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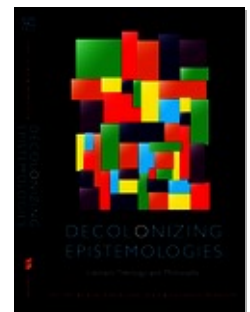
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❖ Mujerista Discourse: A Platform for Latinas' Subjugated Knowledge

ADA MARÍA ISASI-DÍAZ

One of the main goals of *mujerista* discourse has been to provide a platform for the voices of Latinas living in the United States. *Mujerista* discourse, particularly focused on Christian ethics and theology, has as its goal the liberation/flourishing of Latinas. It uses as its source the understandings and practices of Latinas, in particular the religious understandings and practices of grassroots Latinas who struggle against oppression in their everyday lives. *Mujerista* discourse, originally a liberationist one, highlights the voices of Latinas, which as a group are ignored by U.S. society.¹ Often considered intellectually inferior, Latinas' understandings are indeed one of the many subjugated knowledges that are ignored to the detriment not only of our own community but also of the whole of society.²

Mujerista thought is a "thinking-with" grassroots Latinas rather than a "thinking-about" them.³ *Mujerista* discourse is a "we" discourse that embraces commitment to being community while not ignoring specificity and particularity. Elaborated by academic Latinas, *mujerista* discourse takes very seriously what Paulo Freire noted long ago: At the heart of all liberation thinking there has to be a commitment to the people, what he calls a "communion with the people."⁴ This communion, or solidarity, with the people has to find expression in an ongoing dialogue that profoundly respects the people's ability to reason and to participate reflectively in their own struggles against oppression.⁵

In order to remain true to the struggle for liberation, one needs to continuously find ways of creating knowledge from the underside of

history. This is why *mujerista* thought attempts to be beyond the controlling rationality of dominant discourses. To do this, we use the experience of Latinas as the source for knowledge: This is a nonnegotiable understanding in the struggle for our liberation. Our work is not to elaborate and explain our understandings against the background of “regular” knowledge, using the dominant discourse to validate our insights. As a decolonial discourse, *mujerista* thought seeks adequacy and validation from its usefulness in Latinas’ struggles. This does not mean, however, that we can claim to be free of “dominant thinking” or that we can always evade its categories, or that we always find it necessary to do so. As a matter of fact, the goal of *mujerista* discourse, the liberation/flourishing of Latinas, obliges us to use in our methods, in our categories, and in our strategies whatever we find valuable to achieve our goal.

This makes clear that though *mujerista* theology and ethics have used the language of liberation discourse, they certainly understand liberation not as a project possible within Western civilization but rather one that has as its goal radical structural changes. Our attempt has always been to enable and further Latinas’ thinking, that is, to shed light on the epistemological richness that emerges from our lived experiences and to value what we know and how we know it as our contribution to building a different world. Undoubtedly, we find many similarities between *mujerista* discourse and decolonial thinking—postcolonial philosophy—which we began to explore at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Though we agree with Walter Dignolo that liberation theology, one of the “parenting” discourses of *mujerista* thinking, was conceived within the Western episteme, *mujerista* thinking, as one of the instances of Latina/o thought, has taken liberation thought beyond its initial articulations.⁶ Perhaps because of our condition as an ethnoracial, minoritized, and marginalized group within the United States, *mujerista* theology, though indebted to Latin American liberation theology, also drinks from many of the same fountains as does decolonial thinking. It is not a matter of merely “changing dresses” but rather a welcoming of decolonial thinking as an addition to liberation thought and as a way of creating “coalitions” among scholars and schools of thought that are committed to local communities and that seek to contribute to the articulation of shared meanings.

That said, I turn to the themes of this essay that indeed fall within the paradigms of both decoloniality and liberation. This essay is about two elements at the heart of our communion with grassroots Latinas: an ongoing option for the oppressed, which, as *mujeristas*, is an option for Latinas, and a commitment to value *lo cotidiano*—the everyday of Latinas. Without these two commitments, one cannot contribute to unveiling subjugated knowledges. In this essay I first explain what I mean by the oppressed, of which Latinas are but one group. I then clarify the meaning of *lo cotidiano* in an attempt to discover and highlight its richness. In the third section of the essay, I analyze the option for the oppressed and why it has to be at the heart of all liberative and decolonial discourses. I conclude the essay with some important theological considerations.

