

BURLANDO AL OPRESOR: MOCKING/TRICKING THE OPPRESSOR: DREAMS AND HOPES OF HISPANAS/ LATINAS AND MUJERISTAS

ADA MARÍA ISASI-DÍAZ

[Hispanas/Latinas have turned marginalization into a creative space of struggle. Standing strong in our present day reality, we reach back, gathering wisdom and strength from the struggles of past generations in order to attain a liberative future. Our utopian vision is a critical, liberative, and reflective-action process centered in our daily lived experience that seeks to bring radical change within our communities and in society at large. Our historical project embodies our desires and hopes as marginalized, exploited, and ignored women. The utopian vision of Hispanas/Latinas vindicates the exploitation of our bodies—key element of our oppression. Feasibility and effectiveness are important elements of our utopian expectations keeping us from wishful thinking that does not liberate but rather supports present oppressive structures. Hispanas/Latinas claim the right to desire and work for our pleasure and happiness, intrinsic elements to all true liberation.]

*¡Te digo yo a ti!*¹

THE PREVALENCE OF hyphens, slashes, dashes and parenthetical expressions in contemporary academic discourse point to the shifts that have been taking place in the world for decades, but only recently (20 years seem

ADA MARÍA ISASI-DÍAZ received her Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary, New York City. She is currently professor of Christian ethics and theology at Drew University, Madison, N.J. A tenth anniversary edition of her book *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* was recently published (Fortress, 2003). She has co-edited with Timothy Matovina and Nina Torres-Vidal, *Camino a Emaus: Compartiendo el Ministerio de Jesús* (Fortress, 2002). A revision of her *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (Scranton University) is in production. Also scheduled for future publication is *Mujerista Theology: La Lucha Continues* (Orbis, 2004) and *Un Poquito de Justicia/ A Little Bit of Justice* (Fortress, 2005).

¹ The use of Spanish throughout my article is an attempt to resist the hegemonic English language. Using Spanish helps us Hispanas/Latinas to “bring unprecedented modes of consciousness, agency, and collective action into being that (co-active with all other political formations) will provide us access to the *liberatory* global space as country people of the same psychic terrain” (Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000] 6). The use of Spanish continues to be an identifying characteristic for Hispanas/Latinas, even if some of us do not know but a few words of it. Then there is the fact that there are understandings I simply cannot relate to fully unless I use the Spanish terms. For example: *cotidiano*, *proyecto histórico*, *la lucha*. See my book, *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003; original ed. 1993) esp. chap. 2.

recent to me) have we in the academic world paid attention to these shifts, most probably because they have begun to interrupt our *cotidiano*—the daily reality that impinges on our routines making us notice what is going on “out there.”² Hyphens, slashes, dashes and parentheses indicate that we are in-between times—we find ourselves in a situation where the explanations of what is and the reasons for it (theories) that we created and have depended on to make sense of our world, are less and less apt to help us deal with reality, if not ours, at least the reality of the great majority of the world, which we find less and less capable of ignoring.

¡Ay Dios mío!

The hyphens seem to have a predilection for connecting “post” with a variety of words used to explain how we have been thinking and functioning—“we” here being those of us who seem to believe that we are the avant-garde of the human race. At times, “post” does not do the trick appropriately and we then have recourse to the prefix “neo” hoping always, I would like to suggest, not to ignore what has been. (Rightly so, no?) Why leave behind a way of interpreting reality and dealing with the material world that is beneficial to those with power and privileges? But perhaps I should give at least some of us with power and privilege the benefit of the doubt. The fact is I need to do so. So I would like to propose that some few of us are willing to consider a “post” here and a “neo” there because we have finally realized that our fate is tied up inexorably with that of the more than two-thirds of the human race that do not have time but to think about how to survive today.³ And if this is so, then we need to consider ways of leaving behind what is so detrimental to many. Not such a bad thing this preoccupation with self, for (in the gospel message of Jesus and also in my books) love of neighbor—the only thing that really saves us from destroying ourselves together with destroying them—is grounded in

² I have been saying this for more than two decades. Recently I found resonance in the work of another Latina. “. . . the primary impulses and strains of critical theory and interdisciplinary thought that emerged in the twentieth century are the result of transformative effects of oppressed speech upon dominant forms of perception—that the new modes of critical theory and philosophy, the new modes of reading and analysis that have emerged during the U.S. post-World War II period, are fundamentally linked to the voices of subordinate peoples.” Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* 8. For an elaboration of *lo cotidiano* see, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “*Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology*,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 10, no. 1 (August, 2002) 5–17.

³ See www.thehungersite.com where an area of the world lights up in a map every two seconds indicating someone there has just died of hunger. The site indicates that one billion people live in “relentless poverty and chronic hunger” and that 75% of the 24,000 who die daily are children.

love of self: so we better love ourselves or there is no possible way out for anyone.⁴

¡Vaya usted a saber!

The hyphens, slashes, dashes, and parentheses created by the constant flow between continuity and discontinuity constitute the space where we place ourselves (well, perhaps at times they are simply the spaces where we simply find ourselves). As a matter of fact, what is key always as one moves on (and not to move indicates the one final thing we humans can count on: death!) is to figure out the right proportions between what has been and what will be. Too much of the past means the cake will be hard, too much of the future means it will turn out runny. What about the present? The present is but the moments (and because it is made up of moments does not mean that it is immaterial or non-important for the present is precisely the conscious now in which we live; the present has continuity becoming the present-past and the present-future) that we grab to construct our lives, to make up our *cotidiano* and the narratives about it that we create to explain ourselves to ourselves.

¡Tenlo por sentado!

The hyphens, slashes, dashes, and parentheses likewise are indicative of our fluid social ontology,⁵ which is based on the hybridity and diversity that are key realities/ understandings we need to deal with in this 21st century (and I am being optimistic in not calling them “problems”). *Mestizaje/mulatez* is the Hispanic/Latino incarnation of hybridity and diversity and it has been considered, in *mujerista* theology, from its initial immature enunciations, our *locus theologicus*.⁶ The interstices in which we stand (not any less “real” in and of themselves in spite of their constant movement/evolution into the next one; their flux and temporality not making them any less capable of yielding reality and truth as we deal with them/become involved in the process of changing them), need to be recognized and

⁴ See Hugo Assmann, “Por una sociedad donde quepan todos,” in *Por una sociedad donde quepan todos*, ed. José Duque (Costa Rica: DEI, 1996) 383.

⁵ Catherine Keller, “Seeking and Sucking—On Relation and Essence in Feminist Theology,” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 55.

