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Identifying Feminist Principles and Methodology Criteria for US-Based Scholars

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Transnational Feminism as a Paradigm for Decolonizing the Practice of Research

Identifying Feminist Principles and
Methodology Criteria for US-Based Scholars

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Scholars have written persuasively about shifting away from multiple “imperial contexts” when it comes to feminist thought, developing methodologies, and recognizing knowledge predominantly through academic scholarship.¹ As transnational feminist scholars actively seek to shift epistemology away from an imperialist model of knowledge extraction and instead collaboratively shape it, the tenets of transnational feminism offer a paradigm in which to cultivate a methodology to practice decolonizing forms of research. This article offers feminist principles and a set of working criteria to undergird the development of a critical transnational feminist methodology.

I arrived at this moment of methodological reflection following a series of encounters since the early 2000s with antiracist activists based in the Américas region and with transnational family members from Perú. When I asked an Afro-Peruvian activist about challenges to transnational solidarity across the Américas, she raised specific concerns about solidarity with US people of color, who she felt based on her personal experiences lacked an explicit anti-capitalist politics. When I spoke with a Peruvian lesbian activist about the US response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, she initially expressed hesitation about being completely forthright in her answer because, as she stated, “you are an American.” After the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission report officially revealed the egregious levels of violence and human rights atrocities committed by the state (as well as leftist terrorist groups) between 1980 and 2000, Peruvian family members were quick to remind me, when I raised serious concerns about these findings, that I did not live there during those years of terrorism, and the government did what it had to do to fight terrorism. And when I have talked to US activists of color about their experiences in transnational activist forums, many have been taken aback at how conservative they appear in relation to other activists and furthermore at being labeled “complicit” in the promotion of devastating US foreign policies.

My desire to propose principles and methodological criteria is then based on the quandary US scholars experience when geopolitical realities enter the realm of research.

This article is divided into two primary sections. In the first section I discuss feminist research principles. These principles are derived from my research field experiences and based on transnational feminist scholarship grappling with multi-directional dynamics of power, the permeability and rigidity of borders, the divide between secularism and spirituality, engaging in political solidarity, and identifying the links, relationships, intersections, and connections regarding various social issues and struggles. These principles serve as a guide for our research practices as we make important situational decisions. Second, drawing on specific research experiences as a point of departure, I propose a working set of four criteria as a response to calls to “consider more systematic discussions of the methods and practices that are used to produce transnational feminist knowledge.”²² As Linda Tuhiwai Smith states, researchers have to be “concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices.”²³ This point sheds light on the epistemological foundations of methodological practice in the production of knowledge. I specifically offer applied research strategies, which are ones I have used during different stages of research. These feminist principles and methodology criteria can decolonize knowledge production.

Feminist scholars remain committed to the idea that human agency is powerful and transformative. Therefore, exploring research strategies for social transformation and justice, even within institutions and contexts that are oppressive, remains a vitally important undertaking. The feminist principles and methodology criteria discussed in this article are representative of long-time collective conversations with other feminist scholar-activists and with research collaborators. Academia will not recognize these feminist research endeavors as meritorious, even though they are time-consuming and arduous to practice, yet this reality does not diminish their importance for engaging in a decolonial approach to the practice of research.

ENTERING THE GEOPOLITICAL RESEARCH FIELD:
GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR A DECOLONIAL
APPROACH TO RESEARCH PRACTICE

The US approach to transnational feminism can be overly determined as “the search for border-crossing activities and phenomena.”²⁴ Yet as Millie Thayer’s research on Brazil demonstrates, “making transnational feminism” can be

about engagement with intra-gender dynamics and other social hierarchies or differences in a single national context.⁵ Shireen Roshanravan's proposed strategy of "the anti-imperial feminist praxis of 'staying home'" recognizes that "home" (in reference to the United States) itself is a "global struggle."⁶ This strategy further recognizes that US Women of Color theorizing offers richly varied epistemic frameworks, methodologies, and political orientations.⁷ Even though my research is comparative and engages national contexts including and beyond the United States, this does not mean that transnational feminist research, by default, is about research derived outside the United States. Moreover, as Sandra Soto maintains, "the radical genealogies and epistemologies of U.S. Women of Color" offer critical analytical insights into the depths of global and imperial struggles.⁸

Decoloniality is one of the many epistemological tools that derive from Women of Color politics as well as from indigenous and African descendant social movements from Latin America.⁹ It informs the three key research principles for developing a transnational feminist methodology. Decoloniality requires that scholars destabilize dynamics that, for instance, privilege English, liberalism, the global North, and so-called objectivist scientific modes of knowledge production. In *Decolonizing Methodologies* Smith calls attention to the imperial origins of Western research and underscores the profound limitations of Western paradigms.¹⁰ The aim of decolonizing research, then, is to create new research models and practices.

