

EMBODIED EXPERIENCE OF MULTIPLICITOUS SELFHOOD

Mariana Ortega's Latina Feminist Phenomenology

MARIANA ORTEGA INTERVIEWED BY

JULIAN EVANS, JESSICA ELLIS, AND SANGIE ZAITSOFF

Mariana Ortega is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Pennsylvania State University and the author of In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self (2016). Ortega brings an original approach to questions of selfhood and identity by intertwining the work of Latina feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones with existential phenomenology, in particular the work of Martin Heidegger. Understanding the self as both singular and multiple, Ortega examines accounts of world-traveling and border crossings that illuminate the everyday experiences of marginality, migration, and exile. With keen attention to the experience of living between worlds and the borders that define—politically and conceptually—current categories of identity, Ortega's work challenges abstract and general accounts of selfhood that remain central to the academic tradition of philosophy, a tradition that has marginalized and ignored the unique contributions of Latina feminists and other theorists of colour who deeply understand the experience of being-between-worlds.

The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism hosted Professor Ortega as a guest speaker on March 16th, 2018, where she gave a lecture entitled "Altars for the Living: Shadow Ground, Aesthetic Memory, and the US/Mexico Borderlands." This forceful talk dug into aesthetic reactions and reflections to the ongoing humanitarian crisis taking place at the US/Mexico border. Following

the talk, Professor Ortega was interviewed by three students from the Centre: Julian Evans, Jessica Ellis, and Sangie Zaitsoff. We would like to thank Professor Helen Fielding for her generosity in making this interview possible as well as Dr. Ortega for her time and intellect.

‡ ‡ ‡

Julian: You describe your book *In-Between* as a “hometactic” that tries to find a sense of belonging in the discipline of philosophy. You suggest at the outset that philosophy has often sought general and abstract explanations for selfhood and identity, whereas your work aims to investigate the particular embodied experience of those at the margins: people of colour, immigrants and border-dwellers, for example. How does the *mestiza* theory that you present in your book, particularly your concepts of multiplicitous selfhood and being-between-worlds, challenge our fundamental understanding of what philosophy is?

Mariana Ortega: I think that is an interesting way of asking the question. I do think that the *mestiza* theory of multiplicitous selves that I introduce does present a challenge, although the question presupposes that there is one understanding of philosophy. I want to be careful because I think that traditionally a lot of philosophers and philosophical schools have tried to present general accounts of selfhood. But of course, various theories have called for that generality differently, so I want to be mindful of that. As to how the account of multiplicitous subjectivity challenges the appeal to generality, it does so in terms of an appeal to the multiplicity of lived experience. I think that the push for generality has led us to abstract selves. The moment that you abstract lived experience, it seems to me that you are literally subtracting all of these moments of embodied experience that are multiple. We live, as I put it, in various worlds. To call for an understanding of the way in which the self is multiplicitous is really to call for a mindfulness of the multiplicity that we live every day as we transverse worlds. So in that sense it is a challenge, especially for the views that are too fo-

cused on the transcendental unity of the self. Those accounts are being put to question via this position that calls for an understanding of multiplicity in lived experience.

Julian: What has been the response from the tradition of academic philosophy to your work or to the work of others engaged in similar projects?

MO: Within the tradition of Latina feminism, including Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones, multiplicity is an important notion and has been taken up explicitly. However, this is a tradition that has not been studied in academic philosophy. This has to do in part with disciplinarity. Sadly, in most philosophical circles this tradition is not even acknowledged. When it is considered, those who have a more traditional understanding of accounts of self that require a generality understand what Latina feminist views of self are doing as sociological accounts or narratives, or “self-help manifestos.” I have heard some students—young philosophy students—describe these views in this way. You read them for your personal benefit, to understand yourself, but philosophically they are not considered meaningful. That is a very standard response, which is actually a response to views such as Fanon’s by people who just don’t understand the philosophical implications of Fanon’s views on embodiment and on Blackness. So I would say that if it’s not an erasure, it’s a questioning of its philosophical import.

Julian: Your work takes these, as you said, forgotten voices or forgotten theories, but it doesn’t just present them and leave them at the margins, it brings them to center stage and questions the tradition at the foundation. I can see the connection to Fanon, because you are asking the same questions that challenge the fundamentals of what philosophy is, and that is exciting to see. It brings up that this work needs to be considered philosophically and not just as a study of identity or as narrative, as you put it.

