

العالم النظرية في العالم 世界上的理論 ทฤษฎีในโลก

THEORY IN  
THE WORLD



# FEMINISM

**Transmissions and  
Retransmissions**

**MARTA LAMAS**

Translated by John Pluecker  
Introduction by Jean Franco



## Praise for *Feminism: Transmissions and Retransmissions*

“Anthropologist Marta Lamas’s book is a compelling examination of a variety of theoretical debates among contemporary feminists around the globe. From her location as a scholar/activist within the women’s movement in Mexico, she charts the evolution of her own intellectual/political journey over the past three decades. This text is a model for feminist theorists who are committed to similar self-reflections about a movement that has helped to transform both the academy and civil society.”

—Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Founding Director, Women’s Research and Resource Center,  
Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women’s Studies, Spelman College,  
and past president of the National Women’s Studies Association

“Marta Lamas is a refreshing, incisive voice and the history she charts is a welcome and informative one. The English translation of *Feminism* poses questions and problems that remain points of contention in feminist work across institutions and social spaces. This will be a timely and useful resource for students and scholars interested in learning more about theoretical and political tensions that shaped late twentieth-century Mexican feminism.”

—Rosemary Hennessy, Director, Center for the Study of Women,  
Gender, and Sexuality and Professor, Department of English, Rice University

“Three main scholarly heritages—anthropology, feminism, and Marxism—overlap and inspire Lamas’s approach in this veritable tour de force. This book takes up from the early days of women’s consciousness-raising, to today’s global feminist commitment, to human rights and a democratic praxis founded on inclusionary politics. A feminist in the trenches since the 1970s, Lamas offers new generations of students and scholars a highly accessible text that will persist, undoubtedly, as a required reference for years to come. This is a book you want to read, teach, and keep at hand.”

—Norma Klahn, Professor of Literature, University of California, Santa Cruz

“Lamas gives us new forms of feminist theory and politics from the perspective of her own long-standing engagement with Mexican feminism. Here, we learn how terms like ‘feminism,’ ‘gender,’ ‘sexual difference,’ and ‘essentialism’ have been historically and locally inflected by *mujerismo*, sectarian discord, and Zapatista feminism, as well as by common struggles against the Catholic Church, the machismo of workers’ parties, *indigenismo* movements on the left, and habits of political corruption that have encouraged rape and abuse. A profound reflection on the place of ‘theory’ in future iterations of feminist theory and political activism rounds out the work’s compass. Lamas’s groundbreaking book, like others in this important series, reminds us that theory is not a eurocentric affair, but rather a multisited thinking in and of the world.”

—Emily Apter, Professor of French and Comparative Literature,  
New York University and series editor of *Translation/Transnation*

“Marta Lamas is an extraordinary thinker and writer. Her work is pathbreaking and original. This book will bring her and the history of Mexican feminism to a broad audience. As theory and history it is an indispensable read.”

—Joan W. Scott, Harold F. Linder Professor of Social Science,  
Institute for Advanced Study

“Lamas’s essays span three decades of intellectual and political leadership in Mexico’s feminist movement. Among the challenges they throw down, two stand out: politics will go nowhere without theory, and feminism must overcome dogmatism and ‘arrogant’ sectarianism if it is to develop a viable political base. The *Theory in the World* series is an ideal setting for the transmission of Lamas’s work.”

—Mary Louise Pratt, Professor, Department of Spanish and  
Portuguese Languages and Literatures, New York University

# THEORY IN THE WORLD

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*Neighborhood and Boulevard: Reading the Modern Arab City* (forthcoming)

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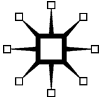
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*Marta Lamas*

Translated by John Pluecker  
Introduction by Jean Franco

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FEMINISM

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# Theory in the World: A General Introduction

“Theory” is an English transcription of the Greek *theorein*. Corresponding words exist in the major European languages. Our series, “Theory in the World,” works within these limits. “Theory” has been creolized into innumerable languages. Yet the phenomenon of “seeing or making visible correctly”—the meaning in Greek that will still suffice—does not necessarily relate to that word—“theory”—in those languages. That describes the task of the editors of a translated series of theory in the world.

Heidegger thinks that truth is destined to be thought by the man of “Western Europe.”<sup>1</sup> Our series does not offer a legitimizing counteressentialism. Take a look at the map and see how tiny Europe is, not even really a continent, but, as Derrida would say, a *cap*, a headland.<sup>2</sup> Such a tiny place, yet who can deny Derrida’s description, which is a historical and empirical observation? Look at the tables of contents of the most popular critical anthologies, and you will see corroboration of the essentialist conviction that goes with the historical claim. The counteressentialism is reflected in the choice of critics from “the rest of the world.” Just being non-white is the counteressence.