Principle 1: Positionality and Reflexivity

An important body of scholarship exists with regard to positionality and reflexivity when in the research field and as related to research experiences, but the role of US citizenship and the privilege attached to an affiliation with the US academy remains largely underdeveloped.¹¹ The *unearned* privileges gained because of US citizenship status and as US academics, which include easier movement across national borders, university-sponsored health insurance, and not fearing the loss of our job, are unquestionably accepted and enjoyed, often in ways that are much more profound in the research process than we acknowledge.¹² We have, as Peggy McIntosh calls it, "conferred dominance;" this internalizing of entitlement in such a way that we do not recognize this very entitlement and/or advantage.¹³ Much of our graduate school training in the US academy engages, sometimes minimally or superficially, with the dynamics of gender and race as part of the research process, but extensive discussions about the impact of national privilege on the research process have been less obvious.¹⁴

Privileges garnered as a result of geopolitical power are not always experienced the same way, even by groups of people who benefit from the same structural privileges. In other words, field research experiences largely differ for white scholars and US scholars of color.¹⁵ The research process can be particularly fraught terrain for US scholars of color because the interactive dynamics of “insiderness” and “outsiderness” can complicate the research process and even, implicitly, our methodological choices.¹⁶ For example, scholars who undertake research in a setting where they have maintained familial, community, or personal relationships have to consider multiple levels of privilege associated with US citizenship or with US academic affiliations.¹⁷ Moreover, the conscious or unconscious exercise of privilege depends on fluid social location or positionality.

This first principle corresponds to a consciousness of the benefits associated with US citizenship status, which I refer to here as *imperial privilege*. I do not intend to assert that US citizen scholars are the only ones with the ability to exercise imperial privilege, as the US is not the only national imperial context. A Mexican scholar, for example, conducting research in Central America, could experience similar benefits of imperial privilege. Neither do I advocate for recognizing privileges in some type of confessional way because, as Andrea Smith argues, “the undoing of privilege occurs not by individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think themselves into a new subject position.” Its undoing, she contends, is “through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges.”¹⁸

What makes any social categories privileged—white, male, class, or heterosexuality, to name a few—are the societal structures and legal standards that have formed to uphold and normalize these hierarchies. The purpose in understanding multiple and often intersecting and shifting forms of privileges systematically is to underscore how these privileges actually act as “power-over” in many international contexts, specifically within the context of research. Imperial privilege solidifies a global citizenship hierarchy for the minority of the world’s population and differentiates US citizens discursively and literally from virtually everyone else in the world, including other non-US academics.

A number of factors shape my own shifting social location in relationship to the research process outside the United States. My movement within Perú—as a racially and culturally privileged mestiza and as a foreigner with Peruvian immigrant parents—is markedly different than my movement in the United States as a racialized Latina. In the context of Perú I become racialized as (*Norte*) *Americana* (read “white”) because I have lived my entire life in the United States. Even though I have Peruvian roots, and thus achieve insider status in some instances, I remain somewhat on the periphery as well. The same shifts apply to my class status: while I have a level of class privilege

in the United States, my class status elevates even more significantly in Perú. All these social positions influence my research experiences and are aspects I must negotiate as part of my research practices.

Imperial privilege is linked to the structural benefits that US citizens reap both inside and outside the United States, even if unbeknownst to them. Outside the United States, these structural benefits include not having to secure a visa to travel to many countries (Brazil being a notable exception in Latin America); not being required to speak Spanish or Portuguese to travel throughout Latin America or the Caribbean region (in fact, today the curriculum at many schools in Lima, Perú, is being taught in English to ensure fluency); and the adoption of the US dollar to replace national currencies (such is the case in Panama, Ecuador, and El Salvador). Even in those countries that have not adopted the US dollar, the global economy is structured in such a way that US currency retains a higher value, so that US citizens traveling to Latin America wield disproportionate purchasing power, as compared even with middle-class and affluent locals.

Imperial privilege is further augmented by our relationship to US academic institutions, where securing institutional approvals through a Human Subjects Review remains focused on limited and individual-level breaches of ethics. No structure of accountability is in place when researchers alienate or are hostile to participants in the site of research. This type of accountability does not have to exist once we have secured institutional protection, as one of the goals of university review protocols is about avoiding legal liability for the university.¹⁹

Imperial privilege requires transnational feminist researchers to be especially aware of the power they wield in the research field and how that power can impact the research itself and the local community. US researchers can create additional problems when they think they have a “right to speak out” for others.²⁰ Those others may not want US academics to do the speaking for them, especially because US foreign policies have done far more than stymie free speech.²¹ Imperial privilege results in both individually based privileges and structural benefits, which serve to embed US citizens within the global superpower structure, whether or not that power is enjoyed fully. The purpose of this principle is to contend that citizenship and academic structural privileges are fraught, yet some strategic and intentional moves to undermine these unearned benefits remain essential to research practices.

Principle 2: Ontologies

Modernist ontologies come into conflict with relational ontologies in transnational feminist research, and not all ontologies can be researched empirically.

Modernist ontologies rely on dualisms, such as nature versus culture, individual versus community, legal versus illegal, objectivity versus non-objectivity, and so on. In contrast, relational ontologies reject dualisms. Furthermore, a modernist ontology is rooted in a secular orientation and, as a result, devalues spirituality and favors individual methods of knowing over collective or spiritual knowledge.²² Rather than privileging secularism or a rationalist and empirical epistemology, this second feminist principle recognizes that relational ontologies are important conventions relevant to research. Therefore, skepticism toward the spiritual and all that is unspoken and not visible but simply felt and experienced can come into productive tension with transnational feminist research that is seeking to avoid the Western-influenced dualisms of modernist ontology (i.e., empirical knowledge vs. spiritual knowledge, for example).