MO: It’s an invitation to philosophers, in a way. I am a pluralist

and believe that there are different ways of doing philosophy. I understand why there might be a need to concentrate on linguistic issues depending on the philosophical questions asked. In terms of issues of selfhood, it is important to open up the terrain to include work that has not been traditionally considered philosophical but that indeed has philosophical insights. The task is not only giving an account of self to be included in all the other accounts of selfhood, but it is also an invitation to approach philosophy in a more open and interdisciplinary way. In this sense it is non-normative. Before *In-Between* came out I was talking to someone and I said that it is a Frankenstein book made up of different body parts or ideas from different traditions and I did not know if there would be interest in it. Some people will think that these parts don't go together and maybe they'll think it's horrific and dangerous. Though I use Heidegger, I don't want to centre Heidegger—that is not my aim. Some people misread the book and like it because it's Heideggerian, but the aim was not to centre Heidegger and tack on Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones and Linda Martín Alcoff. Rather, it is to show how you can work on the issue of selfhood by way of looking at various traditions and figuring out how these traditions can talk to one another, inform one another, perhaps learn from one another. That was my aim, which opens up the philosophical methodology. The book itself is in-between and it discusses an in-between theory about selves that are in-between.

Jessica: The way that you speak about multiplicity opens up so many questions regarding language and the expression of language, given the different worldings and border crossings, as well as sharing spaces and language. If philosophical language is often prefaced on binaries and concepts that only speak to individualistic existence, which your work is leaving behind, how do we write the new *mestiza*? How do we express language that is a multiplicity, given that language hitherto has been communicated through a singular self? How do we make sense of the singular self and the multiplicity of language?

MO: Your question is an important one regarding the difficulty that arises when naming a particular identity. As Anzaldúa names the “new *mestiza*,” she also reifies this subject, both constraining her to specific characteristics attributed to that subjectivity and expanding her so as to include her in a collectivity. As such, naming narrows and sediments the self while, at the same time, provides relational and political possibilities. There is the need for an account that questions traditional dichotomies (i.e. subject/object, inside/outside, self/other) such that to be a self—and this is a connection with traditional phenomenology—is to be a complex self in the making intertwined with the world(s) and other selves. To be you is to be engaged in your various worlds in multiple ways. Yet, if you have a language that says “this is the new *mestiza*,” the issue of identity becomes “this is all that I am, this one thing with fixed characteristics.” So there is the need for two movements: questioning the dichotomies through which we understand the world itself and at the same time questioning my being a self that can be understood only as one. In the text I really follow Anzaldúa on this. Some people think, “Oh how contradictory to say that the self is one and many, that is ridiculous.” Yet Anzaldúa is aware of the problem you raise—of the constraints of language when describing the complexity and multiplicity of the self and lived experience. She’s using language, but in the mere naming, using that language to put herself on the map, she’s narrowing the possibilities. So what she also has to do is methodologically use different kinds of languages. Spanish here, poetry on one side, more poetic narrative on another, and much more theoretical language in different texts, such as in some sections of *Luz en lo Oscuro*. If you read *Luz en lo Oscuro*, it’s almost as if her poetic side got diminished. It’s much more academic, she is being more of a student. I think language can be made multiple by the way we use it in the work, in the text. With our own bodies too, because we talk by using our hands. So if you think of language as expansive, not just in terms of words but in terms of gestures, sounds, you can disperse it so as to capture that multiplicity and not get caught on that oneness that can easily come out the moment you start writing and putting something

down on the page. Thus you raise a difficult and important issue that we constantly have to confront. The hard part, I think—this I am getting from Anzaldúa—is that we are a bit seduced by the oneness; we want it, but our lived experience also includes multiplicity in various ways. That is what's seductive and scary about that particular problem.

Sangie: In your discussion of Anzaldúa and Lugones in *In-Between*, you acknowledge that they are guiding you but you are also questioning and challenging them. Do you conceive of trust as having a role in the dynamic between the guide and the guided, in particular regarding plural and contradictory dynamics that may develop from relationships that we have with our mentors, our guides, and ourselves?