⁶ Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 5–6. For a much more complete elaboration of *mestizaje/mulatez* see, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “A New *Mestizaje/Mulatez*: Re-conceptualizing Difference,” in *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins*, ed. Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001) 203–19.

embraced (ah! yes! embraced, as in *un abrazo fuerte*, with not even a little bit of air between the embracer and the “embracee”) as a way of exposing and subverting the liberal hegemonic paradigm that continues to control society and the academy, as a way of revealing the power differences that keep many at the mercy of a few, and as an antidote to a self-aggrandizement that will make us explode (well, maybe implode). The problem is that though the blasts are often not enough to kill us, they leave us diminished more than anything else, I would like to suggest, because they affect those around us as well as those not so close by (like the Mexican-American woman who harvested the tomatoes I had in my omelet this morning)—those “those” with whom I am intrinsically bound whether I realize/accept it or not.

¡Avanza!

Coming from one of the communities that lives on the hyphen,⁷ I want to capitalize on the interstices—and that is what I have been doing all along. By this I mean that I want to make it count: I want to stand on the “in-betweens” fully conscious that it is not only a matter of acknowledging that is where I am, but also knowing that I have to decide “how” I stand there and “which way” to turn. I stand in these spaces as a protagonist—a non-sovereign *sujeto histórico*—needing to contribute to the “meanings” operative in society and wanting to resist any attempt to leave me out of this enterprise. (Yes, to postmodern and postcolonial I indeed add post-structural!⁸) I stand there always turning whichever way best makes it possible for me to engage in *la lucha-la lucha* for life, for fullness of human life (life, fullness of human life is another way of talking about liberation; liberation is the hermeneutical lens/ideological stance/worldview of *mujerista* thought/theology). From the interstices I look back and I look to the “backward” in the now: to the neo-colonial forces at work in the present. I do this only in so far as it helps *la lucha cotidiana hoy*, for the present situation of my main community of accountability—the Hispanic/Latino community living in the United States, particularly Hispanas/Latinas—is too precarious (Come on! It is outright dangerous!) to dally in what has been. The present is often death-dealing and from the space the present provides I look back and “backward” in order to decolonize⁹ myself and

⁷ I borrow this from the title of a book by a fellow Cuban, Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas, 1994).

⁸ I am informed by the clear and precise elaborations of Chris Weedon: May the Goddess bless her! See Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987; reprint 1994).

⁹ See Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University, 1999).

my community. I look back to critique, and this means that I stop to denounce and deconstruct only insofar as I need to for the sake of the future.¹⁰ To denounce and deconstruct is a raiding action: it is a taking hold of what I find useful in my colonized condition for building the future (this recognizes the fact that we Hispanas/Latinas can speak and have spoken; that our interstices have not been and are not silencing spaces but rather fertile in-betweens from which to gather rich understandings/praxis).¹¹ I denounce and deconstruct to find and salvage the “dangerous memories”¹² of the personal and communal experiences where life has been begotten and birthed despite the death-dealing situations in which we have lived. I denounce and deconstruct only to rescue what is mine, recognizing that to do so I have to embrace the life-long process of freeing myself of the internalized oppressors. To denounce and deconstruct is a way of actively remembering what I do **not** want the future to be like. However, to tardy in the colonial past and the neocolonial present even if it is to critique it, is one of the key impediments to liberation for it feeds the oppressors within. This is why looking back and “backward” is necessarily a “memory forward,”¹³ not a “back and ‘backward’” for their own sake, but a remembering myself and my people only to make it possible to move ahead.¹⁴

¹⁰ I am not interested in critique in the sense of “reflecting on the conditions of possibility of transcendental categories, of thought, morality, or judgment, universal values, cultural forms, linguistic structures, and religious a prioris [sic].” Nor am interested in critique “as a pragmatist project” intended to reach understanding through certain procedures. Manuel Mejido, “Propaedeutic to the Critique of the Study of US Hispanic Religion: A Polemic against Intellectual Assimilation,” (unpublished article), c. 2001.

¹¹ I am addressing the famous comment of Spivak regarding the inability of the subaltern to speak. However, I think it is unjust to freeze such a gifted woman thinker in what she said, in a moment of despair, almost 20 years ago. For an explanation of how her thinking has evolved see, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1999) 308–11. Though he is speaking about a somewhat different sort of hyphen, Pérez-Firmat sees living in the hyphen as a place/situation that offers “opportunities for distinctive achievement.” See Pérez-Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen 5*.

¹² Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 184. This phrase is used so much! I quote Metz because this is the place where I first saw it used years ago.

¹³ *Ibid.* 188.

¹⁴ The urgency to move ahead because of the precariousness of the poor and oppressed is something that I learned initially from the poor of Lima, Peru, with whom I had the privilege of working in the decade of the 1960s. For some philosophical grounding for my claims in this regard see, Enrique Dussel, *Ética de la liberación: en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión* (Madrid: Trotta, 1998).

¡Nena, por favor!

Engaging in *la lucha* for fullness of human life-liberation, however, is much more a matter of “creating a-new,” of looking forward in order to participate in creating a future that is life-dealing, from which no one—starting with myself and my community of accountability, of course—no one group of persons (turned into “a group” by capitalizing on whichever characteristic/feature they or the rest of us consider desirable) is excluded. Looking forward from the interstices we have created as refuge or where we had been exiled but have turned into our own is an exercise of the imagination. It is a strategic way of engaging in *la lucha*—of struggling by expanding the imaginary, of looking ahead. I look forward and by doing so I recognize how Hispanas/Latinas have created spaces interstitially as the beginning moments of “a hopeful utopian project,”¹⁵ our *proyecto histórico*.¹⁶

¡Imagínate! ¡Más!

To claim that our *proyecto histórico* is a utopian project indicates that I intentionally move away from postmodern understandings to a way of understanding reality—you cannot understand/know reality unless you take responsibility for it and change it—that is liberationist. Regardless of the many ifs and buts that postmodern thinking has introduced about meta-narratives, I hold on to the need for a *proyecto histórico* as a necessary element of any true liberation thought—and *mujerista* theology is, among other things, a liberation theology. Since we are talking about a *proyecto*, what we are dealing with is, first and foremost, a process that turns the confinement of the smallest of in-betweens into a stepping-stone for the future. Then, precisely because this *proyecto* is *histórico*, our utopian project struggles with what is as it tries to become a concrete way of life in a given geographic space for the largest number of people possible. Hispanas/Latinas’ *proyecto histórico* is indeed, as the prophet Joel said, a dreaming dreams and seeing visions by the powerless: the old and the young, the maidservants, the menservants.¹⁷ Our *mujerista proyecto histórico* is enmeshed in materiality, beginning to become a reality whenever

¹⁵ Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary* 33.

¹⁶ In Chapter 2 of *En la Lucha*, I introduced our *proyecto histórico*, as one of the constitutive elements of Hispanas/Latinas’s identity. I have kept working on the specifics of our utopian project. See, for example, “Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the Twenty-First Century,” and “*Un Poquito de Justicia—A Little Bit of Justice*,” in my book, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996).