This second principle draws from global South movements to decolonize human rights. These movements seek to challenge universalisms that embody particular ways of knowing and acting upon or within the world that are hostile to decoloniality or indigenous ways of knowing. Decolonizing human rights suggests an understanding that differs, as Arturo Escobar states, from “the dualist ontologies of liberal modernity” because “relationality refers to a different way of imagining life (socio-natural worlds).”²³ In this context of “alternative human rights imaginaries,” according to Rosa-Linda Fregoso, lies the “pluriversality of human rights.”²⁴ Therefore, when the conceptualization of human rights is solely tied to legal norms (modernist ontologies), then the practice of human rights beyond the legal realm (relational ontologies) becomes negated.

Let me elaborate further by way of two examples. First, in 2013 I met a group of Peruvian human rights educators inspired by the pedagogical practice and insights of Paolo Freire. They organize human rights workshops throughout Perú that attract a wide range of participants, from lawyers and teachers to local farmers and community activists. These workshops involve interactive exercises and games in which *the participants’ collective knowledges and experiences* become the point of departure for talking and learning about human rights. The purpose of the workshops is not about having participants regurgitate legally protected rights. Rather, for these human rights educators, “the practice of human rights and democracy begins from within”; it is about affect.²⁵

Second, when I was helping with a 2013 commemoration ceremony for a disappeared person named Javier in Lima, Perú, I remember feeling as if *something intangible* was happening in that space that was beyond emotions, pain, and even joy. This gathering took place at a memorial called *El Ojo Que Llorá* (The Eye That Cries), a site that recognizes the tens of thousands of victims of the Peruvian internal conflict of 1980–2000. For the ceremony, candles had been lit throughout the memorial site, including a candle next to a

stone that had Javier's name engraved on it; of all the candles that had been lit at the site, the wind eventually blew out every one *except for the candle next to his stone*. The key organizer whispered to me how incredible it was that the candle remained lit; Javier must be here in some way, she said. One of my challenges as a researcher, then, is theorizing about that experience in a way that does not dismiss as random the power of the spiritual.

This principle is meant to challenge the privileging of secularism and even the tendency to secularize US feminist research. Gloria Anzaldúa's writings, for example, have been too often invoked, as Leela Fernandes, Maria Lugones, and others astutely point out, in the service of "secularized concepts such as intersectionality, diaspora, and hybridity."²⁶ Anzaldúa's work intimately embodies spirituality with knowledge production. Modernist ontologies not only separate spirituality from knowledge production but devalue it. M. Jacqui Alexander reminds us of the importance of the Sacred for "transnational feminism and related research projects, beyond an institutionalized use value of theorizing marginalization."²⁷

Moreover, as Lugones contends, spirituality or the spirit world is central to the praxis of decolonial feminism in that women of color are "the fractured locus," and thus, from this location, "important epistemological shift[s]" occur.²⁸ The challenge for transnational feminist researchers becomes how to capture effectively the relational ontologies that may be difficult (or even impossible) to study empirically; another challenge is for transnational feminist researchers to engage relational ontologies for the purposes of knowledge production. Knowledge production is collective, and we must strive to retain that collective spirit in the organization of our research. As a result, scholars may have to be more creative about their research practices or acknowledge that we do not have the existing methodological tools or ability to research certain dimensions of relational ontologies.

This second feminist principle unsettles the prioritizing of modernist ontologies at the expense of relational ones. Its purpose is to support a research practice that recognizes both ontologies in order "to theorize in a respectful way."²⁹ A meaningful engagement with relational ontologies seems critical to any respectful modes of theorizing. Hence, as I reflect on that inspiring moment about the candle remaining lit next to Javier's memorial stone, dismissing that moment as random or trying to rationalize it in some way would be disrespectful to theorizing. As Alexander states, "The dead do not like to be forgotten, especially those whose lives had come to a violent end."³⁰ It is then incumbent upon me as a researcher to remain, at the very minimum, open to acknowledging the importance of alternative worldviews and spiritual experiences.

Principle 3: Multilingualism

A principle based on multilingualism seeks to destabilize the colonial imposition of English as the primary or dominant method of communication. Engaging multilingualism exposes researchers to new understandings of the socio-natural world and advances a holistic approach to research. Multilingualism as a principle mandates that scholars challenge limited communication skills even if the majority of daily life is in monolingual contexts.

Ontology and language are intimately connected as well. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos states, it is extremely difficult to explain alternative visions with “colonial language.” Offering the example of how “the original people of this continent [who] have been excluded by all Western modernity” believe that “the Mother Earth has some rights, the rights of the Pachamama, as they call them,” de Sousa Santos asserts that certain views “cannot be expressed in English or in Spanish or Portuguese or French in adequate terms, because they come from non-colonial language.”³¹ So given these realities, researchers can view themselves as a type of translator, or what Manisha Desai refers to as a “supportive interlocutor,” in order to be a conduit between deep differences in ontology and language.³² Translations can be imperfect, but they are nonetheless attempts at critical explanations to new audiences.

