
Volume 20

Issue 6 *Women's Movements and the Shape of Feminist
Theory and Praxis in Latin America, Part 1*

Article 1

Jun-2019

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Recommended Citation

O'Connor, Erin E. and Torres, M. Gabriela (2019). Introduction: Women's Movements and the Shape of Feminist Theory and Praxis in Latin America. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(6), 1-3.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss6/1>

Introduction: Women's Movements and the Shape of Feminist Theory and Praxis in Latin America

By Erin E. O'Connor¹ and M. Gabriela Torres²

The two special issues in volume 20 of the JIWS on Latin American women's movements and feminisms were born out of conversations between ourselves and journal editor Diana Fox. Our shared goal was to present an interdisciplinary issue— with articles published in Spanish or English— that would highlight the diversity, continuity, and challenges of Latin American women's movements and feminisms, past and present. Cognizant of the importance of dialogue to enable gendered discourses that foreground *otros saberes* or “other knowledge” to challenge oppression, we present the work of scholars in their language of preference. Combining feminism in practice and in thought we pay homage to the idea that knowledge of difference relies on a *sentipensar* or thought-in-action (Méndez Torres et al., 2013).

As in other parts of the global south, Latin American feminisms have taken shape under the legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Within the constraints of “western” frameworks of thought and civil society, their intellectual and practical project has centered on acting and producing knowledge in the face of oppression. Women of indigenous and African descent— who have typically paid high prices so that others might reap the benefits of capitalism or gain politico-military power— are most particularly positioned in opposition to oppression. Women's and feminist movements in Latin America have taken a path familiar to those who study Africa or Asia, where western feminisms have both influenced and conflicted with home-grown movements. In Latin America, women activists have often identified more strongly with class- or ethnic-based movements than with feminism. This is due in part to the historical predominance of middle- and upper-class urban feminists in the region, who rarely addressed problems faced by most women in a meaningful way. Latin American feminisms today are broader and engage at different levels with international, national, and local issues of inequity beyond those of relevance to urban middle-classes. Increasingly feminisms of the region give indigenous and Afro-Latin American voices currency.

¹ Erin E. O'Connor is a historian of Latin America who specializes in the intersection of gender with social and political history since 1800. Her first monograph, *Gender, Indian, Nation: The Contradictions of Making Ecuador, 1830-1925* (Arizona, 2007) explored the centrality of gender and multiple patriarchies to Indian-state relations. She has also written and edited pedagogical books, including the two-volume document collection on gender, race, and empire/nation titled *Documenting Latin America* co-edited with Leo J. Garofalo (Pearson, 2011), and *Mothers Making Latin America: Gender, Households, and Politics since 1825* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014). She is a professor of history at Bridgewater State University, and her current research interrogates the multiple meanings of domesticity in Ecuadorian politics and labor from 1850-1950.

² M. Gabriela Torres is a Guatemalan-born cultural anthropologist that specializes in the study of the violence— particularly gender-based violence— and state formation. She has published widely on femicide, marital rape, and sexual violence in the academy and is editor of two volumes *Marital Rape: Consent, Marriage and Social Change in Global Perspective* (Oxford, 2016) and *Conceptualizing Sexual Violence in Marriage: Research and Policy* (Routledge, 2020). She works as professor of anthropology at Wheaton College (MA) and regularly as a pro bono expert witness on gender-based violence and country conditions in Guatemala. Her current research looks at the development of policy and practice to mitigate sexual violence in the academy.

Though all of the above patterns can be found in many parts of the world, there are particular regional histories that inform Latin American feminisms and women's movements. For example, right-wing military authoritarian governments ruled in many parts of Central and South America in the 1960s and 1970s, and most emphasized traditional gender roles that constricted women. As Schild and Piatti-Crocker's essays both discuss, women's political advancements in the 1980s and 1990s were central to the process of democratization in the aftermath of authoritarian regimes. Around the same time, however, economic crises and inflation led many of these countries to adopt neoliberal policies that were devastating to the poor, and especially to indigenous or African-descended women in rural areas. Ongoing racism, economic hardship, and attacks on natural resources (most notably with petroleum extraction and mining) were among the factors that led regional, national, and international indigenous movements in Latin America to demand greater political rights and, often, environmental protections.

The articles in Part 1 of this special issue capture how Latin American feminisms engage in praxis from a number of disciplinary vantage points. Weaver's contribution provides a unique entry point through the translation of a speech in which twentieth-century Peruvian feminist Magda Portal engaged with the life and work of nineteenth-century French-Peruvian feminist Flora Tristan. Drawing from political science, Schild and Piatti-Crocker present two approaches for thinking about the circulation of feminist ideals into scholarship and social movement practice. Schild tracks how feminisms in the Southern Cone have addressed gender, economic, and environmental threats at the turn of the century. Piatti-Crocker's cross-cultural study shows the institutional impacts of Latin American and International feminisms, highlighting the development of political quota and parity systems. Looking at post-conflict societies, Bennett and Anicharico González et al. show how women's rights ingrain themselves in different ways into culture in religious practice and the family. Bennett's article focuses attention on how Maya Guatemalan indigenous women advance their interests by working within the patriarchal practices of an evangelical church. Anicharico González, Martínez Ortega, Cerón Ruiz, and Rengifo Agudelo assert that attention to women's particular needs and experiences of war reveals how gender construction is essential to the goal of building a lasting peace in Colombia after decades of civil war. Finally, Gómez and Lozano provide an example of the new ways that Latin American feminisms circulate beyond national space by tracing how a small group of international feminists use YouTube as a platform to address gender discrimination.

As Bard Wigdor and Artazo (2017) note, defining Latin American feminisms poses an epistemological problem. First, the idea of "Latin America" is itself a construct of the west and a colonial experience. Purportedly universal "Latin Americanness" built on notions of racial mixing or *mestizaje*, but in fact obscured the continued racial and class differences in the region by enacting the erasure of difference. Similarly, most western feminisms turned a blind eye to the ties between racism, colonialism and patriarchy. Second, the sheer volume and diversity of feminist scholarship and political action in the region cannot be appropriately covered even in twelve articles with diverse regional, disciplinary and topical foci. It is true that western feminisms and feminist theories have often provided Latin American feminists with tools in their home-grown struggles against inequality, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet as Marcela Lagarde de los Ríos (1999) has shown, contemporary Latin American feminisms now place the connection between racism, colonialism and patriarchy as central to the very development of their knowledge (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1984).

These diverse and evolving feminisms are evident in some of the articles in this special issue. Weaver's translation/essay shows the interplay between feminism born of the Latin

American experience and feminist thought in Europe in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. Weaver situates how Magda Portal found inspiration in the life of Flora Tristan, because Tristan's dual commitment to gender and economic justice spoke to the problems she was facing. As Weaver's discussion of Portal's life reveals, even socialist and communist feminists were constrained by male leaders who proffered little practical attention to gender (and sometimes not very much to race). By the late twentieth century, grassroots movements challenged old assumptions and inspired new directions in feminism. Schild's essay offers evidence of some of the ways that indigenous movements and their emphasis on the environment have inspired new, intersectional feminisms rooted in questioning the links between patriarchy and other forms of oppression. Bennett's study of Kaq'chikel Maya women working within the confines of evangelicalism also challenges the reader to think of feminist action that based on indigenous women's rights considers the question of feminism as beside the point.

The articles presented in this special issue, and in the one that will follow later this year, put forward innovations in feminist thought and practice of different kinds. Showcasing this work is, we hope, a beginning for greater conversations between trajectories of thought that too often remain one-sided in their cross-pollination.

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