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Philosophy Approaches to Identity**

By Sofia Garcia

Honorable Mention

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The idea of identity is thoroughly debated by a plethora of philosophers, and it is also a subject that non-scholars question and battle within themselves as well. For those in marginalized communities, whether they are Hispanic, African American, LGBTQ, identity is extremely complex and comes with extreme political, socio-economic, and physiological implications as well. In our current climate these identity questions play out in discussions over critical race theory, immigration policies like DACA, and so many other grave issues. Latinx philosophers take conversations about identity seriously and ask questions such as what is Latina identity really? Is Latina mestiza identity fundamentally a being-in-worlds? Specifically, this paper will focus on the answers to these questions offered by Mariana Ortega in her book *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity and the Self* and Maria Lugones's articles "The Heterosexual Modern/Gender System" and "Decolonizing Feminism." First, I discuss Ortega's answers to these questions. Second, I discuss Lugones's answers to these questions. Third, I discuss one decolonial objection raised against Ortega's theory of Latina identity. Fourth, I offer an Ortega-type response to the objection. Fifth, I determine whether Ortega offers a convincing response to the diminish the force of the decolonial objection. I argue Ortega has not offered a convincing response to the decolonial objection. These two philosophers encapsulate the many contentious areas and different perspectives there are, not just with the idea of identity in general, but more specifically, Latina identities and how they are seen in society and throughout history.

Mariana Ortega believes that Latinas are a being-in-worlds, an in-between, multiplicitous identity and self. With this abstract idea comes many parts, the first one poses the question of

what does Ortega mean by “being”? In her book, she uses Heidegger’s theories of existence, *Dasein (human being)*, and applies it to the meaning of “being” a Latina. There are many fundamental features of “being” as established by Heidegger, but the main ones I will cover are temporality, thrownness, and anxiety.

Heidegger believes that human beings create themselves through their choices and through living, existing and being is projecting ourselves toward the future and all its possibilities. Being means we have access to temporality where the past, present, and future are intertwined and in our awareness, and we have the freedom to choose. Latina feminists and Heidegger both believe that the self is always in process (Ortega, 52). Being means that one is always aware that the self is created through choices and the future, and its possibilities are not predetermined or set. Although they agree on that area of his claims, Latina feminists such as Ortega believe that his theory lacks the reflective and thematic side of the process of which Latina’s experience, where she must analyze the differences between her and the different worlds/cultures in which she occupies.

The idea of temporality and being able to project oneself into future possibilities means that Latinas are already in the world and engaging with objects, which is the idea of the self as “thrown” (Ortega, 52). While Heidegger explains the idea of thrown, it is too vague for Ortega and other Latina feminists. He does not explain specific concerns and conditions of human beings, such as particular power relations like economics and culture. As Ortega states, the Latina is “thrown in the US-Mexico borderlands and has to negotiate her various social identities in this complex in-between territory” (Ortega, 53). Latinas must find their way as they are being thrown into a world where they take up spaces in many locations and cultures.

Ortega claims that part of existing as a Latina and being thrown like Heidegger states is the existential crisis that arises when she faces difficult choices given her multiple positionalities, and this crisis is anxiety (Ortega, 54). Heidegger and Ortega see the effects and significance of anxiety very differently. While Heidegger claims that what makes being and existing unique is a human's anxiety towards death and to the self's possibility for authentic existence, Ortega sees that "being" as a Latina brings anxiety towards different subjects (Ortega, 53). Anxiety is connected to difficult choices, "While, in the Heideggerian view, anxiety discloses itself as not at home in the world, in the Anzalduan story, anxiety is connected with paralysis and the inability to make choices" (Ortega 54). For Latinas it is an intense and detrimental feeling.

As I break down the idea of what Ortega believes is "being", as she applies it to Latinas as a being-in-worlds, the next part of her claim is the idea of "Being-in". According to Heidegger, the primary way of being-in the world in *Dasein* is the know-how of everything around you, which does not apply to the existence of Latinas as Heidegger does not theorize by culture rather just humans in general. All the cultural ruptures in a Latina's experiences give her many different social locations, which, established by Moya, is the nexus of gender, race, class, and sexuality in which an individual exists at any given time in society. It is one's place in the different social statuses. This leads to a reflection of her everyday activities and interactions, which Heidegger does not theorize in his philosophy (Ortega, 60). Being-in for Heidegger is also connected to the self's actions and activities towards objects in the world, which are non reflective, such as creating something, using something, or letting something go. He portrays the idea that being-in the world for humans means that we are living our lives through practical interactions with things and people available to us (Ortega, 70).