In sum, the three feminist principles discussed in this section are based on a political commitment to decoloniality. Decoloniality is an active practice and not merely metaphorical; it simultaneously strives to undo as well as attempting to create or rebuild.³³ These principles serve as an important guide during the research process. Therefore, a consciousness about imperial privilege results in a different engagement in the research field. An affirmation or recognition of relational ontologies leads to unexpected discoveries or even awareness that there are dynamics in the socio-natural world which are simply not possible to research empirically. And the role of multilingualism challenges researchers to develop a fluency in communication skills and to embrace the messiness—the undoing and rebuilding—related to decoloniality.

PROPOSED CRITERIA FOR A TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

The four working criteria for a transnational feminist methodology build upon the feminist principles discussed so far and include the following: conscious negotiation of imperial privilege, building a research community, integrating multilingualism, and highlighting projects, communities, and other liberatory models as a way to expand beyond social critiques as well as con-

tribute to social movements and collective epistemology. The intent in proposing working criteria is to identify an alternative basis for building and constructing ethics separate from the problematic institutional process. This building of ethics involves relationships and solidarity models, prioritizing collective justice, and adopting alternative research models that acknowledge the dimensions of spirituality in relation to ethics. Academic-based ethical norms do not take into account the social structural violence that research has inflicted on the communities under study and in the name of (secular) scientific understanding. Thus it is incumbent upon transnational feminist researchers to be reflective and generative. In that spirit, I offer specific research strategies for consideration as part of cultivating research practices informed by the promise of transnational feminism.

Negotiating Imperial Privilege: Resource Sharing, Interactive Interviewing, and Reconciling Community and Researcher Needs

Transnational feminist scholars have argued that it is important to engage with the contradictions in our research lives to strive toward social change and social justice.³⁴ Imperial privilege is one of those contradictory factors in the research process. It is more than just recognizing that one is a citizen of the United States; the meaning of imperial privilege is intimately intertwined with understanding how we conduct ourselves in the research field matters. In this section I offer some practical strategies for engaging the contradictions of imperial privilege in the practice of research by focusing on resource sharing, interactive interviewing, and reconciling community and research needs.

Resource sharing involves practicing acts of reciprocity to shift from mere awareness of imperial privilege into concrete acts of redistribution. Scholars have acquired a level of social and cultural capital that facilitates assistance with translating documents, identifying prospective funders, and assisting with the logistics for community meetings (i.e., organize chairs in a room, gather materials for use in a meeting, and offer to clean up). Therefore scholars can offer our labor to the communities generous enough to talk with us and even send any financial benefits from our published books to the communities, groups, or organizations generous enough to speak with us. Further, bringing gifts to the community as a way to acknowledge their time respectfully seems essential for resisting the establishment of a neocolonial precedent where we take (or extract) but do not give back.

Since interviews are a form of labor, interviewees can be compensated similarly to how consultants are paid for their expertise. Given the enormous amount of unpaid labor women in particular are too often asked to perform

throughout the world, an interview stipend or a gift of appreciation is an important act of reciprocity. These examples of potential remedies acknowledge to some degree the significant resource and power disparities that are reproduced through US imperialism.

Structuring an interview in an interactive way challenges the dominant research model that distances academics from non-academics and encouraging and rewarding a form of privatized knowledge production. According to Cuban scholar Marta Núñez Sarmiento, converting in-depth interviews into actual dialogues can disrupt the one-way nature of interviews because having a “free flow of ideas” undercuts the dynamic of “the researcher guiding the interview.”³⁵ The interactive interview approach proved fruitful for Núñez Sarmiento’s research as it nurtured collaboration, resulting in the modification of interview questions as well as the inclusion of new ones she had not previously considered.³⁶ Conceptualizing interviews as dialogues suggests that researchers must also be willing to be interviewed and respond openly to questions. This context can then produce “empathetic relations between those who ask questions and those who respond.”³⁷ I have had a similar experience to Núñez Sarmiento. When I have conducted interviews as a conversation, I find the experience to be richer, illuminating, and generative. It gives interviewees an opportunity to disrupt the monotony and ensures that I do not stick to a preconceived script. It allows them to navigate the interview dynamic to some degree as well.

Another part to interactive interviewing is interactive consent. I typically adopt a multi-level form of consent, which includes written and oral consent, with an understanding that it can be withdrawn at any time. Once an interview has been transcribed, I email the transcript to the interviewees and inform them they have an opportunity to review the document. Interviewees are then *free to make any changes and modifications they see fit to the transcript or even to revoke the interview entirely*. People seem to be genuinely surprised when I present them with these options upon receipt of their transcripts: accept as is, make modifications, or change your mind altogether and pull the interview. Once interviewees signal their approval, I then proceed with preliminary data analysis, though always willing to revisit consent if needed.

Reconciling the needs of the community and the researcher is another challenge to the dominant research model, whereby researchers have been trained to value our own individual needs in the research field (i.e., such as getting the interview) over the needs of the community. One critical goal is crafting interview questions that reflect a sensitivity and respect for the conversation.³⁸ This means not conjuring up discomfort for the interviewee.³⁹ Perhaps in some cases, reports from nongovernmental organizations, archi-

val documents, newspaper accounts, and participant observation become reasonable alternative avenues of inquiry instead of interviewing.⁴⁰ For instance, when I wrote a journal article about women who had been sexually assaulted or raped by US border enforcement officials, I intentionally decided to base those narratives on newspaper accounts, court records, and existing reports from human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the American Friends Services Committee.⁴¹ I knew interviewing women who had been assaulted would cause additional trauma. This goal of striving for balance between the needs of the community and research goals may then lead us toward making decisions that understand our role is to bridge academic training with community-based needs in a way that prioritizes people's well-being.

