminist researchers from Third World countries are read and listened to. They are seldom confronted, never contested.²⁷ This double standard has been a way of reinforcing the hegemony of Western feminism within the theory.²⁸ Research produced by women with Third World backgrounds may be de-legitimated through discourse of "Western pollution" and "non authenticity".²⁹ A variation of the same theme is to assert that since we are dealing with different rationalities, debate, discussion and criticism is not relevant. Whatever the argument, Third World feminists are not met as equals.

The experiences of black, minorities and "Third World Women" and the theoretical issues evolving from these experiences had until recently a marginal role within feminist construction of theory. Mary Romero (1992) argues that the different perspectives that women of color can bring to monocultural academic institutions remain invisible in theory construction and that the 'celebration of diversity' is underlined only when their 'ethnicity is needed'. A clear division of labor exists within feminist theory: "different women" provide accounts of difference, to be included within a universal "womaness" provided by first world feminists. Elizabeth Spelman (1988) argues that when Western feminists use the concept of difference they represent difference as being different from, and never constructed as heterogenities within an arena of equality through which different locations and positionalities are acknowledged.³⁰

²⁷ The politics of domination create a dynamics where there is a tendency to place more value on what men write about women, whites about blacks or non-white heterosexuals about lesbians etc.

²⁸ For further discussion see: Spivak, G., 1990, *The Postcolonial Critique: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, (ed) Sara Harasym. New York. Minh-ha, T.T., 1989, *Women, Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Indiana University Press.

²⁹ Lata Mani suggests that assertions about ideological Western contamination make invisible central issues, as "Third World" intellectual's material conditions of scholarship. Mani, L., 1990, "Multiple mediations. Feminist Scholarship in the age of multinational reception" in *Feminist Review*, N. 35.

³⁰ Western feminism's resistance to accept their own positionality may be explained according to Clara Rodriguez by the fact that privileged groups have no

An emphasis on problems, however, may make invisible the strength of locations of difference. Feminist philosopher Maria Lugones (1987) emphasizes the common practice of women of color in the USA of what she defines as "world travelling". This travelling is not chosen, it is a consequence of structural racism. However, she considers that to be trained in travelling across worlds is essential for a feminist ontology and epistemology. She further asserts that being secure, at ease in a "world" is dangerous. It produces people who have no inclination to travel across worlds or have no experience of world travelling.

Some Remarks about "She is a Feminist; She Writes about Women"

My intention with my research is to illuminate a particular historical situation in terms of gender. In panels and conferences I have often experienced an ambivalence in my role of making Nicaraguan women visible, a woman discussing other women in a process of social change; while men discuss Social Change. While acknowledging Nicaraguan Women and feminist research they created a space in which abstract and gender neutral understandings of social change were constructed as the universal principle for a theory of social change. My emphasis on gender has to be read as a contribution to an understanding of society as a whole and not to an understanding of women.

Defining Motherwork

I am going to stop writing for today. As many other days my thoughts take me to the Managuan neighborhood. What are they doing now? I try to imagine each of them, going through their faces, their hands, their smiles, enter their kitchens, sit silently with them in their rocking chairs. While the pictures become more and more vivid I laugh at the fact that I cannot imagine them outside their motherwork. One evening Dona Rosaura and I were waiting for Muriel (her daughter) who was supposed to be back home at nine o'clock after her evening lessons. It was dark and no woman would chose to walk those streets alone. So we were waiting for her. Muriel was very "revolutionary" and did not want to be fetched at the bus stop. All this waiting. We began to speak about the children.

experience of being a "minority". The conception of location is for them an abstraction. Rodriguez, C., 1988, "On the Declining Interest in Race" in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, N.3 & 4.

The children. The thing is not giving birth to them (parirlos). The thing is to raise them (criarlos). I remember when I got pregnant (me quede panzona), It happened only once and I got pregnant...I was telling you about how difficult it is to raise a child, that is why I do not want Muriel to get pregnant now. If you have a child you are always preoccupied. You must have a place to live in. You cannot live under a bridge with a child. And you must have a work so you can give the baby what she needs 'su comida, su ropita' (its food; its clothes). Is she eating enough? Is he ill? What happens if I die? Then they grow up and you continue to be preoccupied. Is he drinking too much? Is he vagando (hanging around) in the night? And then in the military service. I can hardly sleep when they are in the mountains.³¹ I think all the time when I hear a car (because they always come by car) now they are coming to tell me. You are like me. You were terrified when Paula (my own daughter) did not return home. It is much worse if it is a girl, so much can happen. You know they are going to suffer more. They can die pariendo (giving birth) or anything can happen with all these 'degenerados' around. All the canas (white hair) I have is because all the work with my children...to make them decent persons, to make them useful (utiles). Do not say anything to them, but they turned to be fine. Even if they grew up without a father. They turned to be fine. But we have always been a family. And they know I love them. My mother left me when I was very small. She could not afford to have me. Those were other times, the time of the rich.³² But I stand by

³¹ Since 1982, Nicaragua had become militarized. The "contra" army supported by USA had operated from military camps in neighboring Honduras. During 1984 women that had supported the Sandinistas began to resist the military service of their sons (two years for all men over eighteen years of age). Every family in my neighborhood had a member in the "mountains", as Dona Rosaura puts it.

³² The women in my neighborhood divided time in a before and after the sandinistas. They usually spoke of "the time of the rich" when they referred to

them. They know that. We have been poor but they know they can count on me. I have been their father and their mother... What would you do without the children? Be all by yourself? And then when they are grown up they help and support you. But they are work, work and work.