¹⁷ Joel 2:28–29 and Acts 2:17–18 (RSV).

the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given to drink, the homeless are sheltered, and those who are sick and in prison are visited.¹⁸

¡No lo puedo creer!

Often I have the sense that the rejection of utopian projects by those with power and privileges is a way of imprisoning so-called minorities in the in-betweens. Often I know that we, Hispanas/Latinas, let them think they are dominating us while we in the interstices create a meaningful *cotidiano* that makes our lives worth living—and I am not ignoring or lessening the reality of the pain and sorrow of oppression of my community of accountability. In other words, *nos burlamos del opresor* for though they exploit us, we in turn not only survive despite them, but also change their material world and are learning to influence their discourse about the world at large and even about themselves. *Mujeristas* are archeologists (yes! in the Foucault-fashion) and *nos burlamos del opresor burlando al opresor*: we mock the oppressor by tricking/evading the oppressor. This does not mean that we do not take to heart the advice that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”¹⁹ Rather than using the master’s tools what we are doing is turning the confinement/spaces to which we are assigned into creative/liberating spaces. In other words, we are trying not to let the will of the masters (and mistresses) define the tiniest of space which initially was not ours but which little by little we turn into our own, partially because masters and mistresses are scared to come into them once we inhabit them.

¡Acaba, chica!

Nos burlamos del opresor burlando al opresor: mockery as a “power of the weak”²⁰ is an intrinsic element of our *proyecto histórico* and though I wish it did not have to be so (for I am often boringly straight-face), the fact is that the mischievousness of mockery is a most healthy antidote for any sense of “victimhood” that we might be tempted to embrace. The even more important thing is, however, that *nos burlamos del opresor* in order to *burlar al opresor*.²¹ Hispanas/Latinas mock the oppressor—and often

¹⁸ Matthew 25: 31–46 (RSV).

¹⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1984) 110–13.

²⁰ I borrow the phrase from the title of the book that first made me think about tricks/deceptions as a useful tool for those without power, Elizabeth Janeway, *Powers of the Weak* (New York: Knopf, 1980).

²¹ One of the most powerful uses of *burla* is that of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz, “Respuesta de la poetisa a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de La Cruz,” in *Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz: Dolor fiero*, selección y prólogo de Fina García Marruz (La Habana: Fondo Editorial Casa de Las Américas, 1999). See the brilliant essay about what

“they” do not even notice!—as a way of confronting the oppressor. *Burla*, meaning mockery, is another way of asserting ourselves as *sujetos históricos* engaged in *la lucha* and refusing to value suffering in itself. *Burla*, meaning tricking/evading, makes it very clear for us Hispanas/Latinas that our *mujerista proyecto histórico* cannot be a repetition of what is—for much of what is, is worthy of mockery, right?—that we cannot become like the oppressors nor imitate the way they create, understand and interpret reality (well, at least most of the way they do it!). This is our ultimate *burla*: to turn the elements of confinement in the tiniest of interstices into those needed to create *una sociedad en la que quepan todos*,²² a society in which all fit, from which no one is excluded.²³

Our Mujerista Proyecto Histórico: A Hispanas/Latinas Utopian Project

Hispanas/Latinas in the United States are oppressed and excluded. Given that reality, it is not surprising that we hope for a different future, that we look ahead and work for what is not part of our reality: liberation. Our *mujerista proyecto histórico* clearly indicates that we understand our ethical-theological enterprise as praxis: Hispanas/Latinas critical reflective action process centered on our lived-experience that uses and embodies a

Sor Juana accomplishes in this letter by Josefina Ludmer, “Las Tretas del Débil,” in *La sartén por el mango*, ed. Patricia Elena González and Eliana Ortega (Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1985) 47–54.

²² This is a leitmotiv of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, southern Mexico, which pointedly expresses the goal of their struggle. Throughout this article translations from the Spanish are my own.

²³ Allow me to stop here to clarify that most of what I say in this article has exceptions and needs modifiers in both directions: more and less. For example, when I talk of excluding no one, I am aware of the fact that I cannot even know all those who must be included, much less can I figure out how to include them all. Most of the issues that come to mind for not being able to include some have to do with material feasibility (‘how’ to include them); but then there is the finitude of all human enterprise including this one of knowing who are all the ones being excluded. The fact is that even if we were able to include all, the inclusion would be only for the time being for we have no way of knowing how history will evolve and, therefore, whom will it exclude. This is the kind of “modulation” that I intended to introduce a few lines above when I wrote, “Then, precisely because it is *histórico*, our utopian project also struggles with the givens as it tries to become a concrete way of life *for the largest number of people possible*.” Of course I introduced that modulation knowing that some would criticize me for not including everyone! For a philosophical explanation of this issue see Dussel, *Ética de la liberación* 412–22. I am also interested in grounding this understanding of inclusion-exclusion in the biblical concept of the *anawim*, the poor of Yahweh, for I believe it is an element much needed in the explanation of the preferential option for the poor. See, Albert Gelin, *The Poor of Yahweh* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1964); John O’Brien, *Theology and the Option for the Poor* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992).

liberation hermeneutics. Our *mujerista proyecto histórico* is a utopian project and this immediately distinguishes us from postmodernism, which insists that utopias are invalid totalizing narratives. Also distancing our *mujerista* enterprise from postmodernism is our (hopefully) clear and effective commitment to moral agency.²⁴ Postmodernism offers no position from which to speak²⁵ and our *mujerista proyecto histórico* is precisely that: a place/position/commitment from which to speak as well as a place/worldview/societal organizational framework that we are committed to create and inhabit. I am not totally ungrateful to postmodernism for I know that it certainly has contributed to breaking the hegemony of modernity in which Hispanas/Latinas could not get a foothold. However, it is my humble opinion that by the time postmodernism began to be elaborated as an understanding/theory in the academy, the struggles of poor and marginalized people all over the world during the 1960s and early 1970s against dictatorial governments and colonial oppression as well as three sociopolitical movements in the United States—for civil rights of African Americans, against the war in Vietnam, and for nuclear disarmament—had gone a long way in questioning and beginning to deconstruct modernity as a social, political, and philosophical period/condition. To these peoples' struggles and movements is that *mujeristas* are grateful for breaking the hold that modernity had on our understandings and ways of conceptualizing our world and ourselves. So, though it might be academic postmodernism what gets me invited to write this article, it is the struggle of peoples against modernity that gave me a start in the struggle for liberation.

In regard to postcolonialism I will simply say that *mujerista* ethical-theological enterprise certainly includes what is central to this discourse: the “dismantling [of] the Center/Margin binarism of imperial discourse.”²⁶ Likewise, our *mujerista* enterprise has a strong political motivation that necessarily has to start being oppositional (the looking back and “backward” is precisely part of the oppositional movement in our work). This is also true of postcolonialism.²⁷ There seems to be, therefore, affinity between postcolonialism and the *mujerista* enterprise. Though it is very rare to find reference to utopias in postcolonial text, it is a theory—maybe

²⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) 3.