THE OPPRESSED

Injustice, which from the perspective of those suffering is called oppression, has different causes that need to be made explicit in order to struggle for justice in a more effective way than we have done since the 1960s. Different causes lead to different modes of oppression, which are interrelated but do not operate in the same way. There are five different modes of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, ethnoracism, powerlessness, and structural violence.⁷ None of these different forms of oppression is more unjust or causes more destruction than the others. All of them are interconnected, creating institutions, organizations, laws, and customs that reinforce one another and create structural oppression. The dominant group, the group that has power, considers oppressed people as having no value or significance. Those who are oppressed—Latinas and Latinos, the impoverished, lesbians, gays, transsexuals, and transgender people, among many others—are not taken into consideration in determining what is normative for society.

Often when referring to the oppressed, I specify “the impoverished” because I am a middle-class Latina and though I have suffered economic exploitation, i.e., my salary in comparable situations has not been the same as that of my male colleagues,⁸ being middle class can easily lead me to ignore poverty. Consciously mentioning the impoverished is a way of reminding myself that I have to struggle for societal changes even

if such changes will “cost me” some of the economic advantages and privileges I have being a middle-class Latina.

When I refer to the oppressed and the impoverished, I am referring to those who are conscious of their oppression and who struggle for their liberation, taking into consideration their communities. In this category I include those who know that liberation is about a radical change of structures and not about participation in oppressive structures. The oppressed and the impoverished are those who are conscious of being historical agents, though they would most probably not talk about it using this phrase. They are those who can and do explain to themselves what happens to them and in doing so take responsibility for their experience of being oppressed, for who they are as oppressed people and how they face the situation in which they find themselves.⁹ I do not include, however, the impoverished whose struggle to survive makes it impossible for them to reflect on their circumstances. In no way does this mean that I devalue them or ignore them. A commitment to the impoverished and the oppressed is precisely a commitment to create spaces that will allow them the opportunity to become more conscious of the reasons for the injustices they suffer. Though one cannot “conscientize” anyone else, we can facilitate opportunities for the oppressed and impoverished to reflect on their own reality.¹⁰

Not part of this category are those who consider themselves oppressed but whose situations are due to personal circumstances and not to structural ones. One needs to keep in mind, at least in the United States, that it has become somewhat fashionable to claim to be oppressed in order to benefit from government programs such as scholarships for minority children and youth. Therefore, in conclusion, the oppressed and impoverished are conscious of their oppression, and they know that their reality is not due solely or mainly to personal shortcomings; they neither seek an individualistic way out of their situation nor attempt to simply “move ahead” within oppressive structures.¹¹

LO COTIDIANO

I start this section with a quotation from Martin Buber’s work, for it situates me and my interest in lo cotidiano, and indicates the reason for my commitment to value it.

I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. . . . I know no full but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility. Though far from been equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility, and know who speaks and demands a response.¹²

My interest in *lo cotidiano* is intrinsically linked to the principal axis of my ethical-theological work: an option for the impoverished and the oppressed. Therefore, *lo cotidiano* that interests me and to which I refer is that of the impoverished and the oppressed, particularly that of my community of accountability, Latinas living in the United States. I struggle to describe *lo cotidiano* in order to be able to make it concrete, for if not, I will not be able to affect it, that is, to change it.

The description of *lo cotidiano* that follows, which I propose not as a definition but as a heuristic device that has as its goal a better—deeper—understanding of both the oppression of Latinas and our liberative praxis, has hermeneutical and epistemological implications.

Lo cotidiano refers to the immediate space—time and place—of daily life, the first horizon of our experiences, in which our experiences take place. It is where we first meet and relate to the material world—by which I mean not just physical reality but also the way in which we relate to that reality (culture) and how we understand and evaluate our relationships with reality (our memories of what we have lived, which we refer to as “history”).

The materiality of *lo cotidiano* brings into focus the fact that it always refers to embodied experiences; the embodied quality of *lo cotidiano* is consciously important to the oppressed and the impoverished.

Lo cotidiano has to do with the practices and beliefs that we have inherited, and with those habitual judgments that are part of our “facing life,” of how we face and what we do with our reality.¹³

Lo cotidiano does not refer to the a-critical reproduction or repetition of all that we have learned or to which we have become accustomed. Instead it refers to what is reproduced or repeated in a conscious manner, that which is part of the struggle for life and for liberation. *Lo cotidiano*, therefore, refers to the problematized daily reality—that is, to the limitations imposed by the material-historical

reality one faces every day, and to the personal situations in which we find ourselves as we try to deal with such problematized reality.

