

# SIGNS



J o u r n a l   o f   W o m e n   i n  
C u l t u r e   a n d   S o c i e t y

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# SIGNS

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## **Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society Special Issue: Unfinished Revolutions**

**R**evolutions have been a hallmark of modernity, celebrating the transformation of hierarchies and established social relations; the death of traditions; and the emergence of new classes, identities, subjectivities, sexualities, nations, technologies, sciences, methodologies, and ideologies. Yet despite the creative energies unleashed with the initiation of revolutionary change, the completion of revolutionary projects seems remarkably rare. As its etymology suggests, revolution may refer to apparent movement, the action of turning, a return or repetition, or a discursive shift as often as it does to an instance of great change or a complete overthrow of established relations.

For this special issue, we invite feminist explorations of the intricacies of unfinished revolutions, whether situated in the context of cultural, demographic, epistemic, historical, methodological, national, political, scientific, sociological, or technological frames. We welcome submissions that creatively deploy feminist analytical categories to enrich understandings of the dynamics, effects, implications, and consequences of unfinished revolutions.

Professor Phillip Rothwell, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Rutgers University, will serve as guest editor of the special issue.

The deadline for submissions is June 30, 2010. The issue will appear in autumn 2011. Guidelines for submission are available at <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/Signs/instruct.html>.

### **An Announcement from the Publisher**

The University of Chicago Press Journals Division is pleased to announce that the appointment of Mary Hawkesworth as editor of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* has been renewed for a second editorial term (2011–15). During her first term as editor, Professor Hawkesworth has greatly enhanced the presence of *Signs* in women's studies. Among her achievements is the creation of the Catharine Stimpson Prize for Outstanding Feminist Scholarship, named for the founding editor of *Signs* and awarded every two years to the best article in an international competition. She has also increased the global representation of *Signs*, introducing comparative perspectives symposia and encouraging contributions from scholars in emerging nations, such that, in 2008, 45 percent of the authors published in *Signs* were from twenty-three nations outside the United States. The Rutgers *Signs* office has also made great strides in reducing the overall time of peer review.

The University of Chicago Press gratefully acknowledges Rutgers University for its ongoing and generous support of *Signs* in providing space for the editorial office as well as financial support for Professor Hawkesworth and opportunities for both graduate and undergraduate student assistants and interns in the journal office. *Signs* has benefited greatly, and now will continue to benefit, from its conscientious staff in the Rutgers editorial office (senior editor Karen Alexander, managing editor Miranda Outman-Kramer, editorial assistants Dawn Blissett and Deanna Utroske, and many talented interns and graduate research assistants) and from the remarkable depth and breadth of scholarship represented by the editorial board at Rutgers. The University of Chicago Press is delighted to have this partnership with Professor Hawkesworth and Rutgers University continue for another five years.

## Comparative Perspectives Symposium: Indigenous Feminisms

### The Emergence of Indigenous Feminism in Latin America

R. Aída Hernández Castillo

As an indigenous feminist I intend to recover the philosophical principles of my culture and to make them fit into the reality of the twenty-first century. That is to say, to criticize what I don't like about my culture while proudly accepting that I belong to that culture. Indigenous feminism is to me part of a principle—women develop and make revolution to construct ourselves as independent persons who become a community that can give to others without forgetting about themselves. The philosophical principles that I would recover from my culture are equality, complementarity between men and women, and between men and men and women and women. That part of the Mayan culture currently doesn't exist, and to state the contrary is to turn a blind eye to the oppression that indigenous women suffer. The complementarity is now only part of history; today there is only inequality, but complementarity and equality can be constructed. I would also recover the double vision, or the idea of the *cabamil*, the one who can look forward and back, to one side and the other, and see the black and white, all at the same time. To recover this referent, as applied to women, implies knowing one's self with all the sad and terrible things that are part of my reality as a woman and to reconstruct myself with all the good things I have. It means to recognize that there are women different from me, that there are *ladinas* [not indigenous] and indigenous women, that there are black, urban and *campesina* women.

—Alma López<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alma López, Quiché woman, ex-council member of the City of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala (quoted in Duarte Bastián 2002, 18). All translations from Spanish are the author's own.



**A**lma López is not alone in her search for new consciousness and new organizing spaces. In different regions of Latin America many indigenous women like her have begun to raise their voices in the public sphere, not only to demand cultural and political rights for their communities but also to signal that the construction of a more just society must begin within the family itself. Some of them, like Alma López, have opted to self-identify as feminists. A minority (but a very important minority) of indigenous women have made women's rights the principal demand of their organizations.

