

Mariana Ortega

In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self
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Reviewed by Ofelia Schutte, 2017

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Mariana Ortega has written an important book on a topic that arguably should be considered central to feminist philosophy: an original, sustained theory of the self developed in light of US Latinas' reflections on their personal and social identities, their ways of knowing, and the type of existential struggles and challenges they face in US society.

In order to develop her theory of the self, which she calls 'the multiplicitous self,' Ortega covers at least three fields of scholarship. The first involves an extended critical reflection on a number of central images and concepts appearing in the works of highly recognized Latina writers or philosophers--for example, Gloria Anzaldúa's figure of the *new mestiza*, María Lugones's notion of "'world'-traveling," and Linda Martín Alcoff's analysis of a hermeneutic 'interpretive horizon' (Anzaldúa 1987; Lugones 1987; Alcoff 2006).¹ The second involves her reliance on a largely Heideggerian approach to the human condition in the sense of seeing the human being (Heidegger's *Dasein*) as thrown into the world and engaged necessarily in living with others, a view that distinguishes existential phenomenology from the conventional view of the atomistic subject of knowledge and action. Ortega then takes a critical distance from Heidegger when it comes to theorizing the multiplicitous subject, whose existential features of *being-in-worlds* (plural) and *in-between worlds* clearly distinguish it from its predecessor *Dasein*.

The third body of knowledge on which Ortega draws (one that exceeds classification but deserves some mention) consists of the incorporation of numerous feminist works published not only by a range of other Latina authors but, significantly, by other US women of color and by white Anglophone feminist theorists. These other voices are introduced often into the discussion insofar as they relate to Ortega's analysis of how the multiplicitous self 'fares' in the world. They touch on numerous topics relevant to women

of color, from identity politics to intersectionality, resistance, marginality, communities (the self with and among others), epistemic engagement, and self-understanding.

As the book develops, the three above-mentioned avenues of knowledge are found crisscrossing one another, a factor indicating the 'intertwining' (a term recurring throughout the study) of elements disclosed at the theoretical, social, and personal levels in the subjects featured centrally in Ortega's study: Latinas reflecting on their lived experience.

At its most basic level, then, the book is about Ortega's Latina-grounded theoretical proposal of what she calls the *multiplicitous*, or *in-between* self. The term *multiplicitous* is meant to capture the quality of an 'in-betweenness' in the self, where one sees oneself as 'one' (in the sense of an 'I' or a 'mineness' that senses its continuity) but also as 'multiple' (in the sense of the many locations, directions, or engagements that characterize the self's 'faring' in the world).² The self who is the subject of this theory is always a *situated* self. This is a self 'in process' whose different social identities are rooted in specific material conditions (244, n. 2).

The pivotal element making the multiplicitous self function at its best is its in-betweenness. Ortega attributes a heuristic, interpretive, critical function to in-betweenness as a psychic state or process (123-24). In this view, ordinary experience thrusts Latinas into border zones of in-betweenness, largely due to the Latina self not fitting in fully anywhere (socially speaking, whether from discrimination, migration, exile, or many other factors combined). That psychic state of in-betweenness that she is thrown into, whether she wants to be or not, born of marginality and often painful contradictions, makes way for a place of creativity and critical insight from which she can assess the shortcomings of the various worlds she inhabits, develop the strength to resist injustices, and engage with others in projects of personal and social transformation. 'It is this ability to see various perspectives from various worlds that is especially important for multiplicitous selves because it allows for the possibility of critical reflection and resistance' (153). In the pages of this book, the multiplicitous, in-between self emerges as a resilient, spiritually courageous, creative self, one whose special attunement to critical thinking and judgment arises from its very condition of in-betweenness.³

The argument is drawn and developed coherently through the book's seven chapters, plus its introduction and afterword. In the introduction, Ortega offers a poignant description of her choice of methodology. She situates her choice of an existential phenomenological method in her lived experience. 'Having come to the United States due to war, from a rude awakening and introduction to existential questions at an early age, [I] *had* been moved by the existential account of *Dasein* with its discussion of temporality, anxiety, and death. Philosophy let me explore questions about the meaning of life at a time when meaning seemed to have vanished' (3). Around the same time that she was drawn to these questions, she says, she 'digressed' from the strictly understood borders of philosophy to read works by Anzaldúa, Lugones, and other women of color who offered a range of 'self-explorations' and 'invitations to their lived experience' (2). The powerful and

sometimes gripping ways in which these two lines of concern (existential analysis and Latina narrative) came together planted the seeds, many years ago, of the work readers have before them today.