MO: That is an extremely important issue for me. I am deeply mistrustful of philosophers and thinkers in general who do not embody or practice their theoretical commitments. I don't believe in purity, having read Anzaldúa and Lugones who really lead us to challenge the idea of purity that a great deal of traditional philosophy embraces. It is deeply problematic to have a commitment to a particular vision of the world, a particular way of being associated with your theory, and not to embody it or practice it. It has to do with trust. It is difficult to see thinkers completely negating their views, their actions countering what they claim. While it is not possible always to embody our theories, it is still important to try to do so. Trust is diminished if we continue to theorize about the need for coalitional and decolonial practices while at the same time engaging in anti-coalitional and colonialist practices. So I do think that there is an element of trust in relation to a guide, the way you are putting it, or to a mentor, or to someone who inspires you. With writers who are no longer around, I don't know how to approach it. To me it is more of an intuition from the text, given the way they present themselves, whether trust is open. Given your question about language, Jessica, there is maybe something about how they use language that allows you to come into their text, in a

way that is inviting and generative. There are two levels here: the level of the praxis, but interestingly enough I think trust can be generated at the level of the expression of the text, and it depends on the kind of language you use, what you assume about your reader, how you treat your reader, how you invite your reader. Now that I am starting a new book, that is one question that I have: how do I want to approach the reader? How do I become respectful of the reader? How do I challenge but at the same time invite her? I think the language itself, maybe, reveals whether there can be more or less trust. But at the level of praxis, it is a matter of theorists critically engaging their own views in an embodied manner and of readers expecting that we at least try to “practice what we preach.”

Julian: Speaking of writers whose lives don’t necessarily match up with their works, I wanted to ask you a bit more about Heidegger. I feel like the book does an excellent job of really deeply exploring how the Latina feminist conceptions of selfhood do relate to Heidegger’s work in a very interesting way. But I was left wondering why Heidegger resonated so well with these other thinkers, rather than philosophers such as Deleuze, Foucault or maybe Derrida who also think about multiplicity, embodiment, or radical difference? Why was Heidegger such a key point for this text?

MO: I appreciate your way of asking this important question, as some people ask me in an already accusatory manner, “Why did you use a Nazi?” I just have to be sincere about this: I picked up *Being and Time* and literally from the get go I had the sense that the book had so much to tell me. I fell in love with the text, with the idea that I could get a glimpse into the meaning of being, because I had been thinking about it in terms of life and lived experience. I had a huge rupture in my life. I started reading philosophy in high school and I fell in love with Camus’s, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and at the same time with Plato, *The Republic*, for very different reasons. I had been thinking a lot about what it could mean to be, given that life can be over so quickly that the whole floor can be taken from

you. I think when I moved to the US, I never stopped thinking about that question, because I came to the US due to a revolution in Nicaragua, my country of origin. I majored in philosophy in college, and wrote a thesis on Camus. I was obsessed with the question of existence, and *Being and Time* was an invitation to continue thinking about the elusiveness of being, and I really got caught up in the systematic thinking of it.

I do think that there are better thinkers that I could have used and could have added to the text; to be frank, it did not have to be Heidegger. Politically, it definitely should not have been Heidegger. In fact, that is one of the reasons why I stopped writing the book and did not think that I was going to continue it. At one point I felt that it would be embarrassing to write a text where I continue to make the connection that I had made years ago in a *Hypatia* article (“New *Mestizas*, World-Travelers, and Dasein: Phenomenology and the Multi-Voiced, Multi-Cultural Self”). Someone asked me, “Why did you continue to use Heidegger after that article? You should have dropped him.” I have to agree that there is some good reason for believing that I should have dropped him. Yet, I have good reasons as to why I did not. I find Heidegger’s description of the self as really capturing key aspects of experience. But what struck me is that even though this account is so generative and is attuned to lived experience, it did not match with the accounts of lived experience I was reading in Black and Latina feminist texts. There were numerous questions that I wanted to keep thinking about at the intersection of these texts. There are certainly difficult questions regarding my choice to work with phenomenology, specifically Heideggerian phenomenology. I refuse to be told what I can and cannot think together—what precludes openings that I might want to explore. This is not to say that I do not care about the political question in Heidegger. It was a difficult project precisely because doubts about my appeal to his work continued as I kept writing, and thus I opted to engage metaphysical questions while at the same time recognizing the difficult questions that remained. I held on to what I think was an opening to re-think, to re-orient traditional phenomenology, and specifically his work, in

fruitful ways.

