THEORIZING CLOSENESS

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Pelagia Goulimari: The title of this edited collection is Women Writing Across Cultures so I want to start with “woman.” Beauvoir emphasized the constructed nature of “woman” and the weight of “situation.” More recently Foucault-inspired archaeological and genealogical critiques of “woman” explored implicit presuppositions and rules for the discursive production of “woman”: for example, Hortense J. Spillers (“Mama’s Baby”) and Ellen K. Feder (Family Bonds, 2007) focused on the role of race, Judith Butler on compulsory/normative heterosexuality and genders as polar opposites. The main aim of such critiques is, it seems to me, to contribute to the democratizing, pluralizing, opening-up of the meanings of “woman” and the gender practices involved. What is announced – as a tendency rhizomatically connecting some feminist, queer and transgender theory and practice – is an ontological and epistemological pluralism boldly legitimizing and constellating local, “disqualified” or “subjugated” knowledges. Here your work on the “existence of multiple worlds of sense,” developing the work of María Lugones, has been very fruitful.

In “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance” (2014) you wrote: “I simply found friendship and love in the activist trans subcultures of Los Angeles. There we had developed alternative ways of living gender that felt far more safe and healthy” (384). You affirmed “the resistance inherent in the self-identities of trans people, particularly for those who claim to be men and women [...] [W]hen a trans woman says ‘I’m a woman’ and her body is precisely the kind of body taken to invalidate a claim to womanhood in mainstream culture, the claim is true in some trans subcultures because the meaning of the word ‘woman’ is different; its very meaning is under contestation” (388–89). You argued that “it is precisely” the “foreclosure of the multiplicity of interpretations [of ‘woman’ and ‘trans’] that allows for abstraction from the multiplicity of oppressions” (401). You insisted on “the existence of multiple worlds of sense, worlds in which terms such as ‘woman’ have different, resistant meanings; worlds in which there exist different, resistant gender practices” (403).

You concluded that this is “analogous to the use of political expressions such as [...]
women of color – expressions invested with meanings or perhaps potentials for meaning that are both lived in resistant opposition to dominant meanings and at the same time open ended and multiple” (403–04). I should add that your discussion of “resistance” has been inextricable from your analysis of sexism, transphobia and what you call “reality enforcement” – especially the “maximal intermeshing of oppressions” targeting “trans women of color” (395) (also discussed by Muñoz, Halberstam, Shaksari, DarkMatter and others). Would you agree that using these terms does not mean subscribing to the priority of gender over race, class, ethnicity, sexuality?

Talia Bettcher: I don’t think using expressions like “woman” and “trans woman” has to mean subscribing to the priority of gender. But it could mean that. So much depends upon who is using the terms, how they are using the terms, and why they are using the terms. The expressions are English expressions. So there’s already the issue of linguistic hegemony. Must English expressions always have English meanings? Not when they are used in resistance to such hegemony in a US context. They might be used to carry both English and Spanish meanings at once, that is, hegemonic meaning, be used to carry both English and Spanish such hegemony in a US context. They might mean that. So much depends upon who subscribes to the priority of gender. But it certainly reject any view that sees “woman” as merely naming a category that applies to individuals based upon perceived sexual (i.e., reproductive) capacities, oppressed on the basis of their being so categorized as women. It’s clear that the term “woman” is implicated in multiple oppressions. Consider, for example, Lugones’s view that “woman” (and “man”) functioned to locate non-white, non-European peoples outside of the realm of the human – that is, as female (or male), but not necessarily women or men (i.e., humans) (“Toward a Decolonial Feminism”). Or consider the ways in which the meaning of “woman” can centralize white or straight as paradigm. Given the multiple ways in which the deployment of “woman” can function to oppress or marginalize, there are invariably multiple resistant resignifications of the term – reclaimings that contest various modes of oppression and marginalization. This suggests that taking terms like “woman” as the firm starting point for a feminist analysis, with the meaning fully fixed, is a questionable move. Given the multiplicity of meaning, what is the meaning one is presupposing?