I wanted to give an accurate picture of how women went on creating and recreating the lived world of their households and neighbourhood. I was a prisoner of a world of sociological meaning. I felt that their experience of work and struggle had been made invisible, considered non relevant, or conceptualized as "natural". The women themselves helped me to name this gap. It was Dona Rosaura, who always went around saying: *everybody can own a house, but a family is another thing* (poner una casa lo hace cualquiera pero una familia..ya eso es otra cosa). And Dona Amelia that often told the young people in the neighbourhood: *There were only houses around her, only houses...it took time for the neighbourhood to be as it is now*. I began following these clues. They were trying to tell me that households and families are not the same thing. That there is women's work in the process of transforming a household into a family. There is women's work in the ways the strong ties of both biological and fictive kinship are weaved. I could feel the difference between a neighbourhood and a community.

And, if I understand Dona Rosaura, motherwork covers all these activities - provision of food for the children; provision of shelter; provision of clothes, provision of protection from dangerous outsiders and from the "danger" of society, provision of network in case one dies, provision of moral education to make them "decent persons", provision of love to make them resistant. Dona Rosaura, as most women in Nicaragua, regards these activities as gendered. There are women's activities. They are part of their motherwork.

Motherwork and the Silent Gendered Way of the Political

I used to stay for a chat with Dona Rosaura after the dishes. I never saw her involved in political discussions. All the house had to be mobilized for her to travel to Managua's center to participate in a meeting where she would receive the ownership

Somoza's dictatorship and of "our time" when they spoke about the time of what they themselves named as the "revolution".

of the house where she had lived for more than twenty years. However, she played a crucial role in politics. Her opinions had an impact on the neighbourhood that overrode the boundaries of her extended family unit. Dona Rosaura had worked throughout her life. Selling "tortillas" when she was abandoned at the age of 25 and had to raise her four daughters. She had lived the last twenty years with Aroldo, the father of her last and fifth daughter who is still unmarried and lives together with Dona Rosaura and her husband. After she had met her "companero" (as she used to name him) she found a very good position as a maid of one of Somoza's mistresses. Four years before the triumph of the revolution, her husband could provide for her to stay at home. 'At home' she raised by herself three of her grandchildren, and supervised the activities of the rest of her grandchildren when their mothers were outside the barrio. 'At home' she continued to prepare tortillas, which were now sold by one of her friends. 'At home' she got clothes to wash from other women in other neighbourhoods.

Sandinist leader Omar Cabeza (1988: 3) tells us that the first time he saw the name Sandino in one of the walls of the city, his first reaction was to return to his childhood and to his grandmother. The grandmother told the children the same story again and again, every summer: How she and grandfather lost everything they owned because they supported Sandino. At thirteen, Omar was old enough to stop listening to grandmother's stories of Sandino, and to conceptualize them for what they were: grandmother's stories. Ten years later grandmother's stories would turn to be Nicaraguan history.

To argue that women as her have constructed the backbone of sandinist triumph and actually the core of sandinist politics may sound un-realistic. It may be translated as a romantic and naive view of female culture. Specially taking into account that she had no time left for political activities, and that her space was limited to the households within her extended family. She, as many other women, have nurtured the children with stories following the strong tradition of storytelling in Nicaragua. Dona Rosaura, as most Nicaraguan mothers I have met in the barrio, told her children her personal story again and again. Her stories always begin with: *Do not forget that we are poor. But we are decent. And we do not bow down (no bajamos la cabeza)*. Dona Rosaura, as most Nicaraguan mothers by telling her personal story, weaved the collective memory of the community and of popular struggle.

These narratives cannot be dismissed because they exist, and especially because many teenagers I met recalled them as part of their personal-political development. This hidden knowledge, this subversive and silent way of constructing the collective memory excluded from male political science was alive in the kitchens in my Managuan barrio.

Returning to My Feminist Kitchen

Similar patterns may be seen in the new ways in which women's traditional roles as mothers have informed politics in Latin America. Women's political practice have challenged mainstream political sociology and hegemonic trends within feminist theory that often explained women's political marginalization as a consequence of their confinement to traditional values and private roles. Much of this theoretical misunderstanding has its ground in the view of women's activities as mothers - especially poor women from the Third World - as "natural", and thus of women's political activities based on an extension of motherhood as an extension of the natural role of women. While male workers' engagement has never been described as a natural extension of their factory working activities, women's engagement is conceptualized as a natural extension of their role in the family.

Bell Hooks (1990), discussing the role black women played in constructing home-places, asserts that even if women's important role has been acknowledged, it has been assumed as a gesture which is not reflective of choice but rather of women's natural role in the context of poverty and racism. These problems are much more exacerbated when focus is on women that enter politics through traditional gender roles: as mothers or wives. It is assumed that there is nothing political in their activities. "Third World Women" must struggle against conditions of oppression, they must develop collective strategies of survival as well as defend their children.

These assumptions lead to an interpretation of women who enter politics through their traditional gender roles as not necessarily acting on basis of political decisions. Women are represented as acting in the realm of necessity more than in the realm of ethic and political choice. This *naturalization* of the political takes away from the women of my neighbourhood their individual political choices as well as their political practice of creating a community in a neighbourhood.

The core politics of a neighbourhood is the process of construction of it as a community. This construction is based on hard political engendered work. Women's silent political work. The women I met in my Managuan neighbourhood made moral and political choices that are appropriated by the assumed naturalness of much their behavior. I do not conceptualize the practice of women as a practice of survival strategies, even if people were surviving through these strategies, but one of doing politics which include creating and recreating their families and communities. Women's collective struggle was not about survival but about the meaning of survival in a broader political praxis.

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