

IN-BETWEEN: LATINA FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY, MULTIPLICITY, AND THE SELF

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Mariana Ortega provides a detailed and much-needed account of multiplicitous selfhood drawing on Latina philosophy from an existential and phenomenological perspective. Certainly this monograph is a major contribution to Latina philosophy and Latina feminist phenomenology, as well as to feminist phenomenology and phenomenology more generally. One of the strengths of phenomenology has been the way it moves between the particular and the general, but, as Ortega points out, even existential phenomenological accounts “that profess to do justice to lived experience avoid personal descriptions informed by particular social identities, staying within the confines of general categories of existence.”¹ To stay within such general categories not only fails to provide for the kinds of thick phenomenological accounts that enrich our understanding of the particularities of lived experience, but also of the generalities that allow us to understand more clearly what it means to be existentially human. Indeed, attending to thick descriptions of lived existence has led Ortega to extend phenomenological categories and understanding at the level of generality, providing us with her important concepts of living in-between worlds, and in particular, of multiple selves. But what Ortega accomplishes here is even more profound. In developing her concept of the multi-

¹ Mariana Ortega, *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2016), 2.

plicitous self she shows how the study of Latina feminist phenomenology is not a marginal—a subset of feminist phenomenology, or phenomenology in general—but rather completely changes the field. She reveals how what appear to be general and neutral accounts are in fact impoverished ones that do not phenomenologically reveal contemporary experiences of marginalized and oppressed selves who live between worlds.

For feminist phenomenology, Ortega's multiplicitous self allows for the appearance of that which is covered over, providing a critical methodological understanding of what it means to develop accounts of marginalized and oppressed selves, which is surely at the heart of feminist theorizing. Not only does this self allow for the necessary critical distance from the transcendental self of classical phenomenology that seems to presume a neutral embodied subject, but, more than this, Ortega intrinsically changes the way we understand the phenomenal self.

Ortega is, in Gloria Anzaldúa's sense, a new *mestiza* thinker as she is "embodied and situated in a particular space where particular economic, cultural, and historical circumstances crisscross."² This means that although the new *mestiza* thinker might "tactically" take on identities or thinking strategies, they cannot be chosen at will—they come out of her roots and lived experience. For Ortega the thinker, those roots are Latina philosophy and Heideggerian existential phenomenology, which she courageously thinks together. This move is courageous since, given Martin Heidegger's politics, it does not seem his thinking has, at first glance, anything to offer those opposed to oppression. Moreover, Latina philosophy, which rejects the unified subject, is not formally recognized within the traditional philosophical (and Eurocentric) classroom. But as an uncompromising *mestiza* thinker Ortega cannot but write what seems ethically demanded of her.

In-Between shows us why exploring this intersection between Heidegger and Latina philosophy can be so fruitful, and could only be initiated by a philosopher like Ortega who is herself a multiplicitous self, and so is able to bring together disparate per-

2 Ibid., 45.

spectives and think them together. The world-travelling her multiplicitousness requires of her allows her to see how “both Latina feminist phenomenological accounts of the self and existential phenomenological accounts have various similarities, the most important being the commitment to provide an account of selfhood that does justice to lived experience.”³ The Latina thinkers whose works she addresses, such as Anzaldúa, Maria Lugones and Chela Sandoval, might not think of their work as phenomenological nor do they employ formal phenomenological methodologies as such. Nonetheless, their rich descriptions of subjectivity expressed through the lens of each’s lived experience are inherently phenomenological, and the theorizing that comes out of these descriptions overlaps with the phenomenological tradition, even as there are also significant differences. As Ortega describes it, “their appeal to experience is a disclosure, a making visible, audible, a making perceptible, those beings in marginalized and nondominant positions whose histories have been previously erased, ignored or covered up.”⁴

Disclosure is of course the heart of phenomenology, making visible what was obscured, and recognizing that there is always that which cannot be collapsed into one frame of understanding. These descriptions also reveal that our philosophies need to take seriously not only the critiques of the unitary notions of the self, but moreover, if we are to understand oppression, living on the margins as well as resistance, we need theories that help explain the multiplicitous self. Understanding this phenomenon also contributes to understanding how we become selves and are selves.

