

Materialist intersectionality and situated critical genealogies. Towards an epistemic-political ruptureⁱ

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the critical capacity of the intersectional perspective is enhanced when it is articulated with the materialist perspective that involves a particular type of practice. This practice reads social processes as part of a complex whole structure with tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions. It intervenes conceiving theory and practice as inseparable.

Facing fragmented, simplistic, additive and unidimensional analyses centered on a single axis of oppression, the articulation between both critical perspectives has the power to address the multiple oppressions in a complex way, within the framework of contradictory and unequal social formations.

I emphasize that the potential of the articulation between both critical perspectives is requiring the recovery of critical genealogies, which is able to explain the knotting between body and politics in opposition to the dichotomous logic that insists on separating them.

Furthermore, the mapping of critical genealogies allows us to revitalize intersectional analysis - in the context of the processes of neutralization and simplification that annul the concept – and to show its political core

in the practical background. This challenge the deterministic readings that invalidate struggles and resistances; to move on to the epistemic and political recognition of the knowledge produced from the margins.

Keywords: *genealogies, activism, inequality, praxis, criticism*

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the question of how to address in a complex, critical, and situated way – in the border space between academia and activism, because the theoretical production is subject to the hegemonic canons of knowledge – the intertwining of oppressions, discriminations, and exclusions, as well as privileges, resistances, and alternative agencies. I will argue the need to carry out an *intersectional* praxis that implies the articulation between intersectionality as a critical approach of multidimensional, relational, dynamic analysis and the *materialist perspective*. This involves a particular type of reading of social processes as part of a complex whole structure articulated with tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions. It intervenes from the inseparable link between theory and practice.

It is due to this that the term I use in the title of the paper is "materialist intersectionality" that implies the articulation between intersectionality as a critical approach to analysis and the materialist perspective that involves a particular type of epistemology. And the proposal to trace critical and situated genealogies responds to the need to specify, historicize, and situate intersectionality, by facing the diagnoses of simplification and unrestricted massification of this concept – similar to what happens with concepts such as "care", "feminism", "gender perspective", "deconstruction", among others. In this sense, critical and situated genealogies make it possible to recover both the practical and political core of the concept, as well as its complex core. The

notion of genealogy is understood in this framework of analysis as a method of archeological reconstruction that allows destabilizing what is perceived as immobile and static (Foucault, 1980; Owen, 1995).

I will show that, contrary to simplistic analyses of reality, focused only on oppression and on a single axis of oppression – as occurs with the analysis of identity politics – intersectionality is an integral approach to the overdetermined contradictions that are part of a complex framework in which power relations are interwoven. I am interested in exploring the specific mechanisms through which differential effects of subjection, exclusion, epistemic and political erasure are produced; but also, spaces of privilege, resistance, and alternative agencies. To do this, I propose to address the questions of Collins, 2017; Combahee River, 1988; Davis, 1981, among others.

This work is circumscribed in a greater purpose that consists in directing intersectional praxis that breaks with the excluding centrism that structure hierarchies and inequalities. The work aims to abolish all forms of domination, by understanding that to achieve this it is essential to target the matrix from which multiple oppressions are produced. Thus, this paper proposes not to prioritize the resolution of one and the reinforcement of others - a political strategy limited by its partial nature and for not disrupting privileges - which have a central status in the whole interplay of power relations.

Can we break with the dichotomous, hierarchical, and excluding logic?

This proposal starts from a problematic diagnosis that is linked to the growing processes of political neutralization in academia where a series of practices and habitus have been naturalized (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013; Ciriza, 2015).

Examples are the use of an encrypted language, hyper specialization, encyclopedism, and the use of merely formalized concepts adapted to the

parameters of objectivity and ubiquity of modern science. I focus on this habitus to show that the unrestricted adoption of a thesis or a term without theoretical or historical precisions has depoliticizing and simplifying the effects that reinforce an excluding binary scheme that insists on separating theory from practice and mind from body. Bell hooks observed this disembodiment in the following way:

It is evident that one of the many uses of theory in academic locations is in the production of an intellectual class hierarchy where the only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references (hooks, 1994, p. 64).