To speak of indigenous feminisms would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. Nevertheless, beginning with the 1990s we have seen the emergence of indigenous women's movements in different Latin American countries, movements that are struggling on different fronts. In many cases these indigenous women's struggles for more just relations between men and women are based on definitions of personhood that transcend Western individualism. Their notion of equality identifies complementarity between genders as well as between human beings and nature.<sup>2</sup> It considers

<sup>2</sup> In the memoirs of the First Summit of Indigenous Women in the Americas (Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América 2003), some of the main elements of this alternative epistemology are expressed in the following terms: In contrast to the stark individualism promoted by globalized capitalism, indigenous women reclaim the value of "*Community* by understanding this term as a life where people are intimately linked with their surroundings, under conditions of respect and equality, where nobody is superior to anybody." In contrast to predatory neoliberal development, they reclaim "*Equilibrium*: which means to watch over the life and permanence of all beings in space and in nature. The destruction of some species affects the rest of beings. The rational use of material resources leads us toward balance and rectitude in our lives." In contrast to violence and domination of the strong over the weak, upon which is premised the liberal conception of survival of the fittest, they propose "*Respect*: which is based on the indigenous concept of the elders being those who are most respected, an attitude that extends to all other beings in nature. The Earth is seen as a woman Mother and Teacher that conceives the sustenance of all beings. It is the equal treatment with other beings, under the same conditions." In contrast to the superiority of the masculine over the feminine, which is claimed by patriarchal ideologies, they propose "*Duality or dualism*: in which the feminine and the masculine in a same deity are two energy forces found in one, which permits the balance of vision and action. They represent the integrity of everything that guides us toward complementarity. By considering the Supreme as dual, father and mother, one can act with gender equity. This attitude is basic for the eradication of machismo." In contrast to the fragmentation of the productive process promoted by maquiladora development, in contrast to the segregation of the labor force, in contrast to the fragmentation of collective imaginaries and the rejection of a systemic analysis that allows us to locate the links between different forms of struggle, they propose "*La cuatriedat*: which signifies the totality, a cosmic balance, that which is complete as represented by the four cardinal points, unity and the totality of the universe. By seeing both ahead and behind, by seeing to the sides, it is possible to struggle for unity. It is a force capable of transforming the inequalities

what constitutes a dignified life through a different understanding of people's relationship to property and to nature than the one liberal individualism provides. This alternative perspective on women's rights, which reclaims indigenous cosmovisions or indigenous epistemologies as spaces of resistance, is being transnationalized by a continental movement of indigenous women, most notably as part of an international network called Enlace Continental de Mujeres Indígenas (Indigenous Women's Continental Alliance; see Blackwell 2006). In this sense, we can point to an emerging form of cosmopolitanism (De Sousa Santos 1997) or transnationalism from below, which is confronting not only ethnocentric universalism but also globalization from above.

If we consider feminism to be a body of social theories and political practices that analyze and seek to change inequality between men and women, then this budding indigenous women's movement can be seen as a new indigenous feminism. Even though indigenous women have allied with wider women's movements, they do not always define themselves as feminists. Most indigenous women associate feminism with urban middle-class women and regard it as divisive of their shared struggles with indigenous men. However, these preconceptions are starting to change, and some indigenous women's groups in Mexico as well as some Mayan feminists from Guatemala are beginning to appropriate the concept of feminism (Hernández Castillo 2008).

In many Latin American countries organized indigenous women have joined their voices with those of the national indigenous movements to denounce the economic and racial oppression that characterizes the insertion of indigenous communities into the national project. But at the same time, these women are struggling within their organizations and communities to change those traditional elements that exclude and oppress them.

Although in some ways the demands of indigenous feminists coincide with those of urban feminists, they have substantial differences as well. The economic and cultural context in which indigenous women have constructed their gender identities marks the specific forms that their struggles take, as well as their conceptions of women's dignity and their ways of building political alliances. Ethnic, class, and gender identities have determined indigenous women's struggle, and these women have opted to incorporate themselves into the broader struggle of their com-

that our people suffer due to neoliberal and globalized politics" (Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas 2003, 132).



munities. But at the same time they have created specific spaces to reflect on their experiences of exclusion as women and as indigenous people.