In particular, Ortega explores the overlap between Heidegger and Anzaldúa. Like Anzaldúa’s, Heidegger’s self is not a substantial self but is rather relational. Humans do not have an essence that determines who they are in advance. They become who they are through the relations in which they engage, through their commitments and through their embodied situations. Nonetheless, as Ortega points out, though Heidegger explains the “major onto-

3 Ibid., 6.

4 Ibid., 7.

logical existential characteristics of a self” that is thrown into the world, “he does not explain the specific ontic situations” that selves live, specificities provided by the Latina thinkers Ortega engages.⁵ Further, for both Anzaldúa and Heidegger, it is through anxiety that the “self becomes capable of ultimately making choices that are not expected or prescribed.”⁶ For Heidegger, anxiety reveals how the self is uncanny, or *unheimlich*, not at home in the world; it is a mood “that discloses the possibilities of being-in-the-world and the individual aspects of the self.” For Anzaldúa, however, anxiety can lead to paralysis, since the *mestiza* self must grapple with the inability to make “extremely difficult choices given her multiple positionalities.”⁷ But both the experiences of not feeling at home, and of paralysis can lead to important critical reflection. Indeed Ortega describes how, along the way, she herself experienced periods of paralysis in her writing about the self.

In short, out of her engagement with Latina thinkers for whom the lived experiences of marginalization, oppression and resistance are central, as well as with Heidegger for whom the self is in the world, Ortega develops her own understanding of the multiplicitous self. This self is not a plural self, a self that moves from one perspective to the next, which is Lugones’ understanding of world-travelling as Ortega describes it, nor is it a deep self that crosses all these experiences. Instead, it is a self between worlds. Drawing more specifically on Heidegger’s existential phenomenology, for whom the self is always already in the world, always already a self shaped through spatio-temporal relations and commitments in the world into which she is thrown, for Ortega, the multiplicitous self is a “being-between-worlds and a being-in-worlds, an in-between self.”⁸

As a good phenomenologist Ortega provides a number of descriptions of this multiplicitous self. For example, drawing from the work of Anzaldúa, the multiplicitous self “is a self inhabit-

5 Ibid., 54-55.

6 Ibid., 54.

7 Ibid., 54.

8 Ibid., 50.

ing the borderlands, a self in-between the U.S. and Mexico, who experiences a lived struggle because she is split between cultures, races, languages, and genders, all tugging at her, pulling her to one side or the other, demanding alliances or setting down rules, continually pushing her to choose one or the other, to suffer from an absolute despot duality.”⁹ But the multiplicitous self does not choose one or the other, and instead breaks down any binary approach that requires such a choice. For the multiplicitous self is “intersectional, flexible and tactical.”¹⁰

Ortega engages with a number of Latina philosophers as she further specifies her understanding of this multiplicitous self. Thus, for example, though Maria Lugones’s work is important to her own, Ortega distinguishes her multiplicitous self from what she understands as Lugones’s ontological pluralism whereby ‘world travelling’ is defined for Lugones as “the experience of being different in different worlds”, “an epistemic shift to other worlds of sense.” By contrast, Ortega’s multiplicitous self is embodied by the experience of living between worlds, “a practice of both survival and resistance” for those in the margins. According to this ontological pluralism, selves “experience themselves as different persons in different worlds.” They do not “experience an underlying ‘I’” that exists across these different worlds.¹¹ For Ortega, ontological pluralism would imply a multiplicity of selves and worlds “anchored in multiple realities,” which ultimately is self-traveling and not world-traveling. Instead, in her understanding, “world traveling is a practice in which the multiplicitous self has access to an opening or aperture to different worlds,” but the self remains “mine” and it is this mineness that gathers the world-traveling self together.¹²

In other words, as I understand it, these other worlds open the self to new possibilities and understandings, but the self does not leave the other aspects of herself behind. Just as Ortega finds that the playful aspect of herself comes to the fore with her fam-

9 Ibid., 26.

10 Ibid., 71.

11 Ibid., 88.

12 Ibid., 88.

ily or with other Latina friends and colleagues, she does not leave her playfulness behind when she inhabits the more traditional and all-too-serious realm of philosophy. It simply moves into the background and is generally not engaged. This is a region of her existence that comes to the fore in one world, and recedes in another, which is why she exists in-between.