Aurora Levinas Morales (2001) in “Intelectual orgánica certificada” (Certified Organic Intellectual) shares this diagnosis concerning certain institutionalized feminism that is abstracted from its activist roots, which makes it less and less acceptable to speak in a comprehensible way. This criticism is in continuity with what decolonial feminists such as Ochy Curiel and Yuderkis Espinosa Miñoso call the process of *oenegización* (ONG) and depoliticization of feminism, where slogans and broadly inclusive slogans abound but without concrete actions and decisions for their effective achievement. Sara Ahmed (2012) and Jennifer Nash (2010) speak of a current “fetishization of intersectionality” and Kathy Davis (2008: 67) describes it as a “fashionable neologism”, warning of the danger of reducing it to an uncritical and rigid proposal to the detriment of its dynamic, political and transformative character (Cf. Goikoetxea, 2017: 75).

From my perspective, intersectionality has limitations, challenges, and tensions that have not been rigorously evaluated, mainly linked to the dichotomy between the theory and the practice. In the case of academic and institutionalized policies, they have taken the precise form of “*politically correct*” slogans or of “half-hearted inclusion” (Anzaldúa, 2016) which, by cloaking exclusionary practices with the idea of inclusion, hinder the task of

advancing in the eradication of violence, constituting this way an epistemological and political obstacle.

For Sarah Ahmed (2018), this is a distinctive feature of university institutional politics whose bureaucracy creates "the secretary's secretary" to solve a problem of discrimination, which only lengthens its resolution. This is why formalizations operate as attenuators of complexity and as mere political decorations and florid gestures (Radi, 2019). Against this kind of "falsified inclusion" and in pursuit of advancing against inequalities and oppressions. Thus, it is necessary to program the disarticulation of the systems of power that produce the precariousness of our lives, and structural inequalities, while dialogue with emancipatory movements through discourses of equality and fraternity.

However, in a context of increasing standardization of institutional practices – that is: systematization, unification, and homologation (especially academic ones) – the intersectional perspective, due to its multidimensional, relational, and dynamic character, allows us to re-complex biased analyses. Promoting the recognition of, that subjectivities multiplicity, are complex and can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege, in opposition to the binary framework which conceives them monolithically good or bad, oppressors or oppressed, masters or slaves. Thus, it is not a matter of categorically separating the positions in the social structure – where there are multiple overdetermined instances (ideology, politics, economics) that are "relatively autonomous", coexist and are irreducible to each other. In this framework, the economic base, forming part of the conditions of existence of the material structure and exerting a specific effectiveness on the rest of the instances of the structure – nor of finding out which is the primary structure in the oppression of a group but of the complex interweaving of power relations that are co-constituted in the multiple *lived experiences* (Davis, 1981).

The debate between Marxist feminists and materialist feminists in the 1960s and 1970s about the status of domestic work, and subsidiarily, on which structure was of oppression and subordination of women, cannot be understood upon if it is posed in dichotomous and hierarchical terms (Arruzza, 2010; Federici, 2010). However, it can be traced back if the problem is inscribed in a new terrain, that of the interweaving of different structures of domination within the framework of social formations, complex, contradictory, structured, and overdetermined by different instances of social differentiation.

In the new framework, it is possible to move towards a complex, multidimensional, dynamic, and relational approach to structural inequalities and different forms of oppression. For example, examining gender oppression in relation to other inequalities makes it possible to see that it is a double problem and gives rise to a new issue: which women are we talking about?

The issue directly involves the problem of universalizing the point of view of some women with privileges of race, class, and sexuality; a problem that for decades has been warned from the margins of hegemonic white feminism by focusing on the experience of oppression suffered by an "archetypal woman" (de Lauretis, 1993) which cannot see that multiple oppressions exist as the effect of a simultaneous interweaving of instances of social differentiation.

This complexity also makes it possible to understand that the liberation of one sector does not imply the oppression of another; rather, it is a matter of abolishing the very relations of domination to break with the infinite circularity of violence (Lorde, 1988). For her part, Patricia Hill Collins, an Afro-descendant sociologist and activist, has the main objective of confronting the multiple oppressions of race, gender and class that black women go through, either symbolically or physically, seeking to establish ties between these women who based on their individual experiences can generate a collective conscience.