²⁵ Ibid. 153. In all fairness, Hutcheon believes that postmodernism has both a critical/resistance component as well as maintaining a complicity with practices of representation that are exploitative. See, Hutcheon, 17–18.

²⁶ “Part IV: Postmodernism and Post-colonialism—Introduction,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffins (London: Routledge, 1997) 117.

²⁷ Linda Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout of Empire,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 130.

theories—that in and of itself does not seem to contradict the possibility or even the need for a utopian project. One of the most interesting and helpful elements of postcolonial thought for our *mujerista* enterprise has to do with the difference being made between “place” and “space.” In many ways the utopia that is created by our *mujerista* struggle is not a different place but a different space, a space often assigned to us by the dominant group in society, but also space we have been able to clear for ourselves and inhabit in the midst of a very oppressive place—today’s U.S. society. This space is not an abstraction but rather a spatiotemporal reality that we create in order to have the freedom to envision our preferred future. As this preferred future takes root in us as a community of struggle and as it begins to become tangible in concrete projects, our *mujerista* space begins to influence society, contributing to a radical re-definition of “place” in general by re-drawing the concrete characteristics of this place—today’s U.S. society—where we struggle to find and/or create our Hispana/Latina’s space.²⁸ Perhaps in the future critical postcolonial theory will work to bring the concept of utopias into its discourse. Be that as it may, I unabashedly now turn, equipped with a liberation lens and a hermeneutics of suspicion, to an elaboration of some of the key elements of a Hispanas/Latinas utopian project: our *mujerista proyecto histórico*.

Desire, Hope, Feasibility, Pleasure

Utopias have served humankind as a way of focusing and organizing hopes for changing the world, for making it a better world. The present-day rejection of utopias seems to me to confuse utopia as an inspiring and organizing concept/image, with given forms of utopia that have resulted in the exclusion and oppression of vast number of people. Utopias in reality will never disappear. They will never go away for they are “hidden signifiers”²⁹ of our needs and our desires, and without needs and desires humans fall into mortal apathy. Utopias have to do with the hopes and expectations of the poor and all the marginalized as they face the everyday reality of oppression. As a matter of fact, utopias provide for us the ability to really see and understand *lo cotidiano* and our daily struggles to survive, for “only in a concern to transform the present situation shall we ever be able to acquire an authentically realistic view of the situation.”³⁰ Part of the

²⁸ See *The Spivak Reader*, ed. D. Landry and G. Maclean (London: Routledge, 1996) 21. See also Colin Wright, “Centrifugal Logics: Eagleton and Spivak on the Place of ‘Place’ in Postcolonial Theory,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 43 (no. 1) 67–82.

²⁹ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000) 195.

³⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983) 81. For a most helpful thematic guide of the work of Gutiérrez see *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

driving force or utopias is their subversive character, which is precisely why it threatens those who support the *status quo* at any cost.

Utopias relate, not to an imprecise future but to the present reality in which we are immersed.

But this relationship to historical reality is neither simple nor static. It appears under two aspects which mutually require each other. . . .

Utopia necessarily means a condemnation of the existing order. Its deficiencies are to a large extent the reason for the emergence of a utopia. It is a matter of a complete rejection which attempts to get to the root of the evil. This is why utopia is revolutionary. . . .

But utopia is also a proclamation, an annunciation of what is not yet, but will be; it is the forecast of a different order of things, a new society. It is the field of creative imagination which proposes the alternative values to those rejected. The condemnation is to a large extent made in function of the proclamation. But the proclamation in its turn presupposes this rejection, which clearly delimits it retrospectively.³¹

Utopia weaves desire, hope, feasibility, and pleasure in a way that sustains the struggle to reach our preferred future: life and fullness of life-liberation for Hispanas/Latinas. In our *cotidiano* it is impossible to separate hope, feasibility, desire, and pleasure. Therefore, we separate them only as a heuristic device in order to be able to analyze what they mean and explain how they are present in our lives. Desire is the starting point. Desire is a way of reaching out for what we believe is good for us. This means that desire has an ethical component for desire involves “selective intentionality and responsiveness” and, therefore, “seems to be a part of our humanity worthy of respect and voice.”³²

Desire operates in the interstitial spaces to which we are often confined as the “yeast” that activates us, that moves us to begin to imagine—thus beginning to change—those in-between spaces from confinement to platforms for struggle.³³ To understand and value desire is to pay attention to the beginning of the processes that make it possible for us Hispanas/Latinas to create our own meaning of reality by exploding, confronting, and subverting precisely these same processes that have been created and

³¹ Nickoloff, 201–2. I am quoting from Nickoloff because of his excellent editing of the original material. For the original, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 2nd edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) 135–36. I use in this section the three elements Gutiérrez sees as characteristic of utopias: “relationship to historical reality, its verification in praxis, and its rational nature” (Nickoloff, 201).

³² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000) 147.

³³ I am influenced here by Emma Pérez’s understanding and use of the concept of desire. Her work also led me to study and use Foucault’s understanding of “archeology” and “genealogy.” See Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary* xiii-xix; 106–25.

are sustained by those who oppress and marginalize us. Desire helps us to come to terms with ourselves making it possible to confront the categories of meaning of the dominant group in society which exclude Hispanas/Latinas. In this sense, desire is a tool used in the archeological work we do that enables us to move from oppression to liberation.³⁴ Desire unmasks the discourse of destructive abnegation/self-sacrifice and pain/sorrow and shows them for what they are: anti-values. Hispanas/Latinas create meaning for ourselves by paying attention to our desires thus beginning to be self-defining moral agents by being self-reflective. This is why if we understand “desire as revolution, desire as love and hope for a different kind of future,” desire becomes “a medium for social change.”³⁵ We need to trust our desires instead of suppressing them, as we have been taught, for desires are what make it possible not only to unmask anti-values but also to move in a different direction, to enunciate our utopian vision.

Hispanas/Latinas desires make it possible for us to recognize how social practices to which we have not been allowed to contribute and which we are forbidden to question have been forced upon us—upon our bodies, our personal lives, and the lives of our communities. In this sense desire is not only a tool for discovering and unmasking the discourse of sacrifice and pain but it also helps us to analyze how this discourse has been “written” on Hispanas/Latinas bodies. Desire, then, has not only an archeological function but also a genealogical one, following Foucault’s usage, grounding our utopian vision in the history we have lived and live everyday as marginalized women living in the United States.³⁶ The genealogical function of desire, however, not only enables us to uncover the social practices that marginalize Hispanas/Latinas but also allows our utopian vision to surface, enabling the desires we have experienced—lived here and there, this time and that one, in private and publicly, personally and as a community—despite the oppression we suffer. Desires move us from the interpretations we have been taught to give our experiences—the interpretations we give our desires, who we are, and what we do as well as the interpretations that are imposed on us—to the experiences themselves. In this sense desires are

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). The following passages from this book are particularly helpful in understanding the meaning Foucault gives to “archeology,” 128–29, 131, 135–40, 167, 195, 206–8.

