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“Engaging in Feminist Intercultural Dialogue as Spiritual Transformation: a Reply to R. Aída Hernández Castillo”

Marilyn Fischer, Ph.D. University of Dayton, March 6, 2020

Aída Hernández Castillo has given us a profound meditation on feminist dialogical activist inquiry as a pathway to knowledge. What strikes me most powerfully is Hernández Castillo’s voice. The path she describes is one on which the methodological, the moral, and the existential merge into spiritual transformation.

In this response I will point out three characteristics of Hernández Castillo’s path that leapt out at me: 1) the experiences lead, 2) the self is wrenched, and 3) the self is quieted. Now, this is an odd list. Pragmatists speak of experience as doing and undergoing, and these are all characteristics of undergoing. Scholars think of knowledge as the result of doing, of something constructed. Descartes sought to construct all of it, all by himself. As scholars today, our goals are more humble; our knowledge is socially constructed, and because we are situated, what we construct is limited. Nonetheless we still imagine the work as architectural, something we build using sophisticated tools honed by graduate education and professional experience.

This model of inquiry does not fit what Hernández Castillo offers us. Images of architecting and building do not suggest being led, or wrenched, or quieted. William James knew how important it is to find the right image. He commented, “Any author is easy if you can catch the centre of his vision.”¹ I do not have an image for what is at the center of Hernández Castillo’s vision of feminist activist dialogical inquiry. Perhaps we can find one together. As aides I call on two of classical American philosophy’s founders, William James because he knew the power of words and used them powerfully, and Jane Addams because she too was a practitioner of feminist dialogical activist inquiry.

1) The experiences lead

An account's beginning is instructive. Hernández Castillo's first sentence does not say, "I have discovered a method for social reform, for saving indigenous cultures, and for reforming anthropological methodology." Instead she begins modestly and inwardly; her aim is "to decolonize my own feminism and re-think my activist research methodologies." Repeatedly, Hernández Castillo uses the construction, "the experiences that led me": the experiences that led her to question, that led her to participate, that led her to reflect, that led her to confront.² Her pathway is one of responsiveness to the experiences that come her way, ones she may have chosen to enter, but she did not choose where they would lead. Addams used a similar construction in the Preface to *Twenty Years at Hull House*, writing, "This volume endeavors to trace the experiences through which various conclusions were forced upon me."³

Hernández Castillo's experiences led her to a place that is anathema to positivist social scientists and to liberal and radical feminists. I imagine self-respecting mainstream anthropologists have little interest in placing Mesoamerican cosmovision at the center of their vision. Liberal and radical feminists have staked their minds on stomping out complementarity and duality of gender relations. It's an odd path for a well-trained anthropologist, as Hernández Castillo watched her circle of professional colleagues shrink and her funding sources dry up.

2) The self is wrenched

Hernández Castillo's experiences led her through repeated wrenchings of the self. She began her search as a highly trained anthropologist. Her self, that is, what she knew, how she perceived the world, and how she judged the situations of others, had been well-formed by the methods of science and by liberal and radical feminist theories. She tells us about the ghosts of

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positivist science.⁴ Its epistemology is architectural, its practitioners busy, a-political, value neutral, objective. Though discredited, its ghosts, like Banquo, will not down.

Hernández Castillo recognized what she needed to do: decolonize her own feminism, excise from her activist research methods the lingering paternalism that had cemented her superiority as an anthropologist entitled to give others wisdom, to solve their problems, to transform their reality. Or in the liberal and radical feminist version, entitled to reveal to others the oppression and false consciousness to which they had fallen victim. Hernández Castillo confronted the falseness of these stances by occupying new methodologies of activist research, co-participatory research, and collaborative research.⁵ Yet colonialism still festered inside these methodologies and inside of her.

Descartes began with doubt. Pierce insisted that yes, inquiry begins with doubt, but it must be genuine doubt. Genuine doubt does not call on the demon deceiver just before asking a servant to stir the fire and fetch him a cup of tea. Like Hernández Castillo, Addams begins with doubt. She calls it “self-distrust,” a term that cuts deeply into the self.⁶ Addams was so wrenched by her experiences that she needed to quote no less an authority on experiential pain than St. Augustine, who himself had been “launched deep into the stormy intercourse of human life” on his way toward knowledge of God.⁷ James decided to proceed by believing what he doubted if doing so might make those beliefs true.⁸ Like James and Addams, Hernández Castillo did not permit doubts and self-distrust to become barriers to activism.