The central status that the construction of political alliances between disadvantaged sectors takes in the framework of black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 2000), as well as the recognition that the liberation of one sector can never imply the oppression of another, constitutes a political strategy that overcomes the limitations of practices that merely seek to reverse the roles between oppressor and oppressed.

Taking up criticisms of decolonial theory and materialist philosophy to modern rationalism and solipsism (Lugones, 2008), I argue that the neutralization and disembodiment of knowledge have its roots on the ontological dualism of hegemonic modern philosophy that separates mind from body, as occurs with idealistic philosophies where the reality of thought is hierarchized to the detriment of corporal naturalization (see Grosfoguel, 2013). The latter is homologated with nature with which share the same physical laws as inert matter, in analogy with the object-machine (Parra, 2021). In this framework, a binary, dichotomous and hierarchical logic underlies, which is structured from a Center-One and excludes, assimilates, and denies the *margin*, which is displaced to the zone of "non-being".

Hegemonic modern science – born in the sixteenth century from male subjects with privileges of class, race, sexuality – establishes parameters of inclusion according to scientific assumptions (which are essentialist, speciesist, biologist, and ableist) that seek to generalize thought and formalize experiences. In this sense, different Afro-descendant authors have started from the analysis of political practices as a basis for the construction of knowledge in the academy, taking up the proposal of the "point of view" from critical feminist epistemology – which brings together white North-centric authors such as Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Nancy Harstock – to question the standardized forms of knowledge production within the framework of a modern Eurocentric logic, allowing us to glimpse how race, gender and class are

intertwined within the power matrix in the social order. Faced with the ideal of objectivity of knowledge produced by disembodied, asexual beings, without marks of racialization on their skin, the notion of *situated knowledge* of feminist epistemology – critical of the androcentrism of the sciences – allows us to understand the embodied nature of every point of view, and to understand that it is our situation, our situationality that enables us to ‘see’ in a certain way since it is immersed in "the landscape in which we live", as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) argues.

Just as the conceptualization of the *margin* has been central as a metaphor of a place of subalternity in relation to the center, which claims this last position as privileged in epistemic terms to build knowledge that integrates experiences and perspectives that can only be hold from that *locus* of enunciation. And in political terms, that can become a place of resistance because of its practical, and not "merely conceptual" character (hooks, 2004).

Now, I emphasized that modern rationalism is a "hegemonic" philosophical tendency, but other tendencies also existed and resisted, such as the aforementioned "subway materialist current" proposed by Spinoza's ontological monism, a powerful trend which think the politicization of affects; the knotting between body and politics, the material power of "the imaginary" and of ideology to direct our practices, *habitus*, and mold our desires.

In previous research I have focused on one of the derivations of this framework, which is linked to the materiality of ideological discourses, in those whose representations have served to legitimize practices of exclusion within the framework of the capitalist and colonial project (Parra, 2020). The ideological discourses hide assumptions that serve to specify practices of physical, symbolic, and psychological violence, among others. In this direction I rescue, for example, the perspective of Silvia Federici (2010) who analyzes how the

discourses that represent women as witches, "bestially sexual", "not very rational" create an ideological climate to endorse one of the greatest epistemicides and sexocides in history: the killing of witches during the period of transition from feudalism to capitalism. Symptomatically, once the capitalist system is in place, these discourses change and present women as "sweet", "capable of appeasing men", "moderate".

Similarly, Moira Millán (2011) points out that the assimilation of "the barbarian, ugly and savage" with "the indigenous" configure a collective unconscious that has made possible a process of *forclusion* that consists of denying what is "already denied": the indigenous roots. This is manifested in the deeply rooted and little-questioned idea according to which in Argentina "we are all descendants of white European immigrants"ⁱⁱⁱ.

Millán argues that Mapuche women have been the most harmed in the colonization process, even making them "look at themselves with the blinders of the conqueror"(Millán, 2011, p. 118), as an effect of the process of introjection of the racist and dominant pattern that is also part of the "lived experience of the black" narrated in first person by Frantz Fanon (1962). This shows that capitalism and colonialism are integral and permeate all dimensions of life and this imply the naturalization of excluding thought structures.