The influential *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, for example, lets in only Maimonides before the modern



university system kicks in.<sup>3</sup> But, even if they had let in Khaled Ziadeh, Marta Lamas, Marilena Chauí, and Arindam Chakrabarti, the material would be determined by the epistemological procedures of that system. Norton lets in W. E. B. Du Bois, the first African American to get a doctorate from Harvard, the man who felt that “of the greatest importance was the opportunity which my *Wanderjahre* [wandering years] in Europe gave of looking at the world as a man and not simply from a narrow racial and provincial outlook.”<sup>4</sup> Then we get Zora Neale Hurston (Columbia), Langston Hughes (Harlem Renaissance via Columbia), Frantz Fanon (University of Lyons), Chinua Achebe (University College, Ibadan), Stuart Hall (Oxford), Ngúgí wa Thiong’o (Leeds), Taban Lo Liyong (Iowa), Henry Owuwor-Anyuumba (Iowa), Spivak (Cornell), Houston Baker (UCLA), Gloria Anzaldúa (UCSC), Homi Bhabha (Oxford), Barbara Christian (Columbia), Barbara Smith (Mount Holyoke), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Cambridge), bell hooks (UCSC). The point I am making is not that these wonderful writers have not challenged Eurocentrism. It is that they are sabotaging from within and this is a historical fact that must be turned around so that there is a chance for truth to reveal itself. Fanon stands out, not because he is not a university man, but because he is the only one who clearly operated outside the Euro-U.S., though he was what Du Bois would call a Black European, literally fighting Europe, also from within, located in a geographical exterior.

(In the next most influential anthology, the rest-of-the world entries are almost identical, but for Audre Lorde [Columbia], Geraldine Heng [Cornell], Ania Loomba [Sussex], Chidi Oklonkwo [Georgia Tech], Jamaica Kincaid [Franconia and the New School]).<sup>5</sup> Again, Fanon is the only working “outsider.” I am sure the general pattern is repeated

everywhere. I have myself been so tokenized through my long career as representing “Third World criticism” that I am particularly alive to the problem.<sup>6</sup>

Yet our list is not really different. Marta Lamas teaches at the National Autonomous University in Mexico, founded in 1551; Khaled Ziadeh went to the Sorbonne, and Marilena Chauí is a Professor at the University of São Paulo. Lamas repeatedly assures us that affirmative action for gender justice works in the “developed countries,” Chauí offers us Spinoza, and Ziadeh recommends modernity via an earlier imperial formation, the Ottomans. So what is the difference?

Our position is against a rest-of-the-world counteressentialism, which honors the history versus tradition binary opposition. We recognize that a hegemonic Euro-U.S. series can only access work abroad that is continuous with Euro-U.S. radicalism. To open ourselves to what lies beyond is another kind of effort. Within the limits of our cause, we focus, then, on another phenomenon.

The history of the past few centuries has produced patterns of bilateral resistance. The formation is typically my nation-state, my region, my cultural formation over against “the West.” These days there are global efforts at conferences, events, and organizations that typically take the form of the Euro-U.S. at the center, and a whole collection of “other cultures,” who connect through the imperial languages, protected by a combination of sanctioned ignorance and superficial solidarities, ignoring the internal problems when they are at these global functions.<sup>7</sup> The model is the fact and discipline of preservation. By the Nara document of 1994, Japan insisted that preservation should be not only of built space but also of intangible cultural heritage. What started was the model that I have described above. It is now a tremendous capital-intensive fact of our world.

In and through our series, we want to combat this tendency. We want not only to present texts from different national origins to the U.S. readership, but also to point out how each is singular in the philosophical sense, namely universalizable, though never universal. We are not working for area studies niche-marketing, though the work is always of specialist quality. In the interest of creating a diversified collectivity outside of the English readership, the editors plan to hold annual conferences, interactive on the Web.

The story begins for me in a conversation with the Subaltern Studies collective in 1986—asking them if I could arrange the publication of a selection—because they were not available in the United States. A long term preoccupation, then. To this was added Hosam Aboul-Ela’s 2007 consolidation of a thought that was growing inside me: from the rest of the world literary editors wanted fiction, poetry, drama—raw material. Theory came generally from “us.” When Palgrave Macmillan called on me, I called on Hosam to be my coeditor for this series.

In the intervening three decades a small difference had imposed itself. Earlier I had felt that my brief within the profession was to share and show the work overseas was really “theoretical” by Western sizing. (I use the word “size” here in the sense of *pointure* in Derrida.)<sup>8</sup> Hence “strategic use of essentialism.” Now I also feel the reader must learn that “theory” need not look the same everywhere, that for the independent mind, too much training in producing the European model in stylistic detail might hamper. (From my teacher training work in rural India I understand that it is the illiterate man who understands things best because his considerable intelligence has not been hobbled by bad education or gender oppression. The lesson here is not that everyone should be illiterate, but

that strong minds should not be ruined by bad education or imperatives to imitate.)