This understanding of existence comes from Ortega's engagement with Heidegger. Understanding the self in terms of how it is, and how it becomes, in other words, as a temporal self, is key to Ortega's multiplicitous self. For Heidegger, the ecstasis of temporality means the self exists each moment not as a series of now moments, but rather as the past informing the present in anticipation of the future which includes our finitude. Ontological pluralism would suggest we leave the past, or other worlds behind as we world-travel. The multiplicitous self brings them with her.

There are concrete advantages to understanding the possibility for resistance with Ortega's multiplicitous self. Whereas for Lugones, resistance comes out of the "play of multiple visions" that allow the self to resist a "logic of purity," ultimately this multiple self, though nonfragmented, also lives multiple realities.¹³ In Ortega's account, however, the "multiplicitous self can share specific spatial regions with others and also be in various worlds." Ortega's account thus provides multiple perspectives rather than "multiple crisscrossing realities." She does not "consider worlds as atomistic and thus not intersecting or crisscrossing."¹⁴ Rather than being different persons in different worlds with no underlying 'I', Ortega's "Being-in-worlds is meant to capture the phenomenological way in which the multiplicitous self *is* or fares in various overlapping worlds, and thus it has an important existential component."¹⁵

Drawing on these multiple perspectives while remaining one self means that Ortega's multiplicitous self with its existential rather than ontological pluralism has the possibility of being an expert phenomenologist. As Ortega points out, "by being between

13 Ibid., 90, 93.

14 Ibid., 93.

15 Ibid., 93.

worlds and traveling worlds, the multiplicitous self can have access to alternative visions of self that are suppressed or erased in oppressive worlds.” Situated at the limen, the multiplicitous self has more opportunities for “seeing differently and thus finding alternative visions of oneself and of worlds.”¹⁶

If feminist phenomenology is about bringing the everyday to appearance so that we can better figure out where we want to go, what change needs to happen, then the multiplicitous self, the world-traveller, has the potential to be such a phenomenological expert because this self is never completely at home, can never be complacent, and so can’t take anything for granted. Whereas for phenomenologists such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, the pre-reflective self is inherently phenomenological, we go about our daily existence without consciously thinking about the ways things are, the multiplicitous self is not able to be at ease. For the multiplicitous self, the world rarely falls into the background; this self diverges from that of Heidegger for whom a “practical orientation... is the primary way in which the self is in the world.”¹⁷ The phenomenological method is meant to bring this everyday practical world that operates in the background into appearance. But the multiplicitous self is one step ahead. The multiplicitous self has the possibility of tending towards a critical conscious awareness of the ways in which we are in the world, since for this self the world is rarely ready-to-hand. Nothing has to be the way it is because the multiplicitous self has experienced other ways of being. And because this self is temporal, it can critically draw on past experiences to understand what is happening in this world at this moment, as well as to understand what it can be or emphasize different regions of existence in different worlds, all while remaining one multiplicitous self. It is, after all, often the juxtaposition in experiences that shows up the precariousness of the world and points towards alternative ways of being. For example, the way of being that is home is experienced more sharply through the homesickness that belongs to migrants and immigrants, and to those in

16 Ibid., 100.

17 Ibid., 60.

exile.