According to Millán, the erasure of Mapuche women from hegemonic narratives occurs as an effect of a pact between official historians and Mapuche men who appear as "leaders" in modern history, which distorts the way in which the Mapuche community was organized before the Spanish invasion and makes invisible the status of Mapuche women leaders, powerful *weichafes*.

By articulating the processes of epistemic denial with material processes of annihilation of otherness, it is possible to understand that from the concrete fact

of the misnamed "Conquest of the Desert" (1878-1885) the denial of the Mapuche women as political and epistemic subjects takes place. In this line, for Ramón Grosfoguel (2013), it was due to genocides/epistemicides in the sixteenth century that non-Western worldviews were suppressed, and hegemonic modern Western thought was universalized.

The materialist and symptomatic reading

The symptomatic and critical reading – coming from a materialist tradition of the "subway" type – is a privileged strategy to "widen the point of view". To do this without simplifying the analysis, since what this seeks is to read the complex structure whole as one reads nature, with its absences, gaps and symptomatic silences. This follows the Spinozian proposal of reading the Scriptures from what it lacks, from what lapses, forgetfulness, and discontinuities say, which raise the problematic absent-present through these symptoms (Pavón Cuellar, 2019).

Following this reading protocol, I will attend to the erasure of the epistemic and political agency of certain subjects – which the philosopher Moira Pérez (2019) explores under the concept of epistemic violence – and whose manifest themselves through the negation of productions from the margin, the neutralization of critical perspectives and the homogenization of thought.

In this sense, I will take up again the criticisms already made of the epistemic privilege of hegemonic currents, starting with the questioning of the decolonial and postcolonial critique of the excluding Eurocentric canon; the questioning of the feminist epistemology critical of androcentrism; and the decolonial feminist critique of an excluding feminist reason, with racist and biologist biases. how the epistemic privilege of certain hegemonic currents and theories is articulated with the systems of power, to advance in the questioning of what epistemic-

political strategies and what alliances we need to disarticulate the matrix of exclusionary centered domination?

In this sense, the symptomatic reading is powerful to show the symptomatically silences of the modern Eurocentric philosophical canon, and the effects of the coloniality of knowledge; subsidiarily it allows to map the roots of "the Latin American" (Santiago Castro Gómez, 2019) and to question the unidirectional Center-periphery circuit of ideas.

Likewise, it is helpful to show, for example, within the feminist theory that hegemonic feminism universalized the experience of white women in our region. In Argentina, this denial of differences was expressed, for example, in 33 years of ethnocentrism in the National Women's Encounters, whose ethnocentrism and ethno-nationalism is manifested in the refusal to adopt an inclusive, multinational, and multiethnic policy. The name of that organization was changed to a more inclusive name only in 2019. This racist bias and the focus on the point of view of an "archetypal woman" (de Lauretis, 1993) prevents it from considering that women's experiences are multiple and depend on different trajectories, factors, and intertwining structures.

Something that is impossible to see from what Yuderkis Espinosa Miñoso (2019) calls a Eurocentered and modern feminist reason that is structured on a dichotomous and binary excluding logic. This Eurocentered feminist reason discursively colonizes (Mohanty, 2008a) feminisms in our region through the imposition of concepts, theories, and problems produced from a hegemonic western position, and with the complicity of hegemonic feminists from the south because of the transversality of coloniality in the whole world, which has had as an effect, among other issues, that "third world women are represented as objects and not as subjects of their own history and particular experiences" (Mohanty, 2008b).

The materialist lecture is powerful in promoting displacements 'from the center to the margins'. Macarena Marey in her intervention on the anniversary of the Paris Commune pointed out the importance of constituting multiple centersⁱⁱⁱ, by not merely inverting the relation of domination because it implies sharpening the gaze, but by refining the listening in order to make room for the “apalabramiento” of those who have been silenced and the “embodiment” of the different experiences and histories of resistance that are at the roots of our theories and ideas.