Jessica: Anzaldúa's later version of selfhood, *la nepantlera*, is a self that does not form self-understandings based on race, sex, gender, and other forms of what she describes as external forms of identification. At several points you refer to this approach as intersectional, as well as intermeshed, or intermeshedness, and you use those terms interchangeably. Do you think that it is at all problematic to use the word intersectional, given the baggage that it has within some feminist trends or with some feminist thinkers who criticize it because intersectionality is based on external categories of sex, gender, and race intersecting? Some have argued that it is too smooth of an analysis, because it doesn't explain the conditions that gave rise to those categories in the first place. I am thinking of social reproduction Marxist feminist theorists who are in the business right now of criticizing intersectionality and I am wondering, when you use that word in your book, are you thinking of it in a different way? I like the term intermeshedness, I think it grabs more of what's going on. When I read intersectional, I have these feminists in my head saying, "We're criticizing that term because it relies on external categories," even though you're arguing that Anzaldúa is trying to get outside of categories and external forms of identification.

MO: I want to clarify that María Lugones also has a critique, interestingly enough, of intersectionality. She changes from using intersectionality to intermeshedness. Jennifer Nash has a very well-known article on intersectionality ["Re-thinking Intersectionality"] in which she provides a critique of the theory of intersectionality. There are also three new texts on intersectionality that are dealing with all of these issues. The more standard criticism is that when you look at the intersectional approach, and you have all of these different categories intersecting, the issue is not that they are categories—they can be seen as oppressions, for example—the issue is that you can think of each one separately, and then put them together and get an intersection. You work at the intersection, but

you are saying that it is possible look at race, gender, etc. separately.

I read Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins as recognizing different issues and problems with the notion of intersectionality throughout their numerous writings. We must be careful not to homogenize or simplify the various intersectional accounts. While some early accounts may be read as less attuned to the problem of the possibility of the separability of the accounts or not providing enough discussion regarding the reasons for the oppression, I think that they still capture important insights about the lived condition of women of color. This is the reason why I continue to use the notion of intersectionality and connect it to Lugones's idea of intermeshedness. In my view these two notions are not opposed to one another, as I recognize the intertwining of the categories even in the early writings on intersectionality. I think that it is still a very good heuristic device, as Hill Collins reminds us. Unfortunately, the debate about intersectionality has become very theoretical and many times misses the original and what I think is the crucial aspect of the notion, bringing to light the material, lived experience of women of color in the contexts of various erasures, oppressions, and violence. One of the current criticisms is that it has been taken away from the context of the law, for which it was originally intended. Nevertheless, as Kathryn Gines has discussed, even before Crenshaw applied the notion within the legal context, various Black thinkers were already working within an intersectional framework. Various Latinas were also writing from a point of view informed by the interaction of multiple oppressions. I still find the notion of intersectionality as incredibly helpful and important in the context of the lives of women of color.

Sangie: In your article "Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant," you challenge and extend Marilyn Frye's account of loving perception and develop an account of loving, knowing ignorance. In "Altars for the Living," you ask what an aesthetics of ignorance might look like. I am wondering if you could speak to the relation between loving, knowing ignorance and an aesthetics of ignorance - is there a way in which you're thinking of them together?

MO: There is definitely a connection. In “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant,” I loved trying to capture contradictory feelings that I have, contradictory positions. For example, how you can love women of colour, study them, and at the same time be clueless about what you are doing and how your actions may actually do violence to their work, to their being. I know that the idea of home is a myth, but I also want it. So I am trying to capture these difficult moments—I am very interested in writing about themes that are hard to write about, for example, moments of contradictions.

My new project is about trying to see how ignorance can be created by way of the aesthetic. I plan to think about how we have used art, maybe in projects that we think are promoting goodness and justice, but at the same time might be reifying other problematic issues. Because I am fascinated by the relationship between image and word, I want to see how we have done with art what we have done with feminism, with theoretical feminism, or what white feminism has done by thinking, “I am helping here, I want to read more about women of colour.” Think of the statement, “I am going to give women of colour a voice,” or, “I am going to represent people of colour.” What if you represent them in ways that are inappropriate, hurtful, or wrong, especially if you have the point of view of someone from a dominant identity? Even if I am a Latina representing Latinas, how do I promote ignorance by way of perception and artistic engagement? On the other side, I want to show how the aesthetic can open up some doors to understand people who have been made invisible or who have been misunderstood; the “Altars for the Living” piece is a part of that project, as it engages the possibility of making visible a group of people who have become invisible (as well as hypervisible in some contexts)—border-crossers escaping poverty and violence in their countries.

Sangie: In the “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant” paper, you mention that the project is archaeological—are you thinking of this new work in that way, as an uncovering? There’s a sense in which there is love there, in the project of making visible or even

reorienting, in the sense of Sara Ahmed's work...