Nonetheless, as Ortega points out, living on the borders, that is, on the limen, is not itself “a sufficient condition for liberation.”¹⁸ For, if world-travelling becomes an every-day practice then it could be co-opted into the movement of publicness.¹⁹ That is, even as the world-traveller sees “her differences or multiplicity,” she may try “to preserve the status quo, all as part of an everyday attempt to survive within unwelcoming worlds.”²⁰ Perhaps survival, Ortega suggests, includes having to give in, settle in, and accept “the norms, practices, and even the definitions of the multiplicitous self assigned by members of dominant groups.” But, as she further contends, perhaps survival itself can also constitute an act of resistance.²¹

For Heidegger, the expert phenomenologist strives not to be at home. In his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking” he writes that mortals, that is, humans, are finite, temporal beings, and that the real “plight of dwelling” is not the homelessness that follows war and displacement, but rather that we “*must ever learn to dwell.*”²² It is in fact Heidegger’s preoccupation with the ontological, with relational ways of being over the ontic that could allow for such a claim. But Ortega’s argument is that the ontic, the everydayness of oppressive material conditions cannot so easily be dismissed. For those who are literally homeless, Heidegger’s claim is not helpful. Moreover, the experience of homelessness can lead to alternative insights into being. Accordingly, in balancing together both the ontological and the particularities of ontic material existence, Ortega opens new possibilities for theorizing oppression.

For example, let us consider Ortega’s hometactics as employed by the multiplicitous self committed to resisting oppression, who is never at home, who is continually world-travelling and for

18 Ibid., 34.

19 See Martin Heidegger, “The They,” in *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996), 107-122.

20 Ortega, *In-Between*, 127.

21 Ibid., 127.

22 Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 159.

whom “the question of home becomes a question of homes.”²³ Hometactics are “temporal interventions aimed at producing variable situations but necessarily at abolishing a system of power.”²⁴ It is a praxis that aims at “the production of a sense of familiarity in the midst of an environment or world in which one cannot fully belong due to one’s multiple positions and instances of [what she calls] thin and thick not being at ease.”²⁵ The multiplicitous self thus experiences at the same time both a “feeling of wanting to come home and that question of whether there is a home (or even homes) for [her].”²⁶

This questioning belongs to being a phenomenal self who is never fully at home in the world because to be so would be to stop asking about what it means to dwell. For Heidegger, this questioning is tied to questioning the meaning of being—to not accepting a metaphysics of presence but to understanding that meaning is not given, but as dwelling, is rather relational, and existential. For Ortega, this questioning is a critical questioning, an asking about how we can live differently, resisting oppression and marginalization, and resisting the forces that engage us in oppressing others. In fact, as she points out, hometactics is a “taking advantage of opportunities as they present themselves.” It is “an uncovering of what multiplicitous selves are already practicing in their everydayness, a disclosure of that which is already happening in [their] lived experience.”²⁷

Ortega’s hometactics is thus thoroughly existential drawing on the spatiality of home as situation and the temporality of lived existence. It involves accepting the ambiguity inherent to both searching for a “sense of belonging while being aware that such belonging is not possible.”²⁸ As such it is an amplification of Heidegger’s claim that humans are the beings who question their own being.

23 Ortega, *In-Between*, 196.

24 Ibid., 202.

25 Ibid., 203.

26 Ibid., 196.

27 Ibid., 202-3.

28 Ibid., 207.

From the perspective of the multiplicitous self, Ortega revisits discussions of feminist standpoint theory and ultimately identity politics with the goal of defending their significance for feminism. Early manifestations of standpoint theory were critiqued for presuming an essential self who was granted a privileged critical position based on her relatedness to oppression and the insight that provided. Rather than beginning with an essential and authentic self understood in the sense of being atemporal and not open to the world, which would derail the project from the start, Ortega introduces the multiplicitous self into the discussion. It is this self's relational situatedness in multiple world in which she is never at ease that allows for, but does not guarantee, a critical perspective. Although Ortega explicitly rejects any articulation of an "authentic" self which would imply an inherent essence and not allow for the self's relational becoming, the self is nonetheless also real and shaped by her material conditions. Moreover, though she also explicitly rejects Heidegger's authentic self that relies on shared and inherited values, norms and practices, since the multiplicitous self has so many inherited pasts to draw on it could never be clear which one that would be, as we saw with Anzaldúa, the risk is paralysis. There is nonetheless a sense of shaping oneself through the choices one makes, a shaping developed through the practice of hometactics.