To test her beliefs in the power of feminist activism and intercultural dialogue, Hernández Castillo lived in a Mayan village for years. She *lived* there; she lived among the indigenous residents as a neighbor. They were her *neighbors*, not her “research subjects.” Addams writes about propinquity, about living close for the long term. She writes that living in

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the Hull House neighborhood with working people at the edge of survival created moral obligations to be responsive to them as neighbors.⁹ Together they entered into the mutual dependencies and responsibilities that sustain that most fragile trust without which community cannot exist. To remain value neutral toward one's neighbors violates that trust. Hernández Castillo, like Addams, learned from her neighbors. She writes that to decolonize her feminism and her anthropological training, she would receive their theorizing on culture, tradition, and gender equity as gifts.¹⁰

Doing this is more destabilizing than it sounds. Some of her anthropologist colleagues idealized the indigenous cultures they encountered. To Hernández Castillo this was a move too far as her indigenous neighbors had the weight of colonization imprinted in their practices and psyches. Her experiences led her to reject the easy categories of innocent victims and rapacious colonial powers. Living thus, for Hernández Castillo, is living among the "gray tones."¹¹

I imagine these "gray tones" as a kind of cultural astigmatism. The way is never clear; one cannot pull one's experiences into focus. This astigmatism led her to acknowledge a double vision, that indigenous peoples have the "right to their own culture and self-determination," while at the same time recognizing the "power dialogues that constitute them."¹²

Perhaps James was wrong. Perhaps there cannot be an image at the center of one's vision if one is a feminist dialogical activist inquirer with vision that will not come into focus. James was talking about Hegel when he made that remark.¹³ Perhaps Hegel could have an image at his center because he hadn't been wrenched into decolonizing himself. Doing so would have made his mind wobble as he questioned and perhaps replaced his clarity with gray, unstable tones.

I tried to remove the perhaps's from the preceding paragraph. I couldn't. I'd like to think that my astigmatism prevents it, but perhaps my own thinking simply slips. Assertive statements

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feel as if they lie on mud, their architecting shoddy. An insecure business, James says, this changing one's mind snip by snip, and then reassembling it stitch by stitch.¹⁴ It hardly counts as architecting at all.

How to go on?

3) Quieting the self

We have such comforting images of intercultural dialogue. We all contribute equally and enjoy each others' stories, and end up celebrating our diversity while sipping tea.

Hernández Castillo's story doesn't go this way. Instead, in turning to intercultural dialogue as a methodology, she had to quiet herself. Consider her experience of working inside the prison. Now Hernández Castillo is a highly trained interviewer, her skills polished through years of professional experience. Yet she did not interview the indigenous women in the prison; fellow prisoners did that. Hernández Castillo had to condense all her hard-earned skills into a training session.¹⁵ The non-indigenous women likely carried out their tasks without professional polish. Yet, though they did not come from indigenous villages, they now lived with indigenous women as neighbors, if you will, inside the prison walls. They had lived there together before the oral history project began, and they would continue to so live after its completion. One of Addams's frequently quoted phrases is, "Sympathetic knowledge is the only way of approach to any human problem."¹⁶ Hernández Castillo had to quiet herself and let the barely trained non-indigenous women elicit the stories of indigenous women who were now their neighbors. Whether this would give them "sympathetic knowledge," would be tested in this project. Hernández Castillo listened as these women checked their drafts, reflecting all the while on shared and unshared experiences. She did not direct the process; instead she bore witness.

Think about this: in the methodology of feminist dialogical activist inquiry a principal task of inquiry is to quiet the self, to listen, and to bear witness.

I think Addams had someone more specific in mind, someone more like Hernández Castillo rather than these non-indigenous women interviewers, when she spoke of sympathetic knowledge. In the next phrase of the sentence Addams gives the complete definition. She continues, “and the line of least resistance into the jungle of human wretchedness must always be through that region which is most thoroughly explored, not only by the information of the statistician, but by sympathetic understanding.” Yes, Addams’s syntax points toward sympathetic understanding, but note how “not only” marks as essential “the information of the statistician.”¹⁷ Hernández Castillo wields these statistics effectively to a different audience, to those who categorize people as peasant, urban, mestizo or not, or by language groups. Her statistics reveal how these categories, recorded in official documents and thus reproduced in countless studies as well as in people’s psyches, also need to be decolonized.¹⁸

The path of inquiry as spiritual transformation

In introducing her work inside the prison Hernández Castillo does not give us a typical academic topic sentence. She does not signal there whether her goal of improving indigenous women’s access to justice has been fulfilled. She mentions this later, in an almost casual, by-the-way kind of aside. Instead, the topic sentence stresses that she came to the prison “without imagining to what extent those women’s reflections and experiences would change my life.”¹⁹ The life-changing knowledge to which these experiences lead is the primary focus of her inquiry.