In my view, the endorsement of a multiple-meanings model is essential to understanding trans oppression/resistance. Trans oppression/resistance simply cannot be well formulated in a categorical model of oppression. Typically, trans people are not oppressed because they are placed into the category “trans.” On the contrary, trans men are oppressed in having their existential identities annihilated through placement within the category “woman” and trans women are oppressed in having their existential identities annihilated through placement in the category “man.” In such instances of transphobia the term “trans” may not even be salient. To put it crudely, it doesn’t usually go down like this: “Hey, look, a transgender person! Let’s go harass them!” It typically goes down like this: “Hey, look, a man in a dress! Let’s go harass him!” Indeed, the very interpretation of “trans woman” and “trans man” is up for grabs in instances of transphobia and resistance. To some they may mean “man who lives as a woman” and “woman who lives as a man.” To trans people, of course, the expressions will mean something entirely different. But the point is this: once interpretation becomes so central to an account of oppression and resistance, category-based accounts of oppression/resistance can’t get off the ground.

I see the “categorical gesture” – the move to fix the meaning of expressions like “woman,” “trans,” “person of color,” and so forth – as a gesture of control. If you think about it, it’s a bizarre thought that one can fix the meaning of terms once and for all – declare that this is what they mean or ought to mean. To be sure,
if one’s meanings are backed up with institutions, if one has the cultural capital, one can certainly guarantee one’s meaning will be hegemonic. But it’s delusional to think that one can control meanings absolutely. Political terms will always be used differently, resistibly, in contestation to hegemonic meaning.

Lugones sees this impulse to control (what I’m calling the categorical gesture) as dogging attempts to frame intersectionality itself in terms of overlapping categories (Peregrinajes; “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”). If we proceed to outline vectors of oppression that target people belonging to specific categories and then attempt to formulate a genuinely intersectional account based upon that starting point, we have already foreclosed some possibilities of resistance (“Toward a Decolonial Feminism”). In so far as “woman” centralizes white women and “black” centralizes black men, no room has been provided for a locus of resistance for black women. Only resistant meaning that contests the purity of the categories can allow that “black woman” can be posited in resistant response to the fragmentation effected by the categories.

This makes it all very complicated. Resistant deployments of the term “woman” typically involve second-order meanings that are closely wedded to a specific, concrete history of oppression. As a consequence, they may also perpetuate other forms of oppression. The resistant claiming of black womanhood, the response to racist marginalization or outright denial of personhood, can replicate a deployment that excludes trans women. The resistant claiming of (black) trans womanhood, then, may intervene in the oppressive denial of trans identities not merely at the level of racist and transphobic deployments of woman but also at the level of racially resistant reclaims of womanhood. One of the things this means is that some (white) trans deployments of “woman” that resist only an (apparently) non-racially inflected form of trans oppression can elide the complex resistant work that other trans deployments of “woman” (as in “trans woman of color”) are doing while simultaneously deploying a racially hegemonic meaning of “woman.” This suggests the importance of meaning openness, that is to say, the willingness to break up one’s own possibly hardened, petrified resistant significations, the recognition that these terms may not always mean what one supposes they mean.

Rather than viewing “woman” as a category (of gender), I prefer to think of various discursive practices in which “woman” is deployed with some significance. I see such practices as implicated in complex extra-linguistic social practices, both oppressive and resistant. Terms like “banker” and “fashion model,” for example, cannot be extricated from the extra-linguistic practices that effectively constitute bankers and fashion models. Much of my work has been an attempt to get a handle on some of the abusive extra-linguistic practices that help constitute “woman” and “man” – the practices that provide the context for the linguistic deployments that are interwoven with this. I see such a project as operating at a different level of analysis (“one level down”) since it does not proceed with a more abstract formulation of category-based oppression. Instead, it examines such practices in terms of structures of violence and abuse.

For me, one of the most important forms of structural violence against trans people (reality enforcement) is the consequence of the way in which gender presentation is taken to communicate genital status. I see this communicative feature as inherently abusive as it compels euphemistic disclosures of intimate information. I see “trans” as a potentially resistant intervention into this practice – a refusal to disclose.