Negotiating imperial privilege means challenging or undermining dominant research practices. In this section I focus on three areas (resource sharing, interactive interviewing, and reconciling the needs of communities and researchers) for negotiating imperial privilege, which has fostered a dominant research model that entrenches the binary between researcher and researched. By identifying the negotiation of imperial privilege as a methodological criterion, we make clear that research designs must adopt strategies in which power differences are not further exacerbated.

Building a Research Community: Resist Working in Isolation

The second methodological criterion is building a research community that crosses several social markers. A research community involves students, mentors, and other faculty colleagues as well as prospective interviewees, family members, and non-academics. Building a research community requires being willing to invest time in community, to move beyond simply building rapport with people during the research process. Fostering a research community means understanding the relationships formed in the research field as ongoing partnerships.

Thinking about community as part of our research design encourages us to think beyond the product of research, such as the peer-reviewed journal article, and more about how research can be part of community building and change. Forming a research community has similar dynamics to organizing coalitions in the activist or political sense because this convergence can at times be fruitful and other times be difficult to sustain. Sometimes the challenges reveal how power is being problematically wielded.

Central to building this research community is transparency, which is especially important given the lengthy history of US academics' problematic

engagements in “Third World” contexts and in marginalized communities in the United States. By transparency, I am referring to being forthright about our research objectives and our plans for dissemination, sharing published research with interviewees and the larger community, providing a copy of the transcript to the interviewee, and providing interviewees with an opportunity to make modifications to the transcript if needed. Transparency involves an interactive engagement with interviewees and community members who are part of the research process and part of our research community *even after the research period has concluded*.

Scholars embedded in community can then strive toward a collective knowledge model built from the dynamism of a research community. This affects the meaning of individual authorship as well. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2006, 2009) and the Latina Feminist Group (2001) are two valuable examples of group authorship models in that individual credit is forfeited for the purposes of acknowledging collective knowledge production.⁴²

A researcher could embrace an opportunity to ask activists what they need to know and then design a research project based on those needs. For instance, when I interviewed a US racial justice activist about her organization’s efforts to appeal to the United Nations Committee to Eliminate Racial Discrimination at a time when the US government underwent a treaty compliance review by this UN committee, she spoke about a promising and largely successful collaboration between advocates and law students in her city. She said:

The advocates informed the [treaty review] process. Advocates came in and did what they do best which is providing information from the ground. They shaped the [research] direction, identified problem areas, and pointed [law] students in the direction of where they might be able to collect data. And the law students put that together and actually did the collating of information and the first drafts in most cases.⁴³

This type of information gathering helped their racial justice advocacy efforts. The point here is that scholarly interventions can make a difference when we resist working in isolation from community. As my interviewee argued, “[Activists are] much better at organizing rallies and directing blame, but taking those nuts and bolts steps of collecting data, putting it together, forming a strong argument irrespective of what we know on the ground, we haven’t done as well.” Researchers can play a pivotal role in this regard.

This second methodological criterion is about perceiving research beyond individual research agendas and not as an isolating process. Conceptualizing research as a community endeavor means being transparent, encouraging feedback and partnerships, and thinking about collective models of knowl-

edge production. When we contextualize our roles as researchers as being linked to communities rather than institutions, our research process can then reflect an important alignment with community priorities or needs.

Integrating Multilingualism: Advancing the “Circulation of Transnational Intellectual Flows”

The third criterion for a transnational feminist methodology involves integrating the practice of multilingualism. This practice suggests that our linguistic skills can be hampered when in overwhelming monolingual contexts in two critical ways. First, communication can be impaired because we may not fully appreciate what we are missing. Second, our intellectual ideas become restricted to a monolingual audience. Integrating multilingualism into our research design indicates a proactive element of seeking out translators, investing in translating our research into other languages to reach new audiences, and considering non-US and non-English scholarship to inform our analyses.

Even in cases where we speak another language, the meaning of the terms themselves can differ. Marisol de la Cadena’s research with indigenous peoples of Perú is particularly illuminating for calling attention to the necessity of linguistic nuance. She states, “As used by indigenous movements ‘culture’ or ‘nature’ do not necessarily correspond to our meanings of the terms. Instead, emerging in modern politics, they may be sites of relations of equivocation occurring in the interval between two (or more) different language situations.”⁴⁴ Her point about equivocation relies on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s definition where “a failure to understand that understandings are necessarily not the same” prevails.⁴⁵ She acknowledges that “equivocations emerge when different perspectival positions—views from different worlds, rather than perspectives about the same world—use homonymical terms to refer to things that are not the same.” De la Cadena argues that equivocations can be controlled if scholars “[pay] attention to the process of translation itself—the terms and the respective differences.”⁴⁶ For de la Cadena, taking into account equivocation proved necessary for her research when she realized that for her, mountains were mountains, but for a Peruvian indigenous person, mountains were beings, which make their two meanings of the word mountain “inseparable, yet distinct.”⁴⁷ So in this case the *meaning* of her interview question and its subsequent interpretation were not compatible. Her research underscores that even if fluent or conversant in another language, scholars have to realize there may be limits to what our research can truly reveal (and to whom).