This kind of knowledge is achieved through spiritual transformation. I was struck by Hernández Castillo’s assessment of cosmovision, the Mesoamerican spiritual vision of the universe, of time, and of themselves.²⁰ It had been the organizing source of meaning for

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Mesoamericans for hundreds of years before the Spaniards arrived, and it still remains a potent source of meaning for indigenous peoples today. To learn about cosmovision, Hernández Castillo, I imagine, consulted codices and studied many books. Yet what gave her the knowledge that changed her life was living as a neighbor among indigenous people, and bearing witness to dialogues in prison.

Conditions and relations inside cosmovision are constantly changing. The aim is a holistic one, holistic across time from past to future, to keep the universe in balance, in harmony, in equilibrium. Complementary gender dualities are not rigid, but share the fluidity of the cosmos. Hernández Castillo became convinced by participants at the First Indigenous Women Summit of the Americas who declared that “spirituality is the basis of knowledge” and that “indigenous cosmovision [is] the science of indigenous peoples.”²¹ She came to understand cosmovision, not as a primordial or primitive belief system that modernity had surpassed, nor as cancelling the colonialism that currently infuses indigenous lives, but as “an ideal to be achieved,” through recovering historic memories and engaging in ritual practices informed by history, memory, and ancestral knowledge. Hernández Castillo came to see that indigenous spirituality holds “emancipatory potential,” especially for gender relations that inside cosmovision are a matter of complementarity and duality.²² Equity and balance substitute as ideals for the equalizing sameness advocated by liberal and radical feminists.

Philosophers in the Americas have long turned to spiritual and religious language to describe the transformative power of their hopes and ideals. Pierce speaks of evolutionary love, Dewey of democracy as a “common faith,” Royce of a community that is beloved. Du Bois begins *The Souls of Black Folk* by crying out their spiritual strivings; Vasconcelos envisions the

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races of humanity fusing together in fecund love; Anzaldúa, who lived inside cultural astigmatism, follows *conocimiento*'s path of creativity and spiritual activism.²³

I have two questions about the transformative path Hernández Castillo has undergone.

1) Academic disciplines in the west are essentially secularized; the spiritual or religious beliefs and practices of individual academics are considered to be private matters. The Rev. Dr. Thandeka, our 2017 Coss dialogue speaker, pointed us toward a path that resembles the one Hernández Castillo has just presented us. Thandeka told us, "Racism won't go away until the underlying affective neural patterns, organic values, personal histories, and life lessons are revealed, analyzed, and transformed."²⁴ To decolonize, do academic disciplines need to undergo this sort of a transformation as well?

2) Western traditions have a long history of gender duality and complementarity. Are liberal and radical feminists too hasty in shutting out gender duality and complementarity from within their own historical traditions?

Many thanks to Dr. Aída Hernandez Castillo for expanding our thinking and challenging us this morning.

- ¹ James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 44.
- ² Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 1, 2.
- ³ Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 2.
- ⁴ Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 3.
- ⁵ Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 3-6.
- ⁶ Addams, “The Settlement as a Factor in the Labor Movement,” 145-147.
- ⁷ Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 2; Augustine, *Confessions*, 12.
- ⁸ See James, “A Will to Believe.”
- ⁹ Addams, “The Settlement as a Factor in the Labor Movement,” 138.
- ¹⁰ Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 3.
- ¹¹ Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 7.
- ¹² Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 2.
- ¹³ James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, Lecture 3, “Hegel and His Method,” 43-62.
- ¹⁴ James, *Pragmatism*, “What Pragmatism Means” 34-36.
- ¹⁵ Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 17.
- ¹⁶ Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, 7.
- ¹⁷ Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, 7.
- ¹⁸ Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 21-26.
- ¹⁹ Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 15, 17.
- ²⁰ Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 9, 10-14.
- ²¹ Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 12-13.

²² Hernández Castillo, “Against Discursive Colonialism,” 11.

²³ Velascelos, *The Cosmic Race*; Anzuldúa, “Now Let Us Shift.”

²⁴ Thandeka, 27. “Whites: Made in America,” 27.

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