You’re right that, for me, it has been important to situate this representational relation within a broader context of oppressions (e.g., sexism, racism). One must begin with the facts: In the United States, for example, trans women of color are at the greatest risk for the gravest forms of reality enforcement. One can, of course, correctly point to the multiplicity of oppressions in such cases (sexism, racism, classism, transphobia) that converge to create such a state of affairs. But I am also interested in a more integrated account. In what sense are the
conditions for reality enforcement the same conditions for (hetero)sexist forms of sexual violence and racist violence? Is there an account of reality enforcement which exposes any characterization of it in terms of transphobia, sexism, or racism as already relying on illicit abstraction? For example, I have argued that the system whereby gender presentation communicates genital status is the same non-verbal communicative system that facilitates (hetero-)sexual manipulation and that justifies (hetero-)sexual violence. So to call the conditions of reality enforcement sexist and transphobic is to miss the way in which such description involves an abstract separation into aspects of something that isn’t separate in that way.

PG: Let me now turn to the question of trans feminism. Your work seems to explore the interconnectedness and irreducibility of different forms of oppression, also the dialogue and interaction between non-trans feminism, queer theory and transgender theory, while they remain distinct (see, for example, your Introduction, co-written with Ann Garry, to the Hypatia special issue Transgender Studies and Feminism in 2009). What are the main issues involved, in your view?

TB: “Trans feminism” is going to mean different things and do different work depending upon the local histories of oppression to which it is a response. The work that “transfeminismo” does in Spain and in some Latin American contexts cannot be easily reduced to the work that “trans feminism” does in the United States and the United Kingdom, for example.

Most of my own work on the topic is situated in the US context. In my opinion, the most important issue is the considerable harassment, abuse, and violence to which trans women, particularly trans women of color, poor trans women, trans women who do sex-work, are subject. Now your question, I think, concerns negotiating the tension between interconnectedness and dialogue. So I’d like to distinguish between the historical, genealogical realities which underlie the development of different theories and politics, on the one hand, and the deeper difficulties negotiating the intersections and divergences of multiple oppressions, on the other. I’ve already discussed the latter, so I’ll say a little bit about the former.

Historically, transgender theory and politics arose in the United States in the nineties in direct response to the exclusionary and outright transphobic nature of (non-trans) feminism – particularly lesbian separatist feminism. Of course, these days the tensions between trans feminists and anti-trans feminists are simply through the roof. While I have no faith that one can convince the virulent transphobe, feminist or otherwise, I do worry about the gap between political visions. Some of my dear friends were pioneers in the lesbian feminist movement way back in the day when Beth Elliott’s presence caused such an uproar at the West Coast Lesbian Conference in 1973. I have benefited from long conversations which have helped sharpen my worries about the current state of trans feminism in the United States. I have worried about the monolithic representation of lesbian feminists. And I have worried about possible foreclosures of insight and historical amnesia.

Because it was imperative that trans oppression be characterized as a mode of gender-based oppression distinct from sexist oppression, it is perhaps not surprising that the “beyond-the-binary” view came into prominence (the view that trans people are positioned outside of the gender binaries and oppressed by the insistence on a binary opposition between man and woman). Unfortunately, this led to several consequences.

First, since in this model it is tough to see identification within the binary (e.g., as a woman) as at all resistant, the possibilities for a genuinely intersectional trans feminism – one that sees trans women as located at the intersection of sexist and transphobic forms of violence – seem entirely foreclosed. In the absence of a theoretical underpinning, it is perhaps unsurprising that we have seen some trans feminisms that seem a tad too individualistic, touting the freedom to gender identify and express without paying much attention to the relational nature of gender and therefore the
ethico-political constraints on identification and expression. I’m drawing here on Cressida Heyes’s notion of an ethics of self-transformation (Heyes). My own work has been, in part, an attempt to articulate an account of trans oppression/resistance that answers such concerns.

I have also been concerned that the mere inclusion of trans women within the feminist purview by well-meaning non-trans women has not led to a change in their own self-identities. I think this is absolutely necessary for there to be a meaningful trans feminism that brings together trans women, non-trans women, and others. The alternative meanings and the alternative gender practices that underlie trans self-identification as “woman” expose the way dominant deployments of “woman” can invalidate or marginalize trans people. It becomes necessary, then, for all who would be allies to rethink their own self-identities, rethink their claims on womanhood and the meanings that underlie those claims.