Accordingly, in her discussion of identity politics, Ortega shows how working with an understanding of the multiplicitous self means we do not have to choose between identity or coalitional politics. Nor do we have to choose between an identity politics understood as grounded in an objective reality, which implies an essential self, or alternatively in a subjective one dependent on the identities with which we identify. For Ortega, identities are both subjective and objective. An experience of oppression can be shared by those who are racialized, not because they are objectively the same, but because their racialized marking subjects them to similar experiences of oppression. As Ortega further points out, it cannot be overlooked that it is women of colour who have continued to support identity politics, and white feminists who have

‘moved on’. Though subjectively, we can choose our alliances, we can choose with whom we identify, which can mean crossing over objective identity markers, nonetheless, racialization has objective ontic consequences that shape experiences of identity. Sensibly, Ortega points out that establishing identity politics in terms of an ‘either/or’ binary or even in terms of strategic essentialism, misses the point. As existential selves we are tied to a material world that we understand subjectively according to the ways we are relationally in the world and in-between worlds.

In other words, as Ortega claims, the “notions of identity and identity politics continue to be relevant even for a multiplicitous self that is in process and that occupies multiple social locations.” The challenge she sets is to think about identity not in terms of “sameness, essence, or ahistoricity,” but to develop an identity politics that does not support homogenization or lead to fragmentation.²⁹ Against essentialism, the *mestiza* consciousness, or that of the multiple self, has aspects that are often contradictory (for example bringing Heidegger and Latina philosophy together). Nonetheless, for Ortega, these contradictions can and do coexist in one self just as for Merleau-Ponty the phenomenal body allows for the impossibles in a way that logic does not. My body gathers together “a nexus of living meanings” of impossibles that emerge for example from seeing, touching, and hearing that cannot be collapsed into one another yet nonetheless belong to one body and open onto one world. Ortega takes Merleau-Ponty’s insight a step further because the body of the multiplicitous self opens onto multiple worlds and in between-worlds. This body brings its impossible habits and ways of being with it in world-travelling, but these ways do not remain in the background, they come to the fore as different worlds call for different habits of being. These habits of being—does one eat cake with a spoon or a fork?—are not trivial. They allow us to be at home or not at home, or somewhat at home in the world or worlds.

Similarly, if we take Heidegger’s understanding of *Mitsein*, or being together, then we are always already in the world with

29 Ibid., 146.

others. In other words, for Heidegger, we are not locked in our solitude, which we must in some empathetic way bridge in order to be with others. Rather, even though as *Mitsein* we are often in a deficient mode of being with others, nonetheless, being with others is primordial to human existence. Accordingly, our identities as not given, as always becoming, are open to being shaped by our relations with others and with the world and worlds. Of course, Heidegger did not seem to understand the implications of his own thinking. His understanding of the self's relations with others, with the "they" or the public world ultimately involves a leveling down, a giving over to a kind of generality that is not one's own. Ortega, with other feminists, goes beyond the generalities of *das Man*. Being with others opens us both to oppression and to joy.

Ortega thus draws on Heidegger's existential phenomenology because it provides a helpful account of an epistemic subject that is temporal and not unified. At the same time this phenomenal subject is a being-in-one-world and thus "relentlessly Eurocentric."³⁰ A phenomenal subject who is in the world, or even who inhabits the world is insufficient for thinking beyond a Eurocentric paradigm. Accordingly, opening up the phenomenal subject to the multiplicitous self and to being between worlds provides a more compelling account for the critical perspective of feminist phenomenology that is tied to opposing oppression and marginalization, and to a phenomenology that has any critical potential for decolonization. In fact, from my perspective there is no going back for feminist phenomenology. Mariana Ortega's concept of the multiplicitous self who exists in-between worlds will become fundamental to any feminist or critical phenomenology that claims to oppose oppression and to provide rich descriptions of lived existence.

30 Ibid., 115.