The second dimension to integrating multilingualism is about transnational intellectual circulations. According to Christine Bose, too often “fem-

inist thought in non-English speaking countries” is not “travel[ing] back to feminists in the global North.”⁴⁸ For this reason, Bose and Minjeong Kim argue, “It is important to promote the circulation of transnational intellectual flows that can inform locally based women’s studies and gender research (and vice versa), that connect local organizers and researchers in different nations to one another, and that undermine global patriarchal and capitalist power structures in all [their] forms.”⁴⁹ Given the dominance of gender-based research from the United States at the international level, Bose and Kim “argue the onus is on U.S. gender studies students and scholars to incorporate the kinds of original materials and insights [that] international perspectives present.”⁵⁰

The purpose of this third methodological criterion is to acknowledge that monolingualism can negatively affect our research. Ways in which to circumvent this research limitation include working with translators, having our work translated into other languages and for multiple audiences, and developing techniques in which we control equivocations. This criterion is perhaps one of the most challenging elements to incorporate into our methodology. At the same time, too many of us have grown passively comfortable in monolingual environments, and it is imperative that we engage in research practices that acknowledge multilingual realities.⁵¹

Embracing a Politics of Vision, Hope, and Love

The fourth criterion corresponds to a vision of social justice as part of our research practice. It includes highlighting liberating models or projects as part of our research design. My intention is not to promote a romanticized notion of research or even social movements but rather to make the case that if activists and visionaries of the World Social Forums are right in proclaiming “another world is possible,” then the task for researchers (as well as activists, for that matter) becomes about a confluence of imagination and action, of creativity and resolutions, of feminist analyses and forming coalitions.

Collaboration is key to embracing a politics of vision, hope, and love. As has been typical in Latin America and the Caribbean, “gender and women’s studies [are promoted] through feminist research centers/institutions or through national feminist organizations, rather than primarily through university-based degree programs.”⁵² This “complex relationship between academic research spaces and the political practice of the feminist movement” can be a source of contention in Latin America and, to a lesser degree, in the Caribbean as well.⁵³ However, this coupling is a distinct model when compared to the United States. Working to form “organic linkages between aca-

demographic programs and feminist organizations” can revitalize energy in both our research process and activist visions.⁵⁴

Finally, finding joy in the research process and with the communities with whom we come to form relationships along the way is sustaining. As learned by her Yakama indigenous elders, Michelle Jacob states, “important principles of decolonization include having fun, to ensure sustainability, while also holding high standards and expectations of those involved [in decolonization efforts].”⁵⁵ Therefore the ability to laugh and enjoy the research process is fundamental to our research practices. If we remain stuck in a space of anger, frustration, or disillusionment, then putting our research efforts toward a greater good does not become possible.

The four working criteria proposed for a transnational feminist methodology are interrelated and overlapping. They humanize research and proactively counter the colonial-like impulses of exceptionalism, (English) monolingualism, and individualism. If researchers can be willing to “change [our] most intimate conceptions and attitudes to approach [the research process] in an honest, genuine, and legitimate way,” then the creativity and fluidity of the research process can emerge.⁵⁶ The purpose of offering criteria and grounded strategies is to engage with the contradictions in research as well as offer a more systematic discussion regarding research practices.

CONCLUSION

Transnational feminism offers a paradigm to envision research engagements that challenge Western and white-dominated research models. By adopting a research approach that acknowledges power dynamics, the importance of political solidarity, and the problematic secular-spiritual divide, then research practices do not empower privatized knowledge over collective knowledge or institutions over communities. The epistemologies and ontologies of people of color mandate that we do not reproduce or validate the status quo of research practices. Transnational feminist projects committed to decoloniality then cannot rely on colonial methodologies.

The twofold purpose of this article is to identify feminist research principles to serve as a guide or frame of reference as we make situational decisions and to propose a set of criteria to inform research designs when it comes to methodological choices. The three feminist principles are decolonial in nature in that they take the initiative to respond to different incarnations of colonialism and imperialism. The first principle is about positionality and reflexivity. Specifically, I discuss how imperial privilege affects social location because researchers do not enter the research field disconnected from the geopolitics of

the present moment or even the past. Social location is also fluid, meaning we can occupy different spaces of privilege. The second principle corresponds to ontologies and how the research process reveals tensions between modernist and relational ontologies. Relational ontologies reveal a contrary understanding of the world compared to modernist ontologies, emphasizing relationality and connectivity rather than rigid binaries and individualism.⁵⁷ For this reason, relational ontologies grapple with the realm of the spiritual, which can introduce new challenges as part of the research process because we have to create new models that legitimate spiritual knowledge, not undercut it. The third principle regarding multilingualism recognizes it is problematic to be solely engaged in English-dominant research spaces. For researchers, interacting with multilingual settings is a way to advance a holistic research process that does not, by default, entitle English as the main linguistic lens to shape our intellectual thoughts. These three principles remind us that being active participants in the research process means we have to be vigilant and thoughtful about research practices.

