Entangled sciences of gender, sexuality and race: Latin American issues

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Latin American women’s participation in the production of knowledge has a long and rich history, though this record is frequently invisible in both Northern feminist accounts and in Latin American accounts. Of course, the Northern feminists usually cannot read Spanish or Portuguese. Moreover, some of the most innovative contributions of women to the production of knowledge in Latin America have their origins in the oral and spiritual traditions of indigenous and other local women, and thus have escaped report through conventional academic practices. Additionally, these knowledge contributions are mostly produced in the context of political activism, and thus also remain invisible through conventional research methodologies. Furthermore, while women’s or gender studies programs and centers began to be institutionalized in Latin American universities by development agencies in the mid-1980s and 1990s, they subsequently have shifted to theoretically and politically broader questions about inequalities and biopolitics, as well as violence and labor.

That all said, at least some historians have been documenting how for centuries, including before 1492, Amerindian women participated in the production of useful agricultural, environmental, and technical knowledge, as well as in the speculative ontology and cosmovision known to have been created by Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans (Ciriza 2015). After 1492, the first Latin American feminist thought visible to Europeans would be the writings of the Mexican Catholic nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695), who succeeded in reaching a significant European readership for her arguments on behalf of women’s abilities and their rights to participate in international intellectual life – to the dismay of her Church critics. Interestingly, she was writing a century before Mary Wollstonecraft. (Rivera-Berruz 2018; De la Cruz 2009; Gargallo 2010; Mendoza 2007).

Yet, it would not be until the late-nineteenth century that a significant first wave of Latin American feminist activist projects appeared in urban areas. This lasted into the 1940s. Here women were mobilized for liberal and socialist political movements, and they demanded the right to higher education, to vote, to administer their own property, as well as labor rights and family rights. And they criticized the sexual double standard. The first International Feminist Congress was held in Buenos Aires in 1910. Within the various movements of this first wave, there were disputes about whether women
should be struggling for recognition of the superiority of feminine practices, or whether the goals should more ambitiously be focused on feminist recognition of women’s insights and abilities “outside” the conventional gender binaries of feminine and masculine. The production of feminist knowledge in Latin America occurred in the context of activist and policy projects, as has been the case everywhere around the globe.

The institutionalization of women’s and gender studies programs in the 1980s and 1990s ran parallel to a series of biennial (and, later, triennial) meetings of Latin American women: *Encuentros Feministas Latinoamericanos & del Caribe*. The first was held in Bogota in 1981. These have provided ongoing connections for the debates and struggles over conflicting positions and concerns of women activists, scholars, and the feminist policy makers of the international development agencies (Alvarez et al. 2002; Stehn 2013, 17).

Yet, as elsewhere around the globe, there remains much work to do to achieve equity for women in their living and working conditions, and in recognition of the value of their thinking. The “strong objectivity” demanded by feminist and other social justice movements will require ongoing work (Harding 2015).

Earlier articles in *Tapuya* have already raised important new issues. In Volume 1, Gabriela Sued’s (2018) “The Cyborg Metaphor in Ibero-American Science, Technology and Gender Literature” appeared. Here Sued points out that Donna Haraway’s “The Cyborg Manifesto” opened up new ways of thinking about feminisms and technologies, and she examines some of the distinctive Latin American explorations of, and conflicts within, such work. Also in that volume, Breny Mendoza (2018) asks “Can the Subaltern Save Us?”. She critically focuses on the tendency of Northern feminists to seek redemption in the writings of indigenous peoples, and to find there ecological salvation from the colonial practices of modernity. It turns out that it is the indigenes who are “saving” modern feminists, rather than the reverse as imagined by the moderns. We expect to produce another cluster of such articles in Volume 3.

Three main themes are featured in the articles here. First, does gender equity exist in scientific institutions? Camilo López-Aguirre examines the likelihood of success of current strategies for reaching gender parity in Colombia. It is estimated that, without any action to change current trends, it could take between 10 years in the humanities and 150 years in engineering to reach gender parity across all research areas. This article reached a huge readership through the publisher’s selection of it for distribution in social media. In his article, Luis Humberto Fabila-Castillo points out that while in Mexico gender does not play a role in the assignment of research funds, nevertheless there is probably a kind of indirect bias functioning in the funding of basic science since women are underrepresented in the highest research levels which had the highest odds of success.

A second theme asks if there is equity in the treatment of women as objects of scientific research. Anahí Urquiza, Catalina Amigo, and Jorgelina Sannazzaro document the lack of attention in Chile to the energy poverty characteristic of women’s lives. This failure further impoverishes women. Manuela Fernández-Pinto points to the exploitation of women by Northern pharmaceutical companies in their Latin American clinical trials, challenging the dominant neo-liberal model of the organization of research. And, in her book review, Sandra P. González-Santos examines how assisted reproduction is managed in Mexico. She focuses on emerging new legal and symbolic ways of forming families, and on diverse power relations among genders, generations, the state, legal systems, and medical fields.
Finally, “place matters” (Pérez-Bustos, Medina, and Mora-Gámez 2018). In her article, Julia Sushytska argues that the researcher who is located between two or more cultures is in a position to produce distinctively illuminating insights about both cultures. She traces this insight back to Ancient Greek philosophy, and its appearance recently in writings both by a Soviet era Ukrainian philosopher and by a Latin American feminist. She argues that they have developed the art of “playing with contradictions,” and thereby generated new knowledge from the tension between divergent forces.

Reflections on issues raised. First, how should Tapuya engage with the frequent Latin American practice of using interchangeably sex-difference and gender-difference terms in discussions that are clearly intended to be about gender relations? Thus Urquiza and her colleagues set out to evaluate the gender relations that insure women’s energy poverty in Chile. Yet, they use the biological sex-difference terms of male and female interchangeably with the social gender-difference terms of men and women, masculine and feminine.

On the one hand, feminists have struggled against the widespread sexist biological determinism that assumes that gender differences are simply an expression of fundamental biological sex differences. In such accounts, for example, the absence of women from positions of scientific and other public leadership is simply a reflection of women’s innate lesser rationality and leadership abilities. Thus this practice of interchangeable use of the gender and sex terms would seem to encourage that unfortunate practice. On the other hand, we are now learning that in fact it is social commitments to gender differences that shape what a culture counts as sex differences! The causal tables are here reversed from those of the biological determinists. From this perspective, the insistence on keeping the nature and culture terms separate seems to recapitulate the assumption underlying biological determinism that one can clearly identify what is purely natural or purely biological, quite apart from any cultural practices. What should be our linguistic practice in light of these somewhat competing feminist projects?

In the second place, note that two of the authors are men. Hooray! Feminists have never wanted critical thinking about sex and gender issues to be created or practiced only by women. Tapuya welcomes men taking up the challenges to reflect on feminist issues. Moreover, these days, authors claim many more categories of personal identity than conventional sex and gender binarism permitted. Many varieties of “trans” subject positions are now producing illuminating accounts of nature and social relations more generally. Tapuya looks forward to publishing in its pages the insights and analyses of feminist issues not only by more men but also by authors of any and every sex/gender/sexual identity.

Third, it has been argued that the current leadership role in feminist analyses has “moved South” to Latin America. In recent years, fascinating debates about such sex and gender issues in the context of pre-colonial cultures, colonial ones, and today’s new-colonial practices have been appearing primarily in Spanish and Portuguese (see Breny Mendoza’s account of these debates (Harding and Mendoza, forthcoming)). Tapuya looks forward to becoming a venue for such analyses, as well as to extending them to an English-speaking readership.

We hope that you enjoy the analyses here as much as we have.
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