On the other hand, one of the main ways in which Ortega describes the idea of being-in is through her analysis of not being at ease. Latinas are constantly torn between *being-in* many different worlds, and she might not know all the norms in some of them, or she might even bring contradictory norms along with her, which puts her in the position of not feeling at ease. Ease meaning when the self is “fluent in the language, norms, and practices of her culture” (Ortega, 60). Ortega sees the idea of not being at ease in two different ways, a thin sense, and a thick sense. A *thin* sense of not being at ease is a milder version of not being in tune with the ruptures of everyday practices one is not used to while a *thick* sense of not being at ease is a more deep and profound and analytical sense of not being familiar with the cultural norms and practices around someone, which results in contradictory feelings about one’s identity. It is experiencing racism, sexism, homophobia, and dehumanizing actions that lead to existential crises (Ortega, 63). She believes that it is extremely important to compare these two theories of *being-in* to be able to improve further discussions around the issues of marginalization and what comes along with that philosophically.

It is also important for her to discuss the differences between Heidegger and Latina feminists in their theories of what “worlds” exactly are especially when discussing and claiming that Latinas are a being-in-worlds and multiplicitous. According to Heidegger, “world” stands for one’s own environment, a place in which one dwells that already involves the way in which humans interact and exist in the world with objects around them. For Ortega, she agrees with Lugones’ definition of what a “world” entails, which is a place that is inhabited by real people, an actual society where there is a dominant and non-dominant construction of life and relationships that is linked to the self (Ortega, 65). Ortega believes that the term “world” does not

refer to the collective of all things but more of how the ways in which different worlds are connected to the self and how the self is presented inside those worlds, and Being-in-worlds is supposed to show the condition of the multiplicitous self as being able to access various worlds (Ortega, 67).

In each world, a Latina will have various social identities. For example, a Mexican woman living in the United States could occupy the Latino world, the Mexican world, the American world, the mother world, the employee world, and many more. Some of these worlds can overlap and have the same cultural norms while others will be drastically different, but the Latina will always be moving back and forth and shapeshifting into what social identity fits best for that specific world. The multiplicitous self will remain in-between because, “some elements will be lost in cross-cultural communication...and the multiplicitous self-will in some sense always be an outsider” (Ortega, 67). The multiplicitous self as described by Ortega is intersectional and flexible due to the different axes of oppression experienced in the different spaces they are a part of (Ortega, 71). To be a Latina for Ortega combines many ideas paralleled and applied from Heidegger; however, she uses this to further analyze and critique his theories and apply them in a more specific and particular way. Latinas are a being-in-worlds, an intersectional, ever-weaving identity.

On the opposite side, Maria Lugones claims that Latina's are not an identity at all. They are situated in the zone of non-being, the coloniality of being, where temporality is not fully accessible, or a given. Through her analysis and application of the heterosexual modern gendered colonial system, she argues that gender and all the many categories placed on people is a colonial

and social construct. She also believes that Latina's and other marginalized groups have a non-relational relationship with those of the dominant groups.

First, one must assess what Lugones means when she states that Latinas are situated in the coloniality of being. A key factor to this abstract idea is dehumanization. Latinas fit into this category because of their history with the white bourgeois man and woman. She states, "In using the term coloniality I mean to name not just a classification of people in terms of the coloniality of power and gender but also the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization that fits them for the classification, the process of subjectification, the attempt to turn the colonized into less than human beings" (Lugones, 745). The coloniality of being is a zone where colonized persons are not even seen as Beings but as things.

Lugones claims that being a Latina means her identity is socially constructed but not to be treated as human, but to be degraded and treated as an animal. Lugones claims that Latinas are not a woman or do not have a gender because they they were conceived and treated as colonized females alongside genderless colonized males, "only white bourgeois women have consistently counted as women so described in the West. Females excluded from that description were not just their subordinates...They were understood as animals in the deep sense of "without gender," sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity" (Lugones, 203). There are the colonizers versus the colonized, and to Lugones, Latinas are a part of the colonized, and from the colonizer's perspective, the colonized have no identity; they are solely animals that are a part of nature. They were conceived and treated as satanic bodies, beasts.