³⁵ Pérez, xix.

³⁶ The following resources are helpful in understanding the meaning Foucault gives to “genealogy.” Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983) 104–25; Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New York Press, 1998) 369–91. I might very well ascribe much more materiality and historicity that Foucault does to “genealogy.”

“energies, excitations, impulses, actions, movements, practices, moments, pulses of feeling”³⁷ inscribed on Hispanas/Latinas bodies, in our *cotidiano*, enmeshed in the materiality of who we are and what we do and in what we dare to imagine. In the interstitial spaces we occupy, desires make it possible for us to break loose from oppression in order to resist, oppose and transform. If we do not begin to resist and transform we cannot imagine differently. This imagining differently is part of the process of conscientization that anchors our struggle to be self-defining, to become subjects of our own history, to struggle to make our utopian vision a reality.³⁸

Desire not only plays a role in starting this process of self-definition for Hispanas/Latinas but it also is central to sustain our struggles to bring about our *mujerista proyecto histórico*. Once we cease to desire, our motivation for staying in the struggle grows faint and our ability to keep our eyes set on liberation diminishes. Desire also helps us to evaluate our utopian vision for “if the vast majority” of Hispanas/Latinas “characteristically and pervasively and over a long period of time did not desire” the *mujerista* utopian vision, we might still think that such utopian vision is good but we would have lost a key element needed to turn it into a realizable project—a political project. Our *mujerista* insistence on self-definition necessitates a process of reflection and deliberation, intrinsic steps in choosing for oneself. Choice also has to do with what people want, with what we desire. Desire is as much a human component of choice as are reflection and deliberation. Desire, therefore, has an important role at the level of implementation of our utopian vision as well as being key in helping us to imagine a preferred future different from present oppressive structures and motivating us to struggle for our personal liberation and the liberation of Hispanas/Latinas communities.³⁹

A second moment in imagining and creating Hispanas/Latinas future is that of hope. Once desires help us to recognize something different, making it possible to give credence to what we imagine, hope emerges leading us to work to make our desires a reality. Hope begins to make our desires concrete. Hope is a virtue because it is a disposition that creates a passion that results in actions. Hope is a passion for something that is not but yet will be. Hope is also a praxis that makes reality what one passionately desires. Hope is a virtue that is absolutely necessary for humans to remain alive. It is necessary for life (certainly for fullness of human life-liberation)

³⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, “Refiguring Lesbian Desire,” in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia University, 1994) 78. My conclusion about the materiality and historicity of desire is not supported by Grosz.

³⁸ Emma Pérez’s concept of the “decolonial imaginary” and Chela Sandoval’s understanding of “oppositional consciousness” is very similar to many of the elements I include in terms such as “conscientization,” “liberation,” “fullness of life.”

³⁹ Nussabamu, *Women and Human Development* 150–56.

because hope is what makes us believe that we can and will live beyond this very minute. In this sense hope is what makes possible transcending the present and moving into the future. Hope lies “midway between knowledge and willing . . . where absolute knowledge fails, wishing and willing intervene in a creative act, to take the chance or the risk . . .”⁴⁰ This wishing and willing that somehow move us ahead into the future are “elements” of hope. Hope is “the fundamental knowledge and feeling that there is a way out of difficulty, that we as human persons can somehow handle and manage internal and external reality, that there are ‘solutions’ in the most ordinary biological and physiological sense of that word.”⁴¹ Hope operates at the personal-interpersonal level as well as at the social-political level. It operates in our dealings with each other from the most intimate to the most formal, and hope operates in the social and political institutions that organize and govern the lives of communities.

Utopias are precisely projects that result when the desires of the people fuel hope for bringing together ways of organizing and governing our lives with the means necessary to begin to do so. Hope fills us with optimism, providing us the energy to pursue their implementation—the realization of our utopian vision. However, utopias become indeed “no place” if the hopes that create them have no materiality, if they have no way of being incarnated in political, social and economic systems, processes and organizations. Hope itself is impossible to maintain—dissolving into confusion, futility, anguish, and frustration: despair—if it does not have at least the tiniest of footholds in the world of the tangible. Hope—the wishing and willing that move us on—in many ways is ourselves acting within our own beings in order to make us move outwardly. If hope remains something within with no way of being exteriorized, hope simply dies leaving the utopia it had birthed as something impossible even to imagine. The need for hope to have a foothold in the material world in order to have a reason for continuing to be alive is paralleled and made known by the need utopias have for historical—material—mediations. These material mediations are the conditions and means necessary for a given utopian project to be feasible and to become a reality. If the project is not feasible it runs the risk of becoming “a pseudo-prophecy with unlimited ethical exigencies sustained by an anthropological presupposition of human beings who are generously committed to social ends, which they are waiting for someone to propose.”⁴²

⁴⁰ William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1965) 34–35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 32.

⁴² Assmann, “Por una sociedad donde quepan todos” 387.

Feasibility and Effectiveness

The third element in the work to create our preferred future is feasibility. Feasibility becomes key in shaping dreams, sustaining hope, and moving to make our *mujerista* utopian project a reality. Feasibility points to the rationality of utopias, to the socio-political-historical grounding of utopias that does not preclude imagination and hope. Feasibility has to do with the technological, political, social and economic means to carry out *mujerista's proyecto histórico*. Often what we have chosen, decided, judged to be life-giving and just and adequate is simply not feasible for us to work for or to attain. At times we do not have the technological know-how/expertise to implement projects that make it possible for us to create or inhabit spaces where we can be self-determining. Other times we do not have the expertise to organize ourselves to carry out needed projects in our communities while those who exploit our communities have the political savvy and means to mobilize the community even if they are promoting anti-life goals. Frequently we do not have access to newspapers, radio, and television to make known and publicize our messages. In no way do I want to suggest that Hispanas/Latinas are incompetent or lack leadership qualities. However, the lack of economic means to carry out projects often simply makes materializing our goals unfeasible. We find ourselves repeatedly in situations where we have no way of moving from what we know we should do to doing it.⁴³ This means that often we have no way of making our hopes tangible. It means that repeatedly we find there is no way for us to attain the material means needed to make our utopian project a reality.

Our *proyecto histórico* has many facets to which to tend. It is a process that is not linear and the facets intersect and influence each other in many ways and at different moments. But there is—there has to be—a concrete process or we would not be able to talk of taking seriously the need for historical—material—mediations.⁴⁴ The first step in the process is to establish clearly the meaning of our goal: life and fullness of human life-liberation.⁴⁵ This has to be conceptualized in a possible/feasible way: if we do not see how we can accomplish it, then we cannot do it.⁴⁶ Then we have to begin to elaborate means to make that end come about: projects that will

⁴³ Dussel, *Ética de la liberación* 263. Here Dussel is explaining the understanding of feasibility elaborated by Hinkelammert.