Mindful of the embedded contradictions inherent in the research process, I propose four criteria for a transnational feminist methodology: negotiating imperial privilege, building a research community, incorporating multilingualism, and highlighting liberatory models. These criteria call for an unsettling of orthodox methodology, which is largely rigid and discipline bound. I offer some concrete strategies for consideration in research practices. Though I recognize my embrace of a feminist utopia when it comes to research practices, I recognize that mistakes can happen, even for the best-intentioned scholars. Mistakes can be opportunities in which we grow as researchers and improve our practices. Crafting new research practices requires creativity, collaboration, and a political commitment to communities over institutions.

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(Routledge, 2011). She is on the editorial board of *Contexts*, a public sociology magazine. She is a former UN co-consultant to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. Her work has been published in *Feminist Studies*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, *Journal of Women's History*, *Gender & Society*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Societies Without Borders*, and *Social Justice*.

NOTES

1. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Toward a Multicultural Conception of Human Rights," in *Moral Imperialism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Berta Hernández-Truyol (New York City: New York University Press, 2002), 39–60.

2. Leela Fernandes, *Transnational Feminism in the United States: Knowledge, Ethics, Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 28. Research practice ranges from the conceptualization and design of the actual research to the preliminary planning stages (i.e., setting up interviews, making living arrangements in the field) to reaching informed decisions about the research to be conducted. I do not discuss other forms of qualitative research practice, such as accessing archival records, even though clearly decisions and planning are required in that context.

3. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 20.

4. Fernandes, *Transnational Feminism*, 7. See also chapter 4 of Fernandes, where she offers insightful critiques about the disciplining of transnational feminist research through "regimes of visibility," specifically within the context of visible cross-border activities.

5. Millie Thayer, *Making Transnational Feminism: Rural Women, NGO Activists, and Northern Donors in Brazil* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

6. Shireen Roshanravan, "Staying Home While Studying Abroad: Anti-Imperial Praxis for Globalizing Feminist Visions," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 2, Spring (2012): 1–23.

7. Shireen Roshanravan, "Motivating Coalition: Women of Color and Epistemic Disobedience," *Hypatia* 29, no. 1 (2014): 41–58.

8. Sandra Soto, "Where in the Transnational World Are U.S. Women of Color?," in *Women's Studies for the Future: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics*, ed. Agatha Meryl Beins and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 111–24.

9. See Roshanravan, "Motivating Coalition," and Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–59.

10. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 20.

11. Dana Collins, "Performing Location and Dignity in a Transnational Feminist and Queer Study of Manila's Gay Life," *Feminist Formations* 24, no. 1 (2012): 49–72;

Young Jeong Kim, "Ethnographer Location and the Politics of Translation: Researching One's Own Group in a Host Country," *Qualitative Sociology* 12, no. 2 (2012): 131–46; Michael Burawoy, "Revisits: An Outline of a Theory of Reflexive Ethnography," *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 5 (2003): 645–79; Peter Chua, "Orientalism as Cultural Practices and the Production of Sociological Knowledge," *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 4 (2008): 1179–91; Nancy A. Naples, *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse, and Activist Research* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

12. Post-tenure of course provides an additional level of security for scholars, but even in cases when on the tenure track, conducting research that contradicts feminist-based ethics (such as respect for the community) is not a rationale for tenure denials.

13. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies," <http://www.odec.umd.edu/CD/GENDER/MCKIN.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2014).

14. Discussions about the dynamics of race and gender in the context of research are often quite limiting because dominant U.S. understandings of race and gender are not translatable or transnational.

15. France Winddance Twine and Jonathan Warren, eds., *Racing Research, Re-searching Race: Methodological Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

16. Nancy A. Naples, "A Feminist Revisiting of the Insider/Outsider Debate: The 'Outsider Phenomenon' in Rural Iowa," *Qualitative Sociology* 19, no. 1 (1996): 83–106.

17. Hale C. Bolak, "Studying One's Own in the Middle East: Negotiating Gender and Self-Other Dynamics in the Field," *Qualitative Sociology* 19, no. 1 (1996): 107–30.

18. Andrea Smith, "The Problem with Privilege," <http://andrea366.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/the-problem-with-privilege-by-andrea-smith/> (accessed April 25, 2014).

19. See Gloria González-López, "The Maquiladora Syndrome," *Contexts* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 40.

20. This quote refers to Michael Schwalbe's argument that there are "positive aspects of American privilege," which includes "our rights to associate and to speak out." However, Linda Martín Alcoff argues that this kind of perspective is part of a larger problem of entitlement. See Michael Schwalbe, "The Costs of American Privilege," <http://www.counterpunch.org/2002/10/04/the-costs-of-american-privilege/> (accessed September 20, 2012).

21. Linda Martín Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," <http://www.alcoff.com/content/speaothers.html> (accessed September 25, 2012).

22. Maria Lugones, "Methodological Notes toward a Decolonial Feminism," in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Eduardo Mendieta (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2011), 68–86, and "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–59.