This portrayal and view of colonized women like Latina's lead to a non-relational relation with the colonizers. Since these women are seen as animals and not human beings, since they are

seen as satanic or beast-like, it makes atrocious actions towards them justifiable. Although they interact with colonizers and are in contact with them, it was for exploitation or degradation. Latinas and colonized women were seen as rapable and killable things, not humans. The idea of temporality that Ortega claims makes Latinas a Being, is complicated in Lugones' eyes. The non-relational relation with the people around them prevents them from having those future choices that Heidegger and Ortega claim makes humans so unique. How can one be human if the one fundamental part of their humanity is taken away? The de-futuring of Latinas diminishes their identity as a woman or a being in the Heideggerian/Ortegean sense.

The heterosexual modern gendered colonial system is what created this non-relational relationship and what keeps it in place today, and the identity crisis that comes along with being a Latina within this system, to Lugones, is the coloniality of gender. This system is explained as a 500-year infiltration of western beliefs and systems that have pervaded society all around the world, "It [colonization] imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production..." (Lugones 186). Not only does this system construct specific categories and stereotypes for colonized woman such as perverted and sexually aggressive, but it also creates stereotypes which are placed on white bourgeois women of sexual passivity and fragility. Coloniality is a whole system of power organized around the pillars of race and class according to the philosopher Anibal Quijano that seeps into who has the control over sexual access, knowledge, and collective authority, and that power tends to be in the hands of the white bourgeois man (Lugones, 191). While Lugones draws on certain aspects of Quijano's theory, she

departs from it by arguing that the modern/colonial world system is not only organized around the axes of race and class, but is also fundamentally organized around a colonial notion of gender that is biologically dimorphic and heterosexist. Lugones thus has a different view of the world than Quijano.

This also has implications when it comes to feminist theory. According to Lugones, if the knowledge we have is colonial, no change will be made because we are just continuing those problematic epistemic practices of applying those colonial notions of gender or seeing oppression through only one axis or through a fragmented lens. If feminist theory is based on the idea that everyone has a gender, it is problematic because not everyone does have a gender. The feminist theories are based on a colonial notion of gender which leaves out those who are colonized.

This colonial power system is one main decolonial objection towards Ortega's claim of Latinas being a being-in-worlds. As she states herself, her vision of Latina's and herself as being between worlds can be tied to modern subjectivity and influenced by the colonality of power. Lugones believes that Ortega does not see herself as a colonized being/intellectual and that she ignores colonial histories therefore bringing Eurocentric aspects into her theories. Furthermore, the fact that Ortega's theory is linked to Heidegger with his view being "relentlessly Eurocentric", means that her theory is linked to modernity as well (Ortega 115). For Lugones, in order to combat the colonality of power one must go outside the dominant, categorical system that is colonality, so from a decolonial point of view like hers, Ortega is seen as problematic.

Ortega does fight back on these critiques and issues on her theory. First, she states that she believes it is necessary for discourses of those epistemologies (knowledge) who have been

invisible and shut down under the modern colonial paradigm to be brought to light (Ortega 115). She does express awareness for her problematic ties to European theories, but she believes that she is still offering a way to reconfigure “the way we think about selfhood and subjectivity” (Ortega, 115). She claims that her theory can consider the possibility of resistance even when it includes ideas from within a dominant, Eurocentric structure (Ortega, 116). Furthermore, she rebuts by saying, “it is a view that remains open to critical assessment of its own origin, of the origin of “modernity” (Ortega, 116). She knows that it can be criticized and critiqued and believes that is a beneficial aspect of it.

In my opinion, I do not believe that Ortega has fully diminished the force of the decolonial objection. Although I can see where certain aspects of her theory play out in my own life, Lugones dives deeper into the historical notions of those aspects, which I do not believe Ortega fully does. Lugones brings so much information and many examples of the power imbalance in the world/throughout the world’s history, and really portrays the brutality of colonialism, where Ortega brushes over it/ does not theorize it as much. Her response to the decolonial objection seemed vague and only in response to some parts. While their theories are both extremely influential, in the end, I believe that Lugones’s argument/critiques towards Ortega remained stronger.

Works Cited

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