⁴⁴ I am informed and guided in this process by Dussel's discussion of Hinkelammert as well as Dussel's own elaborations (Dussel, *Ética de la liberación* 258–80).

⁴⁵ More on this in the section below.

⁴⁶ I am in no way excluding dreaming dreams and seeing visions. I think imagination has an enormous role to play in creating/building utopias. However, the imaginable has to be harnessed into the possible in order for it to be effective in the struggle for life-fullness of life.

begin to create spaces, processes and institutions where our goal can become operational. Our starting point for all of this has to be the reality in which we are immersed. In other words, our experience is our starting point and our point of reference to check out the “rightness” of how we are proceeding.

The next step has to do with procuring the material means to be able to implement our *proyecto*. Here is where we have to face the fact that if we do not have what we need to carry out our tasks then our *proyecto* is not feasible. However, we also need to take into consideration that simply because something is doable it does not mean that it should be done. In other words, at all of these levels our *mujerista* ethical principle is at work. We have to ask ourselves constantly if what we are doing or hoping to do contributes to life and fullness of human life-liberation for the largest possible number of people.

The elaboration of projects to bring about our goal based on our experiences and made possible by having the social-economic-technical means to carry it out, accompanied by a constant ethical evaluation of the way the means fit our end and the end informs the means, also needs to pay attention to effectiveness. In other words, how effective are we in doing what we do, and how effective is this that we are doing in making our goal a reality? The best of good will and the best of intentions will not carry the day. Feasibility and effectiveness are intrinsic to the process. As we hopefully begin to see our efforts bear fruit, we must not forget the last two steps on the process. Once we make some gains we need to consolidate them, we need to institutionalize them. Somehow, to change oppressive structures and systems we have to counter with liberating structures and systems. Many times what we have worked very hard to accomplish, after a few years, disappears precisely because we have not been able to institutionalize it—we have not been able to turn what we have accomplished into obligations, norms, and rights respected by all. If we are not able to do this, we cannot obtain civil legitimacy for our goals. No doubt we might be able to get some laws passed that protect what we have worked so hard to accomplish. But we also need for people at large to embrace the fact that whatever step we have been able to take toward liberation benefits all, that it has to be a norm for all. Unless the rest of society embraces what we accomplish as promoting life and fullness of human life-liberation for all, legal legitimacy will be an empty move.

The need to watch for effectiveness of the work we do does not disappear when projects are institutionalized. We need to stay ever vigilant so that institutionalization does not turn what we have accomplished into an inappropriate means given the goal we have in mind. Institutionalization, which means in many ways bureaucratization, can pervert the stated goal of any project. Insisting on carrying out our projects in a way acceptable to

society and doing them whichever way those helping us with the funding insist they must be done, can make us lose sight of the reason for the project, of the values that we are trying to uphold given the goal we have in mind. I am not suggesting a “holier than thou” attitude which makes it impossible for anyone to help us or cooperate with us. Nor am I suggesting that we get paralyzed and insist on not moving unless we are perfectly sure of every step we need to take along the way. On the contrary, I believe that given the limits we humans have, the only way to proceed is to accept all kinds of help, to move on partial solutions, and to take risks even when we are not sure of the results. But all of this has to be done within parameters of responsible action, of responsibility to our *proyecto*, knowing that our goal will become clearer as we move to accomplish it, that our *proyecto* will be modified many times by new understandings, new obstacles, and the ever present realization that nothing in our world is permanent. Being responsible to our stated goal does not mean immutability; on the contrary, responsibility to our *proyecto* means that we see what we do always as a process that evolves and becomes more precise as we go along. However, this in no way means that we adopt an anything-goes attitude. We insist on the need to be clear about what is the ethical principle that guides us, the principle that we have to constantly work to define and refine as we move with tiny but persistent steps toward life and fullness of life-liberation.

Pleasure and Happiness

Feasibility as a characteristic of the praxis that mediate utopias has to do with what makes possible and facilitates life: “to live one has to be able to live, and in order to do that the criterion for choosing ends has to be the satisfaction of needs.”⁴⁷ However, more and more we have come to realize that it is almost impossible to separate needs from wants though we must, I believe, continue to be able to differentiate one from the other for in times of extreme deprivation, we must hold on to our right to have our needs satisfied. The satisfaction of wants as well as of needs is grounded in the importance we give to desires. Replacing abnegation/self-sacrifice—a negative/death-dealing attitude and understanding we have been tricked into believing is a “virtue”—with desire will help us to understand ever so more fully the goal of our *mujerista* utopian project: not only life but **fullness** of human life-liberation.⁴⁸

Desire, hope, feasibility—they all make us realize that the struggle for

⁴⁷ Franz Hinkelammert, *Crítica a la razón utópica* (Costa Rica: DEI, 1984) 240; quoted in Dussel, *Ética de la liberación* 262.

⁴⁸ I am reminded here of the strike slogan in 1912 by the women textile workers made into a song in the 1970: “Give us bread, but give us roses . . . hearts starve as well as bodies, bread and roses, bread and roses.”

fullness of life necessitates that we denounce also as a negative/death dealing attitude and understanding the idealization of pain/suffering, which is quite popular in religious circles, replacing it with the human desire for pleasure. Yes, Hispanas/Latinas have the right to “*una existencia cotidiana agradable y . . . [el] derecho al gusto de vivir*,”—a pleasant daily existence and the right to a pleasurable life.⁴⁹ We claim the right to pleasure and happiness knowing that one cannot be without the other, always considering them as elements of our *proyecto histórico*. By pleasure we refer to gratification and, in this context, we are using it to refer particularly—though not exclusively—to bodily gratification: sensual and sexual. By happiness we refer to fullness of satisfaction and, in this context, satisfaction refers to the gratifying sense that comes from understandings, attitudes, and commitments. Of course such satisfaction is not apart from material reality. Material gratification—bodily gratification—is necessary for experiencing satisfaction, pleasure, and happiness. The degree and kind of material gratification needed depends on the persons involved, but, I insist, material gratification is essential to satisfaction. Yes, gratification and satisfaction, pleasure and happiness, exist in a circular fashion, spiraling towards human fulfillment and fullness of life.