Something like a *deep reading of signs* as proposed by Chela Sandoval, which implies a moving with others, a *collective moving* which produce a disruptive displacement with the exclusionary centrism capable of rising marginalized existences and alternative agencies to the hegemonic modern colonial capitalist hegemonic pattern. From a materialist perspective, this *pilgrimage* (Lugones, 2021) is assured because it is conceived that ideas and thoughts are irreducible to the materiality of acts and practices, which implies a demarcation with other positions and a materialist intervention.

Now, in the context of the diagnoses of hyperinflation and unrestricted expansion of intersectionality, I propose to make clarifications and a constant critique; since – as I have analyzed with respect to the concept of gender (Parra, 2021) – it is because of an uncritical massification that processes of subversion and conceptual appropriation are facilitated by sectors that use them politically for other purposes.

Regarding the loss of political value of critical perspectives, I propose to recover their activist roots by tracing political genealogies.

Critical and situated genealogies

The work of constructing a genealogy goes beyond identifying in the past the traces of knowledge or perspective as Mara Viveros Vigoya states; but also examining how the different positions have emerged, analyzing their tensions and contradictions.

According to a genealogy that I recover, intersectionality has its roots in the praxis of black feminists of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, who criticized the racist biases of hegemonic white feminism and the sexist bias of the civil movement for the rights of black people, taking into account the dynamic interactions between class, race, sexuality and gender (Manifesto of the *Combahee River Collective* [1977] 1988).

In the face of politics centered on the exclusion of identity approaches, experiences such as that of the Combahee River Collective propose articulation based on differences for the construction of political alliances, and the construction of a common politics (Gandarias Goikoetxea, 2017). Under this reading, it is possible to understand the praxis of black feminists as an example of political intersectionality, that is, as a political tool for the construction of alliances, and to see differences not as a reason for separation, "but to make them forces" (Lorde, 1988, p. 91). In this sense: "la interseccionalidad como herramienta para la articulación política –no de identidades estables y cerradas- sino de experiencias y de vulnerabilidad específicas que varían según el contexto y el tiempo" (intersectionality as a tool for political articulation –not of stable and closed identities- but of specific experiences and vulnerability that vary according to context and time) (Goikoetxea, 2017, p. 75).

According to my hypothesis, the intersectional perspective, which seeks to account for the simultaneous intersection and overlapping of systems of domination, is found in practice in the foundational demand of black feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, long before the concept was explicitly formulated in 1989.

African American lawyer Kimberl e Crenshaw proposed the concept of intersectionality after asserting that the reality of black women could not be explained separately on the basis of gender or race. Instead, acquiring an intersectional perspective would serve to observe "the various ways in which race and gender interact, and how they generate the multiple dimensions that shape Black women's experiences" (Crenshaw, 2012, p. 89).

Crenshaw formulated this term to address in the legal sphere the invisibility for the justice system of the existence of multiple forms of oppression faced by women workers of African descent at General Motors in the United States. From this specific case, she tried to generate concrete legal tools to make visible and combat violence and discrimination based on gender and race (Viveros Vigoya, 2016).

From this situation, she denounces the inadequacy of U.S. laws to address the multiple dimensions of oppression suffered by women of African descent. Crenshaw identifies that this inadequacy was linked to a one-dimensional approach (focusing on race discrimination). For Crenshaw, the separate treatment of race and gender discrimination as "mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" had problematic consequences for jurisprudence, feminist theory and anti-racist policies. Thus, she proposed to understand that "the intersection of racism and sexism in Black women's lives affects their lives in ways that cannot be fully understood by looking separately at the dimensions of race or gender" (Crenshaw, 2012, p. 89).

Even when intersectionality is explicitly formulated in the legal field, it is adopted and widely recognized by social sciences and feminist studies. However, since a few years ago, a series of phenomena correlate with the uncritical massification of the concept of *intersectionality* that is stabilized in the triad *sex - race - class*; and it has expanded without precision or theoretical

rigor; as well as unevenly at the disciplinary and geopolitical level (La Barbera, 2016). Therefore, there is a need for further theoretical explorations and a transdisciplinary approach, it cannot be a single discipline or critical perspective that can address the different forms of domination, be it Marxism, feminism, decolonial theory, etc.