PG: One of the areas of dialogue and interaction across non-trans feminism, queer theory and transgender theory is around local knowledge, local theory, self-theorizing. For example, in “Trapped in the Wrong Theory” you theorize from what you call “my local knowledge” (384). To me this attitude inherits and develops Barbara Christian’s insights in her 1987 essay “The Race for Theory,” where she reads texts by African-American women writers as self-theorizing, in dialogue with the self-theorizing practice of African-American women writers of her generation, for example Toni Morrison. As a philosopher, what does “local knowledge” mean to you?

TB: If we begin with the thesis of ontological pluralism, then we recognize that there are multiple experiences of the everyday (or, rather, multiple everydays). By “the everyday” I simply mean the world as it presents itself to us as we try our best to get through the business of life. I see local knowledge as, in part, a knowledge of a specific, local everyday. We have intuitions about what is true and false, we have “know how” in terms of negotiating the social practices of that everyday. There is a “common sense” in that social reality that may be absurd in others.

Traditionally, “local knowledge” and philosophy have not gone very well together. Indeed, local philosophizing seems rather like an oxymoron. Philosophy has, after all, been so interested in making claims about the world that are universal in nature. Once one starts to philosophize from marginalized local knowledge, such pretensions must immediately be relinquished. One’s philosophizing can only deliver results that are at best partial and likely distorted. That’s okay, I think, once we recognize that this business is a collaborative affair. No one gets to have the final word.

I do think that all philosophizing proceeds from some local knowledge of an everyday regardless of whether that is acknowledged. Philosophers typically don’t have much to go on. They have the existing literature and they have their capacity for critical analysis and argumentation. But that isn’t going to be enough if they want there to be some sort of engagement with the world. I mean, it’s not as if most philosophers do a lot of empirical studies. So they invariably rely on their own experiences about how the world works. And that plays a crucial methodological role, recognized or not, in what sort of philosophy they do and what sort of results they get.

In Analytic Philosophy, for example, “philosophical intuitions” play a big role in conceptual analysis – projects that attempt to answer questions like “what is knowledge?” or “what is a woman?” These intuitions often concern the standard or correct deployment of the relevant terms within ordinary contexts. But, of course, if one operates in a resistant subculture where the linguistic practices are different, one’s intuitions about what makes sense are going to differ. What philosophical intuitions should we take seriously? This is both a political and a methodological question. Because philosophy doesn’t usually ask such questions, it ends up taking for granted the intuitions that arise
solely in dominant worlds. It might therefore be worth distinguishing the local knowledge that is invisible to itself as local, and the local knowledge that is well aware of its locatedness precisely because it is a knowledge formed in resistance to dominant and oppressive ways of knowing. In my view, proceeding from the latter sort of located knowledge is going to be a better strategy in getting closer to truth or at least farther away from falsity. And I take that to be an important part of the project of philosophy.

So much has to do with the relation between philosophizing, on the one hand, and local knowledge, on the other. Christian asks the central question “for whom are we doing what we are doing when we do literary criticism?” (61). More generally, we can ask: for whom are we theorizing or philosophizing? And what is the aim of that endeavour? Very often it turns out that philosophers are philosophizing for other philosophers. A critique is offered of some existing theory, and that critique is backed up by an alternative account. And so we get a tight circle. Jargon helps make the back-and-forth much smoother, while blocking out those who don’t have access to this game. Meanwhile, the role of the philosopher’s groundedness in the everyday recedes into the background. We end up with a kind of detached theoretical enterprise that is practiced for the sake of theory itself. This type of philosophy leaves me cold. I am moved by Christian when she writes: “What I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life” (ibid.). Yes. For some of us, philosophizing is about survival, not amusement. And in such cases, as hooks famously argues, there is no distinction between theory and practice.

PG: One of the implications of Christian’s “self-theorizing literary text” is the permeability of the boundaries between theory, literature and life-writing, and this resonates with genre-bending experiments crossing these boundaries: Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, Wittig’s Le Corps lesbien, Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater,” Lorde’s Zami, Le Doeuff’s Hipparchia’s Choice, Preciado’s Testo Junkie (including also Beauvoir, Irigaray, Cixous). How would you describe your own writing?