Insisting on pleasure and happiness does not mean that we are embracing a hedonistic attitude that concentrates on or restricts happiness to pleasure but, again, we are insisting on pleasure as an intrinsic element of happiness and fullness of life. Nor are we espousing eudemonism, claiming that the highest ethical goal is happiness and personal well-being. However, we are indeed saying that happiness and personal well-being are intrinsic elements of fulfillment and fullness of life. We will look at key elements of what we call fullness of life below but here we must at least explain that we base embracing and promoting pleasure and happiness on the theological understanding that love of self is **not** necessarily a selfish act. Love of self is a positive act that serves as the measuring rod for the love of neighbor required by Christian Scripture. The Gospel of Matthew 22: 34–40, places on Jesus’ lips the then already ancient commandment to love God and to love one’s neighbors. But the way it is phrased connects both of these requirements with love of self—a motivational force for we conceive love of self as promoting one’s happiness (not achievable without pleasure): “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And **the second is like it:** you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (emphasis added).

Happiness has been given, most of the time, a positive interpretation usually relating it to the goal of life, to what God wants for us. It is true that

⁴⁹ Assmann, “Por una sociedad donde quepan todos” 387.

many times true happiness has been deferred—postponed, mostly for the poor and oppressed, to the next “world” as the reward for a life of sacrifice in this world. Happiness often seems to be what the rich and powerful have and the rest of us cannot obtain until we die. Yet, even this perverted sense of distribution of happiness has not imposed a negative attitude towards happiness. However, when it comes to pleasure, the contrary is true. Pleasure fell a long time ago into the hands of the negative side of dualism. Pleasure has been paired with the still prevailing negative understanding of sensuality and sexuality, with all sorts of excesses, of vices, with selfishness, with death. Pleasure has been made to refer mainly (only?) to “bodily sensations that have become divorced from or a stand-in for the pleasure of being a soul in a body living in connection with others.”⁵⁰ This negative understanding of pleasure has resulted in splitting us from our desires (perhaps from our best selves?) and, I would suggest, by distancing us from our own humanity it has also brought about divisions among us.

The prevalent demeaning understanding of pleasure distances us from ourselves resulting in “a pervasive trauma . . . that leads to separate ourselves from parts of ourselves, to create a split within ourselves so that we can know and also not know what we know, feel and yet not feel our feelings.”⁵¹ Only a re-valuing of pleasure as “a sensation . . . written into our bodies . . . [an] experience of delight, of joy . . . a compass pointing to emotional true north” will cure the trauma most women, not only Hispanas/Latinas, suffer.⁵² Only our insistence on regaining our pleasure-loving selves will allow us to become fully incarnated, to value our body-lines, to embrace our sexuality, and to pay attention, appreciate and liberate our desires for our own life and fullness of life-liberation.

Life and Fullness of Human Life-Liberation as Universal Ethical Principle

The principle of our *mujerista proyecto histórico* is life and fullness of human life-liberation.⁵³ Since one (Please! I am saying this is only *one* of

⁵⁰ Carol Gilligan, *The Birth of Pleasure* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002) 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 8.

⁵² *Ibid.* 159.

⁵³ Earlier on in my work I talked about our goal being survival. “Survival has to do with more than barely living. Survival has to do with the struggle **to be** fully. . . . This translates into two sets of questions: questions about physical survival and questions about cultural-historical survival” (Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*, 2nd ed. [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992] 4). I have really not departed from this insight that I articulated since the beginning, insight coming from my own experience and the experience of grass root Hispanas/Latinas. The context in which this is said makes it very clear that “*to be*” is not at all meant in an essentialist way yet I continue to be questioned about this. In this article I have moved from *to be* to *life and fullness of human life—liberation* hoping to leave no doubt that I am not making essentialist claims

them) of the essential characteristics of human beings (Please! I am not claiming that this might not also be a characteristic of some other “forms” of life) is self-awareness/self-consciousness/self-reflection, and this ability of the human mind depends on the physical development of the brain (I use “brain” to mean, as it does in everyday language, all of the parts of the brain: the brain stem, the mid-brain, the cerebellum, and the cerebro-hemispheres), there is no way that we can dispense with the physicality of life. So when I talk about the principle of life I refer to the biological-physical aspect of life. Life is also sensations, feelings, emotions—which depend on physical life, as do also the evaluative functions of the mind (the basis for ethical thought), and the linguistic functions. Life also is/takes place at the historical, cultural, ethical-aesthetic, spiritual-mystical level—all of it indicating the necessarily social aspect of human life. Life as a principle for our *mujerista* utopian project “is not a concept, an idea, an ontological abstract or concrete horizon. Neither is it a ‘mode of being.’ Human life is a ‘mode of reality;’ it is the concrete life of each human being from which she or he faces reality, constituting [reality] . . . [and] actualizing it as practical truth.”⁵⁴

The mode of reality that we Hispanas/Latinas experience and create is *la lucha*—the struggle for survival. This struggle for survival is the material criterion for our *proyecto* (it is a material criterion because our *proyecto* is *histórico*). This *lucha* has to do with the **production** of life and fullness of human life-liberation in its physical-material aspect—including the functions of the mind; with the **reproduction** of human life; and with the **development** of human life in historical cultural institutions and values—cultural here referring to all that we humans produce to deal with reality.⁵⁵ All of this happens at the personal level—in each of us (“in” here does not mean “individually”—exclusively within—but rather “pertaining to each one”), at the communal level—in the inter-subjectivity that is another constitutive characteristic of the human person, and at the societal level—

and that what continues to be central is *la lucha*, which always is from a given perspective and is concrete.

⁵⁴ To complete here the quote in the text, “Human life has rationality as an intrinsic constitutive element (because it is human) and the intersubjective and verifying exercise of rationality is an exigency of life itself: it is an ‘astuteness’ of life. Human life is never “other” than reason; it is the absolute-material-intrinsic condition of rationality. This is why there is the demand of not placing reason over life. . . . We defend, then, that human life is source of all rationality, and that material rationality has as criterion and last ‘reference’ of truth and as absolute condition of its possibility, human life” (Dussel, “Por una sociedad donde quepan todos” 618).

⁵⁵ See *ibid.* 622.

in the social, political, economic institutions that we create.⁵⁶ Production, reproduction, and development of life and fullness of life-liberation depend on our struggles to liberate ourselves from social situations of oppression—exploitation, marginalization, cultural prejudices, powerlessness and institutionalized violence—that force us to live in subhuman conditions. We also need to work at our own personal transformation—from a psychological perspective—so we can face any and all kinds of internalized oppression and live “with profound inner freedom.” For Christians this personal transformation also includes liberation from sin, from both personal sin and social sin—sinful structures—that perpetuate conditions that enslave us in so many different ways.⁵⁷

Our *mujerista proyecto histórico* is based on this universal principle of life and fullness of human life-liberation that we have been explaining. In and of itself, however, the *proyecto* neither dictates nor prescribes other universally valid ethical principles nor specific forms of government, economic systems or societal arrangements. In embracing as the guiding understanding/criterion of our particular *proyecto* the concept of excluding no one and being open to including everyone,⁵⁸ which is the only way to make the principle of life and fullness of human life-liberation operative at all times and in all places, we are not “pretending to know which shape of society is the only right one.”⁵⁹ We are not claiming to know exclusively—or even to be the ones who best know—“how can one make human beings happy.”⁶⁰ This means that as long as the social, political, and economic institutions we develop/embrace/uphold do not exclude anyone, then those institutions are valid because they are not contrary to the principle of life and fullness of human life-liberation. All of our criteria/norms are submitted to this same kind of judgment: our decisions of what is right or wrong, obligatory or permitted not only have to respect but they have to promote life and fullness of life-liberation.