23. Arturo Escobar, "Latin America at a Crossroads," *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 4.
24. Rosa-Linda Fregoso, "For a Pluriversal Declaration of Human Rights," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 583–608.
25. Marcia Bernbaum, "Summary," in *Weaving Ties of Friendship, Trust, and Commitment to Build Democracy and Human Rights in Perú* (Lima: Instituto Peruano de Educación en Derechos Humanos y la Paz, 1999), 5. See http://www.hrea.org/erc/Library/research/IPEDEHP/study_english/summary.html (accessed March 25, 2014).
26. Fernandes, *Transnational Feminism*, 184.
27. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 326.
28. Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism."
29. Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demands for 'The Woman's Voice,'" in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edition, ed. Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (Columbus: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2009), 67.
30. Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 289.
31. See "The World Is Changing in a More Progressive Way, and It's Taking Place Here': Boaventura de Sousa Santos on Bolivia Climate Summit," *Democracy Now!*, April 21, 2010, http://www.democracynow.org/2010/4/21/the_world_is_changing_in_a (last access on 28 October 2014).
32. Manisha Desai, "The Possibilities and Perils for Scholar-Activists and Activist-Scholars: Reflections on the Feminist Dialogues," in *Insurgent Encounters: Transnational Activism, Ethnography, and the Political*, ed. Jeffrey S. Juris and Alex Khasnabish (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 106.
33. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.
34. Jennifer Bickham Mendez, "Globalizing Scholar Activism: Opportunities and Dilemmas through a Feminist Lens," in *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles R. Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 136–63.
35. In making this point, Marta Núñez Sarmiento references Pierre Bourdieu as cautioning against the one-way dynamic of interviews. Marta Núñez Sarmiento, "Gender Studies in Cuba: Methodological Approaches, 1974–2007," in *Global Gender Research: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Christine E. Bose and Minjeong Kim (New York: Routledge, 2009), 196–214.
36. Sarmiento, "Gender Studies in Cuba," 196.
37. Sarmiento, "Gender Studies in Cuba," 197.
38. A colleague pointed out that the other factor to consider is the context in which questions are asked. In a recent discussion in her feminist theory course about the

acclaimed PBS documentary (based on the best-selling book) *Half the Sky*, the interviewer/co-author asked an African woman, “Does your husband beat you?” The class had a lengthy discussion about the appropriateness and rudeness of even asking this question for the purposes of the documentary and corresponding book.

39. Eduardo and Bonnie Duran have referred to this type of pain as a “soul wound” for indigenous peoples. Eduardo Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indian and Other Native Peoples* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006); Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Durban, *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). Michelle M. Jacob also addresses at length the concept of the “soul wound” in her work. See Michelle M. Jacob, *Yakama Rising: Indigenous Cultural Revitalization, Activism and Healing* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).

40. My intention is not to suggest that interviews have to be emotionless. For example, the interviews Leisy Abrego conducted about the experiences of Salvadorian transnational families elicited raw emotions. The rich and compelling experiences depicted in her book would have been difficult to do without these interviews. Leisy Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love across Borders* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

41. Sylvanna M. Falcón, “Rape as a Weapon of War: Advancing Human Rights for Women at the US-Mexico Border,” *Social Justice* 28, no. 2 (2001): 31–50.

42. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, ed., *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2009); INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, ed., *The Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006); Latina Feminist Group, ed., *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

43. Personal interview with author, New York City, November 18, 2008.

44. Marisol de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond ‘Politics,’” in *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 350–51.

45. Viveiros de Castro cited in quote from Marisol de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes,” 350. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation in Tipiti,” *Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2, no. 1 (2004): 11.

46. De la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics,” 350–51. Quote also cites Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology,” 5.

47. De la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics,” 351.

48. Christine E. Bose, “Eastern Sociological Society Presidential Address: Globalizing Gender Issues: Many Voices, Different Choices,” *Sociological Forum* 26, no. 4 (December 2011): 748. According to Bose, the reverse problem is that “language barriers and monolingualism hinder feminist thoughts that are developed in non-English speaking Global South countries from even reaching feminists in the Global North

(Knapp 2009).” See Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, “Traveling Theories—Situated Questions: Feminist Theory in the German Context,” in *Global Gender Research: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Christine E. Bose and Minjeong Kim (New York: Routledge, 2009), 261–77.

49. Christine E. Bose and Minjeong Kim, “Introduction to Transnational and Local Issues,” in *Global Gender Research: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Christine E. Bose and Minjeong Kim (New York: Routledge, 2009), 6.

50. Bose and Kim, “Introduction to Transnational and Local Issues,” 7.

51. I acknowledge the cost for getting our work professionally translated can be very high, yet the fee should not diminish its importance.

52. Edna Acosta-Belén, “Between the Dynamics of the Global and the Local: Feminist and Gender Research in Latin America and the Caribbean,” in *Global Gender Research: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Christine E. Bose and Minjeong Kim (New York: Routledge, 2009), 155–56.

53. Montserrat Sagot and Ana C. Escalante, “Relations in Dispute: Conflict and Cooperation between Academia and the Feminist Movements in Central America,” in *Global Gender Research: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Christine E. Bose and Minjeong Kim (New York: Routledge, 2009), 159.

54. Sagot and Escalante, “Relations in Dispute,” 171.

55. Jacob, *Yakama Rising*, 27.

56. Sarmiento, “Gender Studies in Cuba,” 210.

57. Escobar, “Latin America at a Crossroads.”