TB: I would describe my own work as “getting there.” All of my work in trans studies has flowed from my twenty years of life-experiences in LA trans communities. It is unquestionably autobiographical, even if I haven’t always made that explicit. For example, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers” was inspired by our community response to the erasure of Gwen Araujo’s identity through both mainstream media and the strategies deployed by the defense team. We saw clearly that the representation of her as “really a boy dressed as a girl” was what helped get her killed in the first place. We saw and felt the deep violence inherent in that move. My own struggles trying to formulate a theory of oppression/resistance and my dismay with both the “wrong body” and “beyond-the-binary” accounts were grounded in my experience in trans communities. The dissonance between theory and practice was breathtaking.

And it’s deeply personal. I didn’t start doing trans theory for the fun of it. Trying to theorize transphobic violence is a deeply depressing project. But, for me, I had to confront my own life, my own confusions about being a trans woman in a world that isn’t always so friendly. Existential questions abound: Why am I? Who am I? What the heck is going on? And so I faced a choice. I could either “do philosophy” as a theoretical, professional exercise. Or I could do it in order to make sense of my life. I chose the latter.

I describe my work as “getting there” because it is only now that I have become fully prepared to make all of this completely explicit in my work. The book that I’m in the process of writing, Personhood as Intimacy: Trans Feminist Philosophy, mixes theory with autobiographical reflections on my experience in LA trans communities. It’s important to me to reveal the locatedness of my work, the inspiration for my work, and the personal and interpersonal stakes and contexts that shape my philosophizing.
Part of this is to make explicit the underpinnings of the work, to reveal the everyday that plays such a significant methodological role in my philosophizing. But part of it also has to do with that long-standing question whether philosophy’s business is just to tell or to also show. Judith Butler’s “Can the ‘Other’ of Philosophy Speak?” really got me thinking about this.

A lot of my earliest ideas in trans philosophy emerged through my attempts at performance art. Now this was a kind of “philosophizing in theatrical space” that made good use of that space. Theatrical space is very interesting. There’s a liminality between appearance and reality there that I found most useful. What I also found very useful was the way in which I self-consciously performed philosophy to an audience of non-philosophers, often self-efﬁcacy. There was a way in which I was on the spot as a philosopher when I donned that role. And I now ﬁnd myself returning to this. I’ve started to incorporate some more performance-based techniques into my scholarly presentations. But, more than that, I’ve found that as I write more and more for a multi-disciplinary audience, rather than a purely philosophical one, that I’m on the spot again, in this awkwardly self-conscious way. Not only do the methodological questions arise in full force (What on earth do I think I’m doing? How might it be illuminating or at least useful?), but I ﬁnd myself performing the philosopher. I want to play with this. I think that autobiographical narrative and other forms of genre-play will help me accomplish that.

PG: Let’s revisit feminist debates on “experience.” In her 2010 article “Black Feminism, Poststructuralism and the Constructed Nature of Experience” Diane Perpich discussed critiques of Joan Scott’s 1992 essay “Experience” by black, Latina and lesbian feminists such as Paula Moya and Mae Henderson – as well as broader critiques of poststructuralism by Barbara Christian, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. When, for example, black feminists were using “autobiography” towards social theory and calling upon the

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“authenticity” of their “experience” against dominant/ofﬁcial/academic knowledge (including mainstream feminisms), they were not necessarily theoretically naïve. These calls might be read as political, where “experience” works to question canonical accounts. For example, the ex-slave Harriet Jacobs writes in her 1861 abolitionist slave-narrative: “I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations” (1-2). Appeals to “experience” might be read as acts of resistance – adding a perspective that was missing, subjugated, submerged, neglected, silenced. Or they might be read as acts of creative political expression, open to multiple interpretations, including their co-optation by dominant discourses. How would you situate your own work in relation to these debates?

TB: This is a highly complex debate. So I don’t think I can do justice to it now. But I do want to say a bit. While I do agree that appeals to experience of this type are often acts of resistance or creative political expressions, I don’t think that that’s all appeals to experience are, or at least all they can be. Here I’m speaking only of philosophy, but I think this is true of literature as well. Concerns about these appeals may be partially discipline speciﬁc. But in philosophy, I think that experience itself has more value than something to which one can appeal to make the erased visible, for example. There is a sense in which I would say that experience is, for the better or the worse, a starting-point. I don’t know what else there is for me to go on.