MO: Think of it in terms of multiple ways, multiple sightings of love, in a sense. There's the love that the artist or the feminist or the white feminist has that moves them to create work or to create a theory that encompasses women of colour, and there's the love—my love—in uncovering how we have been hurt, in uncovering how other women of colour have already told us that this is happening and they have not been heard. So I am curious, concentrating on photography, how it has happened in photography. I want to see how photography was used supposedly lovingly, but did not work.

Julian: In "Altars for the Living," you engage the deep, tragic, and horrific violence that is taking place every day at the US-Mexico border, but the words and the images that you used during your talk and the photos that you chose really opened up a space for the audience to connect emotionally and effectively with what you were talking about. Most photographs close us off because it is so horrific, so violent and gruesome. Perhaps you could tell us more about how that project is taking shape and where it is going next, how you are using images or photos in a way that haunts us and allows us to emotionally and effectively get a sense of this violence that we are often told to think about but don't actually connect with.

MO: Well, I love art. I love poetry. Words don't fail for me when I read poetry that I love, but it seems to me that calling for empathy or feeling with others' pain doesn't seem to be working in terms of theoretical approaches. This is the reason why I am studying aesthetics and thinking seriously about images, especially photographic representation. I am trying to figure out if there are ways in which I can use images to disclose and uncover moments of violence that people don't want to see but are there and have become transparent and part of the everyday. In "Altars for the Living," I am using the work of a particular photographer, Verónica Gabri-

ela Cárdenas. In another work I am using photographs of objects left behind by those who perished in the desert while crossing the US-Mexico border. I have been moved by the way the audience has reacted to my discussion of those photographs in the context of a discussion of bodies of color as bodies of sorrow. The photographs represent not mere objects but dreams lost, lives interrupted in their pursuit of the so-called American dream. Like *In-Between*, the new project will gather together material from various traditions in philosophy and various disciplines: photographic history and theory, epistemology of ignorance, Latina art criticism, and photographic representations of *Latinidad*. I am making a connection there with the idea that bodies of colour are bodies of sorrow. It is going to be a very different kind of book because I am mixing photography that is artistic but also photography of common objects with photographic history, philosophy of photography, philosophy of art and epistemology in terms of epistemology of ignorance.

Julian: This new work is forcefully critical of the border. Given the political climate in the US right now, this is challenging work, and it must take a lot of hope and courage to be a Latina feminist at this moment. How do you find the possibilities of carrying on this work, given that the political situation looks so bleak right now?

MO: This semester I have been reading outside of philosophy. I've read some books on sociology, a little bit of anthropology, and geography on borders and borderlands, in particular the US and Mexico border. I also took a look at some poetry books inspired by border crossing. It is very hard because it makes me both furious and incredibly sad. I was a refugee, but I had the luck of not having to cross that border. I cannot imagine how people make it. So many don't, and if they do they have been raped, they have been treated so horribly. After college I was an English as a Second Language Teacher and worked with students who had these experiences. It is so heart-wrenching to see how Latinxs and Latin Americans are being described in the media, as if they are only, we are only, criminals. There is currently tremendous racism and ani-

mosity against Latinxs and Latin Americans on the part of the U.S administration and a great part of the population. I recently read an article discussing the way in which there have been incidents of racism in Wal-Marts, where people explicitly voice their racist views to perceived Latinx/Latin American as well as Muslim customers. Incidents of explicit racism and hate are increasing. This is especially difficult to witness as Latinxs/Latin Americans work incredibly hard to contribute to the US economy. It is important to do this kind of work precisely because of this climate. I suppose that I still have some hope, perhaps “anxious hope” as I believe we need to continue to write, to think, to explore these issues even when it is depressing and difficult, even when reading itself creates discomfort. I taught a freshman seminar years ago on the Rwandan genocide, and one of the books was absolutely horrifying. I remember taking a class on the Holocaust in college...you keep reading it, and why? Because you know that you *have* to know this. You cannot *not* know this. Yet, it is not just about knowing. Hopefully, you will feel something as well, because there is another problem: even when there is knowledge about the pain and injustices of others, especially selves at the margins, people living in poverty, racialized bodies, LGBTQ selves, immigrants, refugees—those that Anzaldúa calls *los atravesados*—there is lack of feeling, empathy, and action. It goes well beyond knowledge.

Thank you Julian, Jessica, and Sangie for your interest in my travels to the in-between and for our conversation.