Chapter 1 offers an outstanding discussion of Anzaldúa's work, focusing on the images of the *new mestiza* and *la nepantlera* as these help to unravel the more intricate and salient moments of Anzaldúa's self in the borderlands, both literal and metaphorical (17-29, 35-39). Ortega also highlights the multiple and heterogeneous images of identity found in Anzaldúa. This chapter lays the ground for Ortega's formulation of the multiplicitous self as an in-between self and as multiplicitous in the sense that it is both one and many, with neither aspect necessarily overtaking the other.

Chapters 2 and 3 find Ortega engaged with two major interlocutors: Heidegger and Lugones. Here Ortega's extended discussion of Lugones's well-known notion of world-traveling is paramount.⁴ As much as Ortega appreciates and embraces Lugones's positions at various stages of her work, she differs from Lugones with respect to metaphysical issues in the representation of *self* and *world*. Ortega published an early paper on this topic (Ortega 2001). Here she expands the discussion to cover Lugones's position in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* (Lugones 2003) and more recent work, given some changes and developments in Lugones's views. The various meanings of *world* discussed in chapter 3 ("The Phenomenology of World Traveling") are complex and may require extra reading time if the book is used in a pedagogical context. Ortega's clear and carefully annotated writing style deserves mention. Her Latina feminist reading of Heidegger is a welcome feature. It made me wish she had been my college professor decades ago when I was introduced to *Being and Time*.

Continuing her dialogue with Heidegger and Lugones, now expanded to cover other topics such as 'double consciousness' and 'world-traveling by members of dominant groups,' in chapter 4 Ortega develops the notion of *critical world-traveling* as a critical tool especially useful to the in-between self (131-36). The chapter ends with a fascinating discussion of a good range of non-Latina feminist appraisals of the notion of world-traveling, further engaging with Lugones's highly influential and ground-breaking essay on the subject.⁵

Chapter 5, "Multiplicitous Becomings: On Identity, Horizons, and Coalitions," offers a helpful and phenomenologically informed interpretation Alcoff's defense of identity politics in light of Alcoff's hermeneutic understanding of identity as horizon.⁶ Ortega then orients the discussion beyond Alcoff to what it would mean to consider the epistemic interpretive horizon of a specifically multiplicitous self. She develops her own analysis of how the multiplicitous self may fare in coalitional politics. Toward the end of the chapter a number of interesting issues arise, such as the question of forming coalitional politics with those whose interpretive horizons differ from our own.

Chapter 6 addresses the question of the links among social location, knowledge, and multiplicity. Ortega defends a pluralist approach to feminist methodologies inclusive of poststructuralism while at the same time arguing against some key elements in Paula

Moya's proposed 'postpositivist realist theory of identity' (173-90). At stake is a disagreement over Moya's argument that the postmodern notion of decentered identities undermines Latinas' much needed identity politics, coupled with Moya's dependence on an exclusively linear notion of time when understanding identity-formation. Ortega argues that Moya's use of the postpositivist realist theory of identity oversimplifies the theoretical options at stake, specifically undermining the 'constructive' aspects of the multiplicitous self (174).⁷

The final chapter, 'Hometactics,' deals with the desire to belong, or the nostalgia 'to return to a place called home' (193). Here the reader will find a moving conclusion to the book as well as a number of unexpected observations.

Overall, despite Ortega's determination to avoid dichotomies, the contrast presented in the book between a unitary and a multiplicitous self may itself turn out to be a dichotomy. To avoid this outcome while sustaining her argument against the unitary self, Ortega appears to hold both (a) that the multiplicitous self is the contrary of the unitary self and (b) that it is the unitary self's noncontrarian (that is, nondichotomous) alternative. If this is right, such a paradoxical conceptual status for the multiplicitous self will elicit plenty of debate and critical consideration.

In terms of some major questions or criticisms that may arise from this study, it seems unavoidable to accept the fact that readers, too, are situated selves with a sense of their own identities and preferred methodologies. In my own case, as a Latina trained in continental philosophy and leaning toward the culturally oriented, existential-literary wing of that field, I found this book extremely appealing because it brings to the continental philosophy conversation some important Latina voices on the human condition, an area where, as Ortega notes, we have been all but invisible.

There is another set of readers who may find the book very engaging. The study offers a wealth of information about positions taken on cross-cultural communication, intersectionality, coalition-building, and other issues of interest to US women of color and feminists in general. Ortega's introduction of a multiplicitous lens through which to review and analyze these issues will likely generate much interest. Still, be advised that the work defies a number of possible expectations. This is not a book for the straight-minded--whether in the logical, spatio-temporal, stylistic, or sexual senses of the term. Neither is it a study of race, sex, or gender theory. What makes this study distinct is the question of the multiplicitous self, its *being-in-worlds* and its *becoming-with-others*. The argument turns and (re)turns, disclosing the many sides of the multiplicitous self. At times a reader may become impatient and wish the narrative were more succinct. Although linear thinking is not explicitly ruled out as one of the multiple sides of the self, neither does it assume an exclusive or dominant function.