Of course, I don’t think that my experience gives me direct access to the world “as it really is” or anything remotely close to that. But, as I explained above, my philosophical reflections begin with my experience of the world. Such reflections may, of course, require that I go beyond or even rethink my experiences. But they still have to start there. It’s not as if I do empirical research. If I did, I would be very interested in the experiences of various trans people. So experience would still be important.
Since I don’t do empirical research, I just live my life in trans worlds and reflect on that. I try to be involved. I try my best to “world”-travel, since rather than one “world,” in Los Angeles, there is something more like a confluence or constellations of “worlds.” In a way, you could say that my philosophy is based on a lot of experiential data shaped in the form of a life. This gives it a first-person quality. But it’s not based on nothing.

Again, much has to do with what the theory is for and to whom it is addressed. My own reflections are personal. They flow from my attempts to orient myself, to figure out what’s going on. There’s a kind of disorientation that arises when one is forced to inhabit social realities that are hostile to one’s very existence. Inevitably, one needs an everyday that is resistant to those realities. But one also needs to think it all through. In this way, philosophical reflection can have a very practical value. Beyond that, there’s the question of audience. Is the theory addressed to those who practice hegemonic theorizing? Is it contestatory, in that way, resistant to what the theorist and reader in case it is shared or at least theoretically analogous. The appeal to experience is the stuff one is trying to make sense of. To be sure, it can be more complex than that. One can do different things with theory simultaneously.

I do think a case can be made that those who are seasoned practitioners of some social practice that is part of some social reality are in a better position to critically and with reflection describe and analyze social practices in dominant social realities. I don’t see how any of this commits us to saying that experience always delivers perfect access to reality or that there is a common, homogeneous experience named by some identity-category or that these categories are not historically located.

I think it’s crucial to separate these experiences and the identity-categories that are supposed to track them. In the worlds that I have traveled, many of the trans people I know are very careful to specify that they are speaking from their own experience and that they are not speaking for all trans people. Perhaps because one’s personal journey is so important to how one understands and explains one’s identity in these contexts, such qualifications become necessary. But there certainly isn’t any reason why one needs to speak of a homogeneous group experience, let alone naturalize the categories one uses to name such groups. There are commonalities, of course. But that has less to do with shared identities and more to do with a shared social. I mean, our experiences are of the social. So it’s no surprise that our experiences are socially constructed (given that the social is, well, socially constructed). But it’s precisely experience that links us to the social. And without this link, theory is at grave risk of becoming unengaged with actual political struggle. And once that happens, what’s the point?

PG: I want now to turn to the idea of moving “across cultures,” which is in the title of this collection. In “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion” (2007) and other texts you describe the “dangerous double bind” that trans people are still confronted with in Western mainstream social contexts: “disclose ‘who one is’ and come out as a pretender or masquerader, or refuse to disclose (be a deceiver) and run the risk of forced disclosure, the effect of which is exposure as a liar” (50). This seems to me an existential annihilation of trans people; they are denied authenticity and
deemed to be in “bad faith” whatever path they take and a priori. This is why, you have been arguing, it is so vitally important for trans people to belong to resistant countercultures and trans-friendlier contexts – and to be able to move between the mainstream world and those other worlds. There is a lot of feminist scholarship on resistant counter-public spaces and, more recently, in queer theory, Muñoz’s last work on a “brown undercommons” and Halberstam’s work on “wildness.” You have been returning to the work of Lugones for inspiration. How have you developed Lugones and what is your current thinking on moving, writing, telling one’s story “across cultures”?