This caution applies to *Neighborhood and Boulevard* by Khaled Ziadeh—not bad education, obviously, but the imperative to imitate “French Theory.” Ziadeh theorizes by space and repetition; Hosam Aboul-Ela’s Introduction walks us through it. There are plenty of people writing in Arabic who produce work competitive with the best in European-style “theory.” Reading Ziadeh, as Aboul-Ela points out, we have to learn to recognize “theory” in another guise. My own work profits from his account of the de-Ottomanization of the city by the French into an “Islamic” space; because I think de-Ottomanization, still active in our time, has a history as old as the Fall of Constantinople, and, reterritorialized, backward into Byzantium.

Our series has only just begun. I have described our goal with appropriate modesty: to translate theoretical material operating outside the Euro-U.S., not readily available to metropolitan readership but continuous with the episteme, even as “hybridity” keeps the local elsewhere. Yet there are also singular enclaves in many places where teaching and thinking apparently take place in less continuous epistemic formation. To acquire texts from these enclaves would require the kind of preparation, partly traditionalist, partly anthropologicist, that I do not possess. Perhaps, if our initial forays succeed, we will be able to fling our net wider: particularly important in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, where strong theoretical writing in the imperial languages (also languages of Africa, of course) flourishes and holds influence. For theoretical writing in the indigenous languages, not necessarily imitating the European model, contained within internal conflict, avoiding the anthropologist in the name of tradition will be on our agenda.

For now, I have arrived, after an initial meeting at the Modern Language Association, to an understanding of an activist “Task of the Editor,” that I have outlined above: to combat the bilateralism: my place and your Euro-U.S., that legitimizes Eurocentrism by reversal.

We start our list with Marta Lamas, *Feminism: Transmissions and Retransmissions*. Lamas is a feminist who theorizes as she practices. Her work is full of singular Mexican specificities. My own work can build on hers. As Jean Franco writes in her Introduction: “Lamas remains required reading.” I will spell out how Lamas and I relate. The human being and advanced primates are defined by the difference between what they need and what they can make. In this difference rise art, capital, the intuition of the transcendental, and human continuity as history. Each one of these is medicine and poison. This difference is theorized—and it is silly to think the primitive is incapable of theory—in terms of the only difference empirically available to us: sexual difference. It is this that Lamas calls “the invariable traits of biological difference.” Gender (or “what we now call gender,” Lamas again) is the grounding instrument of abstraction. I could go further, but for the series introduction, this is enough.

Next comes Khaled Ziadeh, of whom I have already written, and Marilena Chauí, *Between Conformity and Resistance: Essays on Politics, Culture, and the State*. Chauí’s specificity is Brazil, as Étienne Balibar’s is France, and Partha Chatterjee’s is India. Readership of English and French have had no difficulty in finding what is universalizable in the texts of these latter two. We hope that they will proceed in the same way with Chauí. In “Brazil’s Foundational Myth” she speaks to India, Africa, Israel, and many other countries. Her

discussions of citizenship and democracy have worldwide application. Her comments on the administered university is right on target for that phenomenon everywhere. Her discussion of popular religion has validity for discussions of secularism today. Her analysis of ethical philosophy, diagnosing “ethical ideology” as a do-gooding that presupposes victimhood and therefore evil, is applicable to the presuppositions of human rights and the international civil society. When she writes about Spinoza, it is an implicit critique of the digital idealism of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s recent work, which takes Spinozan categories such as “multitude,” “singularity,” and so on, and simply empiricizes them, ignoring that Spinoza was writing from within a position that could theorize only the righteous state. Again, there is much more material that I could cover, but I will stop here and let you enjoy the text for yourselves.

(I am sorry that she opposes a caricatured “postmodernism,” especially since she herself is sometimes perceived as a “postmodern” writer.)<sup>9</sup>

Down the line, we are planning to bring forward proposals for translations of Luis Tapia, *History and Politics in the Work of René Zavaleta*, as well as a text by the “Bolivian Gramsci,” René Zavaleta Mercado himself; *Deho, Gebo, Bandhutto*, a text by Arindam Chakrabarti, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Discourse and Interpretation*; we are negotiating for women’s texts from China, Korea, and Japan.

Our translators share with us the problems of translation for each unique text, at least hinting to the reader that, although the activity of translating is altogether pleasurable, to accept translations passively as a substitute for the “original” closes doors. We will not give up the foolish hope that a careful translation, sharing problems, will lead to language-learning.

Read our series as a first step, then. Come to the annual conferences where all of the authors and translators will gather, to ask: what is it to theorize, in our world?

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