In other words, this is not a book in which each chapter addresses a problem and then is done with it. Rather, the study unfolds as an extended critical reflection with some central issues appearing, time and again, in different contexts and approached by a variety of interlocutors. Ortega maintains a respectful and generally appreciative style as she

engages with various thinkers, intermittently disagreeing with or moving beyond them as she develops her argument fully. The multiplicitous theme is played throughout. Each chapter is prefaced by a variety of memorable passages from Anzaldúa, Lugones, Fanon, Lorde, and others, as well as brief existential notes by Ortega. Most remarkably, two strikingly colorful images from Ortega's artwork (signed Mortega) embrace symbolically the main physical body of the book--one appearing on the cover and another just prior to the afterword.

A skeptical reader could ask: why introduce a whole new hypothesis about the multiplicitous self as a defining structure of consciousness when simply accepting the view that (1) there are different sides to our selves that are applicable to various social situations and (2) learning to manage them without doing violence to ourselves and others could solve the problems posed by deep existential conflict? Ortega's case depends largely on the view that at least certain types of psychic disarray and confusion (especially if caused or occasioned by discriminatory social practices) could be prevented if we would stop forcing people to adopt rigid identities in their personal self-understanding and in their ways of thinking and acting. Ultimately, as her book shows, a final question is: where, how, and why do I belong? Where, how, and why am I excluded? Then, turning those questions around from outside in: where, how, and why are there meaningful parts of myself that are excluded by me and by others who matter to me?

The combination of these two sets of questions yields the hypothesis of the multiplicitous self: a self that is both one and many, looking for balance, for possibilities of resistance and creative change, and for a better understanding of self and others in a just society. The analysis discloses a kind of pairing or experiential match between the inner dichotomies and at times paralyzing emotional contradictions within the self and the self's socially inflicted abjections and exclusions.

Another matter for further discussion is whether Ortega has applied the phenomenological method somewhat restrictively with regard to the choice of sources. To clarify, Ortega describes phenomenology as 'a 20th-century philosophical movement concerned with the study of structures of consciousness and experience as understood from a first-person narrative' (221, n. 2). This is good, as long as we understand that there is a need to articulate the process and criteria used to screen the applicable or relevant sets of first-person narratives. Obviously, all studies have limits, whether empirical, conceptual, and the like. In this case, although the selections of first-person narratives Ortega makes are eminently meritorious, the absence of many other types of *Latina situated selves* might lead to some bafflement. The majority of Latinas represented in this work are highly successful writers and intellectuals. What about the undocumented mother of five living in a rural trailer without health insurance, the Latina teen caught in an existential crisis over an unexpected pregnancy, or her fifty-year-old mother trying to survive a broken marriage without sufficient financial resources?⁸ It would be interesting to know how Ortega thinks the theory of multiplicitous selfhood applies to Latinas like these. Flipping the lens, what about mentioning Latinas in *worlds* and relations of *becoming with* where people of all colors (white included) join gladly in relatively

decentered activities? What about parties and festivals where everyone is dancing to US Latin, Caribbean, or South American rhythms? Must the multiplicitous lens be employed always in the context of conflict-ridden power relations? Could a unitary self join the dance?

At the outset Ortega states: 'I appeal to the words of Anzaldúa, Lugones, and other Latina theorists not to make grand claims about what it means to be a Latina in the United States or to create a set of categories that one must satisfy to be the 'right' kind of Latina' (8). In this spirit, let this book be a source of many future questions, conversations, and critical engagements with the ideas of *being-in-worlds* and *in-between worlds* that Ortega has brought so vividly to our attention.

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¹ Following Ortega, I will drop the quotation marks that Lugones places around *world* unless specifically citing Lugones (65).

² Ortega develops these central themes throughout the book, along with others such as guarding against essentialism and affirming the heterogeneity of Latina experiences.

³ One may be left to speculate on what other sets of circumstances (say, the complex effects of today's globalized world) or metaphysical views (for example, life existing in-between birth and death) might apply to broader interpretations relevant to the concept of the multiplicitous in-between self.

⁴ See note 1.

⁵ Ortega's own reading of Lugones appears primarily in chapters 2 and 3. For the initial and revised versions of "world'-traveling,' see Lugones 1987 and 2003.

⁶ Ortega also agrees with Alcoff's analysis of Merleau-Ponty on embodiment as a supplement to Gadamer's concept of a hermeneutic horizon. See also Alcoff 2006, 94-125.

⁷ The terms of this disagreement are complex since Moya's position can be helpful in other matters, such as fallibility and empirical verification. See also Moya 2002, 12-17 and 58-99.

⁸ I mention these examples not to reawaken stereotypes and prejudice but to highlight our shared humanity with these cases.