TB: I have been deeply inspired by Lugones’s work. No other philosopher has so thoroughly transformed me in quite the way that she has. Now Lugones herself is concerned about the possibilities of communication across distinct liminal spaces and this gets to your question about telling one’s story “across cultures” (“On Complex Communication”). To put it crudely, for Lugones, there is no reason to believe that members of different resistant social realities will be able to simply understand each other: Histories of oppression and resistance are far too specific for meanings to be readily translatable. Indeed, the assumption that meaning is transparent in some idealized, unified “limen” is likely to lead to reiterations of oppression. But what she does recognize is that once different people from different liminal spaces begin to recognize each other as liminal, they can understand that communication is complex and that people may not be meaning what they seem to be meaning and that they may be meaning different things at once. While they may not at first understand the subcultural message, they may understand the form of the speech as resistant in nature. Moreover, Lugones thinks that such communications can be heard as invitations across “worlds” to disrupt the dominant world of meaning.

How have I developed her work? One of the most important themes in my own work is intimacy. More generally, I’m focused on the way that all of our interpersonal experiences are mediated by distance or closeness (intimacy). I call this characteristic “interpersonal spatiality.” Consider, for example, the way in which trans people accused of deception are sometimes subject to “genital verification.” It’s an abusive practice that is deeply bound up with intimacy, in this case intimate violation. So I’m interested in how our bodies and our discursive practices are structured by boundaries between the object and subject of access – boundaries which make intimacy possible as intimacy, boundaries which make abuse possible as abuse. I see these boundaries as morally binding, yet culturally contingent. There are different social realities that have different systems of interpersonal spatiality. Some of these systems are themselves inherently abusive, some are resistant to that abuse. I’m interested in the possibilities for resistant forms of intimacy as well as dignity (taken in terms of interpersonal distance). I guess one way to put this is to say that I’m not focused so much on counter-publics (or counter-private spaces) but alternative, resistant ways in which we experience each other both from a distance and up-close-and-personal, that is, as people. Specifically, I’m interested in how intimacy is possible across different social realities. I’m interested in how new forms of interpersonality spatiality can be created and negotiated across “worlds” given the fact that meaning isn’t transparent, given that systems of interpersonal spatiality may differ. The possibilities for harm while opening oneself up for intimate possibilities across worlds are, of course, great. Sharing one’s deepest sense of what it means to be a woman can be answered by the question “so have you had the surgery yet?” That’s profoundly hostile.

This has quite a lot to do with telling one’s story “across cultures.” I see telling one’s story as an intimate act. Or at least it can be. It can also be a dignifying act, an act that draws a firm boundary and creates a little distance. In general, I see autobiography as negotiating interpersonal space in just this way. One needs to decide just how much one will open oneself up, what kind of story to tell. And these are all
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ways of presenting ourselves to others, revealing ourselves as “who we are.” Reflecting back on some of my early performance work, I see myself as having been interested for a very long time now in how one can both narrate and perform a story in such a way that opens up new possibilities for intimacy.

For me, this is of a piece with theorizing. Certainly as usually practiced, philosophical theorizing is one of the most distant ways of presenting oneself possible. But once philosophizing is grounded in experience, once it flows from one’s own life, then there are real possibilities for intimate theorizing. I have found this in Lugones’s work. And I guess it’s also one of the things I want to show in my book. Through sharing my personal experiences and through being on the spot as a philosopher, I want to see how a theory of interpersonal spatiality can itself negotiate interpersonal spatiality – moving close, then pulling back, then perhaps moving closer. Perhaps I’ve been trying to do a little bit of that now, too. I mean, we’re in this dialogue. It’s not in person. It’s not in real time. But it’s an interview. And I’m showing parts of myself to you and to potential readers that are important to me. We’re talking meta-theory here. And, yet, I feel vulnerable because my philosophy is also a window into who I am.

PG: In “Trans Identities and First-Person Authority” (2009) you call for a “multiplicity of trans-authored narratives” and for “polyvocality” (98). The mainstream world denies trans people’s authenticity and treats its own account of them inappropriately as authoritative: namely, that trans people’s “truth” is their genital status. In response, you outline what you call “ethical first-person authority”: one’s self-identifications and self-narratives matter, on grounds that in your eyes are primarily ethical (and perhaps also political) rather than epistemological or ontological. Asserting the “ultimate priority of ethical considerations,” you add that one’s self-identification and “existential self-identity” may not “necessarily indicate something deep” but may have a political aspect (110, 115). For example, “[w]hen a transperson answers ‘I am a woman,’” this may “be understood as a resistant refusal to disclose genital status […] It seems that the correct account is one that fails to provide any defining feature of category membership and thus leaves it open for cultural dispute” (109–10). Instead, one would give an ethical or political account of oneself; for example one’s sense of what is important, what matters, one’s reasons for acting, what it means to them to identify as a woman. Can you explain your understanding of ethics and politics in this context?