The public appearance of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in 1994 served as a catalyst for the organization of indigenous women in Mexico and in many other regions of Latin America. Zapatista women became some of the most important advocates of indigenous women's rights through the so-called Women's Revolutionary Law. This charter, created in consultation with Zapatista, Tojobal, Chol, Tzotzil, and Tzeltal women, was made public on January 1, 1994, and has been of great symbolic importance for thousands of indigenous women who are members of peasant, political, and cooperative organizations.<sup>3</sup> It contains ten articles that enumerate a number of rights of indigenous women. These include the rights to political participation and to hold leadership posts within the political system, to a life free of sexual and domestic violence, to decide how many children they want to have, to a fair wage, to choose a spouse, to an education, and to quality health services. Although many indigenous women are not aware of the detailed contents of the charter, its mere existence has become a symbol of the possibility of a fairer way of life for women.<sup>4</sup>

Since the emergence of *Zapatismo*, indigenous women from different regions of México have not only voiced their support for the demands of their *compañeros* (comrades) and the interests of their communities but have also pressed for the respect of their specific rights as women. Parallel to their participation in the struggle for land and democracy, this wide sector of women has begun to demand the democratization of gender relations within the family, the community, and the organization. The emergence of this new movement is the expression of a long process of organizing and reflection involving Zapatista and non-Zapatista women.

Since the 1980s peasant movements throughout Latin America have become a space of political organization for indigenous women. Leftist activists and indigenous women from different regions have had a chance to interact at meetings, workshops, and conferences. Although formal deliberations have centered on agrarian problems, women have begun to share ideas and experiences informally. Gender inequalities within families,

communities, and organizations have become conversation topics during meetings. During such dialogues, organization advisers, pastoral agents linked to Catholic Liberation Theology, and activist scholars have not only been witnesses and supporters but have actively developed our own feminist agenda, expanding the criticism against capitalist inequality and reflecting on gender and racial exclusion.

Migration, organizational experience, religious groups, feminist non-governmental organizations, and even official development programs have influenced the ways in which indigenous men and women have restructured their relations within the household and reframed their strategies of struggle. We might point out that we have been witnesses to the emergence of a new political identity that cannot be absorbed within the political identities of indigenous movements or within the gender identities of feminist movements.

The different political genealogies and personal histories of organized indigenous women in Latin America have defined the ways in which these women and their organizations prioritize or do not prioritize the gender-related and/or collective demands of their peoples. The significant degree of internal diversity in the movement of indigenous women in the Americas is both its strength and its weakness. Reaching consensus or proposing general demands has involved negotiating political perspectives around how culture is experienced and conceptualized and around rights and relationships between men and women (see Rivera 2008). These tensions are especially evident within the Guatemalan Mayan movement, in which indigenous women have broadly debated the tensions between gender and culture and are pioneers in systematizing their reflections on these issues.<sup>5</sup>

Given the diversity of voices emerging from organizations of indigenous women, it is easy to be tempted to legitimize some and silence others, considering those who defend the indigenous cosmovision as a space of resistance and reject the term "feminism" to be authentic and discrediting those who propose the existence of an indigenous feminism and use the discourses of rights as acculturated. At the other extreme, some label those in ethnic-political movements who reject feminisms as essentialist and conservative, opening up space in political and academic debates only to those who have the most in common with the agenda of urban, Western feminism. Both perspectives can result in new strategies of discursive co-

<sup>3</sup> There are sixty-two formally recognized ethnic groups in Mexico whose numbers include up to 12 million people, that is, about 11 percent of the national population. Among them, Tzotziles, Tzeltals, Tolojobales, and Choles are the four largest groups found in Chiapas, all from the Mayan family.

<sup>4</sup> This law has been reproduced by the national and international press. The content of the law can be read in Speed, Hernández Castillo, and Stephen (2006).

<sup>5</sup> See Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla' (2000, 2004), Macleod and Cabrera Pérez-Armiñan (2000), Velásquez Nimantuj (2003), Gabriel Xiquín (2004), Álvarez (2006), Cumes and Monzón (2006).



lonialism that deny the wealth and complexity of these new political identities.<sup>6</sup>

Although it is still premature to speak of a consolidated movement of indigenous women in Latin America or of an indigenous feminism, the Zapatista women, together with other organized indigenous women in Latin America, have made us recognize that the struggles against racism, sexism, and economic exploitation can and should be complementary and simultaneous struggles. The ethnocentrism of urban feminism is being questioned, and the movement is being challenged to reexamine the importance of race and class in understanding the processes of women's identity formation in multicultural Latin America. The contributions of indigenous women, whose voices we can find in the documents produced in their congresses, meetings, workshops, and essays and interviews in feminist journals, as well as in their own political and academic publications, tell us of the necessity to construct a more inclusive feminist practice based on the recognition of diversity.<sup>7</sup> It is up to us to learn to listen to the claims made by these dissident voices.

*Center for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology, México City*

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<sup>6</sup> For a description of these different political genealogies in the formation of indigenous organizations in Latin America, see Hernández Castillo (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Among those publications are Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla' (2000, 2004), Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América (2003), and Sánchez (2005).