Tracing critical genealogies makes it possible not only to recomplex the notion by focusing on its complex and overdetermined character, but also to dislocate the separation between theory and practice by recovering its foundational struggles, which at the same time allow us to rethink the notion of subject from a scheme that goes beyond the determinist and reproductivist one.

This is not to subtract political and epistemic agencies. In this sense, while recognizing the violence, exclusion and structural oppression suffered by others is the beginning of a break (long, sustained and continued) with systematized and institutionalized inequality; it is important to weave networks and alliances outside any dualistic and paternalistic split in which "passive" and "vulnerable" sectors are "assisted"; and to move towards the full recognition of these subjects as epistemic, political and rights subjects.

Rage in the face of "other people's" pain is very powerful to disarticulate structural inequality and produce political subversion, but it must be coherent and integral, not focused on a single axis of oppression because it reinforces inequality, as Audre Lorde has taught us with her invitation to inhabit the house of difference.

Against the erasure of the differences of hegemonic white feminism, black feminist thinkers and activists consider the recognition of the differences between black and white fundamental for the survival of the feminist movement. In this sense, for example, Lorde argues that "as women we have

been taught to ignore our differences, to see them as a cause for separation" (Lorde, 1988, p. 91). In the face of this, she proposes to learn to take our differences and make them forces to establish alliances and political articulations.

In this potential of not skimping on differences, but also seeking to understand the specific processes and mechanisms through which differences are established and defined, there lies the importance of articulating the intersectional perspective, not only as an analytical tool but also as a political one, together with a philosophical-materialist perspective.

Conclusions

Throughout this paper I have argued the need to recomplex and repoliticize the intersectional perspective to address oppressions from its matrix of domination, attending to its specific material mechanisms. Subsidiarily, I argued to articulate the struggles towards a greater one: with the centrisms proper of binary and exclusionary logic of thought. I have argued that these centrisms are based on a hierarchical and exclusionary dichotomous categorical logic, typical of modern Western thought.

I have also shown that it is required not only to target oppression but also to address the spaces of privilege and hierarchies. In this framework, one of the most challenging tasks is to question one's own privileges and try to produce ascriptions and alliances in one's own spaces to subvert positions of privilege. Not only to seek to organize the spaces of the vulnerable sectors.

As well as to recover critical perspectives in a complex and historicized manner so that they do not lose heuristic and political value; nor suffer processes of subversion and appropriation by adverse sectors. To apply them politically in a

creative and critical way, to promote micro-politics of resistance and daily and uninterrupted decentering in our spaces, to read productions made from the margins of the hegemonic canon, to include them in our curricula, in our quotations, translations, and discussions.

Finally, one of the invaluable contributions of recovering the intersectional praxis of black feminist activism is linked to the teaching they bequeathed us of strengthening political alliances and spaces of collective construction based on the recognition of differences. In fields as competitive and individualistic as academia, it becomes vital to return to feminist practices based on the construction of alliances to promote an engaged and less neutralized academy.

Due to the main place that ideas and theories have in material social changes, I conclude that intersectionality cannot lose its heuristic and political capacity as if it were a mere slogan, nor be complicit in the systematic exclusions of the coloniality of knowledge and academic capitalism, but it must be recovered as an *integral praxis* that engages us with real and urgent problems of our societies.

Notes

ⁱ. This article is based on the conference presented on May 28, 2021 by Fabiana Parra, at the II Coloquio Internacional de Practicas lectoras en clave Interseccional y Post-colonial – CELEI (Chile).

ⁱⁱ For further information, see: <http://lainformativa.com.ar/2021/06/09/la-confederacion-mapuche-de-neuquen-en-contra-de-la-frase-de-alberto-fernandez/>;
<https://www.perfil.com/noticias/internacional/eleonora-gosman-europeos-negros-e-indios-la-maravillosa-identidad-cultural-de-brasil.phtml>; <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/el-rumor-de-las-multitudes/memoria-raices-habitar-casa-diferencia>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marey, Macarena in her presentation at the Jornadas sobre la Comuna de París, en su 150° aniversario de la Comuna de París. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4fTcNw_cpQ

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