TB: I meant a lot of different things. One of the things that I had in mind was intrapolitical disagreement. Trans terminology is often underwritten by political visions. For example, “transgender” has been used as an umbrella term that is closely wedded to a view that posits the binary as a source of oppression. For some trans people who view themselves within the binary, such a vision may be politically problematic. Hence, it would be important to disavow self-identification as “transgender” and to take up other terminology, such as “transsexual.” By contrast, some trans people have disavowed “transsexual” because of its association with a pathologizing medical model. So while self-identification as “woman” or “man” may concern deep personal resonances, self-identifications as “transsexual,” “transgender,” “trans,” and so forth may be reflections of a political stance. Sometimes such political stances are stable. Sometimes they are strategic – changing, depending upon specific contexts and political necessities. I was also thinking of Heyes’s notion of an ethics of self-transformation (Heyes). I have known several trans-masculine individuals who have disavowed self-identification as “man” because they were deeply concerned, as feminists, about the hegemonic meaning of the term as well as the privileges sometimes associated with it. Here both ethics and politics are in play. Such choices can be very difficult, too. Ethical and political considerations may lead one to disavow a term with which one has a strong personal resonance.
Finally, I was thinking about privacy, intimacy, and abuse as moral notions. At the time, I hadn’t found my way yet to the concept of interpersonal spatiality. But I was working towards it. I saw the terms “woman” and “man” as implicated in abusive practices that euphemistically communicate private information. For example, sometimes trans people are confronted with questions like “Are you a woman or a man?” Typically, such questions are euphemistic ways of inquiring about genital status. Often “was discovered to be a man” is polite way of saying “was discovered to have a penis.” I was also thinking about the fact that when a trans person says “I’m a woman” in trans subcultures, one may have no idea what this means to the person who says it. Such self-identifications are often complex and deep, given content through the trajectory of a life struggle. So, at least in trans subcultures, such statements serve as a locus for possibilities of distance and closeness: how much a person shares about their identity is a question of intimacy. In effect, I was proposing something more radical than the suggestion that terms like “woman” and “man” have different meanings in different worlds. I was proposing that the roles of “man” and “woman” in the linguistic and extra-linguistic practices were very different.

In the mainstream, “I am a woman” is not very different from “she is a woman.” In both cases we’re apparently dealing with a mere report about a fact in the world on par with “I am six feet tall” or “she is six feet tall.” However, in trans subcultures, saying “I am a woman” can be a first-person, present-tense avowal, on par with “I am angry” or “I think I’ll go home now.” While “she is angry” may report a fact about the world, “I am angry” is doing something more. Philosophers think that the avower has a first-person authority over what they say. For example, while “she is six feet tall” can be contested by another as a factual mistake on the part of the speaker (“No, you’re wrong. She’s not six feet tall!”), it is generally inappropriate to contest “I am angry” in the same way. “No, you’re mistaken. You aren’t angry” is usually “out of bounds.” (One could accuse the speaker of lying, but that’s a different matter.) My idea was that in mainstream contexts, “I am a woman” is like “I am six feet tall” in that one can charge the speaker with having made a mistake, while in trans subcultural spaces, “I am a woman” is like “I am angry” in that suggesting the speaker has made a mistake is typically “out of bounds.” I wanted to contrast these discursive practices of providing a putative description and of avowing and situate them within larger extra-discursive practices, such as the communication of genital status through public gender presentation.

I was trying to link the ethical basis for this authority to concerns around privacy or at least the autonomy to negotiate that privacy. I don’t think I really succeeded in that. These days, I would say that the ethical basis for this authority derives from the demands of interpersonal spatiality. First-person, present-tense avowals play an important role in making possible and constructing our personas – the appearances of “who we are” to others. I see these appearances as structured and negotiated in the field of interpersonal spatiality. There’s far more to say, of course. But I’ll leave that for the book.

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bibliography


theorizing closeness


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