As we move ahead in the 21st century we have identified issues that need to be taken into consideration if the principle of life and fullness of human life-liberation is going to be respected. In other words, we turn into criteria

⁵⁶ See Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 71–99; see also her latest book, *Out of The Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 133–44.

⁵⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* xxxviii.

⁵⁸ This is a clearer and more precise way of saying what we have said up to now, that liberation cannot be accomplished at the expense of anyone else and that we want and work toward radical change instead of merely wanting to participate in present structures.

⁵⁹ Franz Hinkelammert, “Una sociedad en la que todos quepan: de la impotencia de la omnipotencia,” in Duque, 364.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

for our struggles the elimination of whatever effectively excludes us from contributing to societal norms. This is why we claim that our daily experience of exclusion and oppression and our cries and *lucha* against the death-dealing reality we face today is the starting place for giving shape to our *proyecto histórico*.

At this point, of course, we have moved from considering a utopian project into delineating a feasible *proyecto*, a concrete and practical program/praxis. Our praxis, our liberative praxis—the fully conscious work we do to change the oppressive and exclusionary reality of Hispanas/Latinas—has several important components. First of all, our liberative praxis happens in and defines spaces, situations, and moments. Our liberative praxis is entrenched in the world of possibilities, which is why effectiveness has to be one of its main criteria. This world of possibilities is a utopian vision and, I insist, it is also a “situated universal” because our *proyecto* arises from and is constantly renewed by **our** reality and **our** way of experiencing, understanding, and dealing with what is real. This reality is a “situated universal,” not an abstract universal or a concrete universal that simply sees the concrete as a particular of the given universal.⁶¹ It is **our** *proyecto* and we claim the right to have **our** experience be what defines it and grounds it. The insistence on the “**our**” does not mean that I believe Hispanas/Latinas are unique. However I do claim specificity: we experience reality in a certain way and that way is a very particular one. Particularity does not set us apart but on the contrary, it is particularity what indeed constitutes universality and it is where we encounter universality.

Second, our liberative praxis **is**, and it has many different shapes. “Organic intellectuals”⁶² like myself do not invent liberative praxis but rather

⁶¹ Mario C. Casalla, “El Cuarteto de Jerusalén,” in *Márgenes de la Justicia* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Altamira, 2000) 238 and 262 (n. 11).

⁶² No matter how I think of myself, no matter what I call myself, I get rebuked by someone whose opinion I respect. If I refer to myself as an “academic” or the specific academic title given my specialty in the academy, “theologian” or “Christian ethicist,” I am chided for using titles given by those who have power and privileges and by preferring to associate with book knowledge and not with knowledge arising from lived-experiences. If I call myself an activist because I believe the goals and methods I use in *mujerista* theology and ethics contributes to the liberation of Hispanas/Latinas, I am reproached for ascribing to my work possibilities that are beyond its scope. I am also taken to task for talking in a way that will allow academicians to ignore my work, which means I cannot influence—no matter that it might be a very tiny influence—ideas that become central in the public imaginary and in societal norms. I use “organic intellectual” for I can point to Gramsci and to Gustavo Gutiérrez’s appropriation of Gramsci’s idea for theologians—and that seems to make it acceptable more acceptable. (See Antonio Gramsci, “La formazione degli intellettuali,” in *Scritti politici* [Rome: Riunti, 1967] 830–40; and Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 10–11.) However, “organic intellectual” or “organic theologian” also seems to encounter resistance among some for they think I

contribute to the formulation of frameworks for understanding our praxis. As an activist-theologian I believe that my work in elaborating a theological discourse—*mujerista* theology—is praxis. Our discourse is an attempt to point to and bring together changes in ways of thinking and acting that inform our liberative praxis and arise from it. Our discourse also, hopefully, points to the fact that change happens gradually for “political change arises out of simultaneous and loosely coordinated shifts in both thinking and action across several scales” (either simultaneously or sequentially).⁶³ In our work as organic theologians we attempt to provide an impetus for setting adequate criteria to use in judging our liberative praxis. We see our theological works as one that “does not incidentally bring about freedom because it reflects on certain symbols or doctrines in certain ways; theology does not necessarily result in freedom because it offers theoretical arguments as to the nature of freedom. As a form of social and religious therapy, theology anticipates freedom, calling into question the way things are, seeking out distortions, provoking a new way of being and doing in history. As part of its practical nature, theology is inherently involved with emancipation and enlightenment, and its form must be critical: uncovering, revealing, hearing and enlightening.”⁶⁴

The particularities of Hispanas/Latinas liberative praxis are not something anyone of us invents but rather it emerges from the reality in which we are immersed as Hispanas/Latinas who live in the United States. The multi-layer oppression we struggle against in our daily lives is what shapes our liberative praxis, including our theological enterprise.

Finally, all liberative praxis for us Hispanas/Latinas has to contribute necessarily to the process of conscientization that enables Hispanas/Latinas to become moral agents or to strengthen our moral agency. Conscientization respects and promotes the participation of Hispanas/Latinas in our own process of liberation. This is why in *mujerista* theology we have used a method that includes the voices of grassroots Hispanas/Latinas. *Mujerista* theology is a liberative praxis precisely because it does not objectify Hispanas/Latinas and our struggles but rather includes our religious understandings and practices and our ability to articulate their meaning in our lives. In gathering grassroots Hispanas/Latinas to reflect on their lived

am being elitist, claiming intellectual or even moral superiority. I insist on using “organic intellectual” because it allows me to point to a hermeneutics of self-implicature that insists on a subjectivity that is not individualistic but rather points to social practices of grassroot Hispanas/Latinas as well as the way those in power see us and act towards us. (See Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990] 3).

⁶³ Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* 234.

⁶⁴ Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986) 143.

experience and to share with one another their understandings and struggles, *mujerista* theology provides opportunities for conscientization—for self-definition, an intrinsic element of moral agency. Conscientization is a praxis in which, through reflective action, Hispanas/Latinas come to understand the world in which we live and the preferred future we envision in such a concrete world that we begin to deal with it effectively—undermining the present oppressive world while building the liberative future we desire.

Conscientization is a liberative praxis because it makes it possible for us to move from seeing the spaces in which we are—whether we create them or we are placed there—as interstices in which we can embrace and nourish desire moving to a different kind of consciousness that makes it possible for us to break lose from the confinements of oppression in order to create our *proyecto* histórico.