Lo cotidiano, then, refers to the space—time and place—which we face daily, but it also refers to how we face it and to our way of dealing with it. Realizing that lo cotidiano has hermeneutical value, that is, that it is not only what is but also the interpretative framework we use to understand what is, lo cotidiano is a powerful point of reference from where to begin to imagine a different world, a different societal structure, a different way of relating to the divine (or to what we consider transcendental/radical immanence), as well as a different way of relating to ourselves: to who we are and what we do. Lo cotidiano, therefore, has an extremely important role in our attempt to create an alternative symbolic order.

It is precisely because lo cotidiano refers to a problematized reality, that one can find in it subversive and creative elements that enable questioning oppression and resisting it.

Lo cotidiano is what makes specific—concrete—the reality of each person and, therefore, it is *in view of* it and *in* it that one lives the multiple relationships that constitute each one as a specific person, as me and not someone else.

Lo cotidiano has to do with our emotional and physical strengths and weaknesses, with the work we do, with the frustrations and hopes we have. Lo cotidiano refers to our family relationships and to our friendships; to the way we relate to our neighbors and to our different communities; to our experience of power and powerlessness—that is, how we relate to those who have power over us and to those over whom we have power; and to the role religious beliefs or other beliefs have in our lives.¹⁴

The specificity of lo cotidiano makes focusing on the particular possible while it helps to question abstract universals that often ignore or falsify lo cotidiano.¹⁵

Lo cotidiano does not relate only to what is specific, but it also enters into contact with and is part of social systems. Lo cotidiano impacts structures and its mechanisms and is, in turn, affected by them. It is in lo cotidiano that the oppressed live, socially marginalized, economically exploited, and struggling against sexism and ethnoracism.¹⁶

Lo cotidiano is closely related to what is referred to as “common sense,” which is why it is considered “natural.” Natural here refers to the sense given to “of course,” and not to the philosophical naturalism that limits reality to what the human mind can conceptualize. I use “natural” to insist on how lo cotidiano is enmeshed with the concrete and specific.¹⁷

Because lo cotidiano refers to what is specific about each of us, it is the main locus for considering diversity in a positive way. Now in the second decade of the twenty-first century we are certain that homogeneity turns people into masses easy to control and to manipulate. It is the diversity made present by and in lo cotidiano and the particularity and specificity of lo cotidiano that makes it possible to highlight differences and generate shared meanings as the basis for creating liberating societal structures. It is out of this diversity present in lo cotidiano of many different communities that subjugated knowledge emerges, helping the oppressed survive in the present-day suffocating globalization that ignores them.

Lo cotidiano refers to the simple reality of our world, which is not a simplistic reality. By simple reality I mean the one that we have to urgently tend to, that is dispersed throughout each day, and that we run into whether we want to or not. Without forgetting to deal with the reasons behind the reality, the urgency of surviving for the oppressed makes it necessary at times to leave for later the “whys,” a later that often does not arrive because we do not conquer the urgency. Of course, that some have no time, energy, and/or resources to deal with the reasons for oppression does not mean that they are not conscious of them. In short, then, lo cotidiano is the reality strung along the hours in a day; it has to do with the food we eat *today*, with the subway or bus fare we have to pay *today*, with how to pay *today* for the medicine for a sick child or an elderly parent. Claiming that lo cotidiano has to do with the simple reality of our lives refers to the obviousness and the immediacy of lo cotidiano, to the many crises that grassroots people face with a wisdom and creativity made obvious by the fact that somehow they survive today and are ready to face tomorrow.

It is in lo cotidiano that we have and exercise power, appropriating information that we filter and shape according to our needs, our

hopes, and our goals. This is why the powers that be might kill us but cannot conquer us, as Hemingway said.

Lo cotidiano is an ethical space—time and place—for in it we can move with a certain autonomy, take decisions and put them into play—decisions that might seem unimportant but which woven together constitute our ethical and moral horizon.¹⁸

There are, of course, different cotidianos. Lo cotidiano that I refer to is that of the base/grassroots/Latino communities, mainly to lo cotidiano of Latinas. It refers to how Latinas understand and use the elements of our culture in common, ordinary, everyday realities, to how we appropriate traditions, language, symbols, and art. This cotidiano is very different from that of the dominant group. An example might be useful here.

When using a public bus in New York City, many times I see two Latinas approach the bus but only one gets in. The other one waits outside until the first one uses the fare card and then quickly turns around and gives it to the woman who has stayed on the sidewalk. That they have to pay a \$2.25 fare to ride the bus powerfully impacts their lives. They have to coordinate their efforts to face this reality of their cotidiano. They have to give it much thought: coordinate schedules, decide who pays for the card, how they are going to keep track of its use, and so forth. On the other hand, for those of us who do not have to worry about how we are going to pay for local transportation, lo cotidiano is less demanding, and we hardly pay attention to it. Often we stand on the sidewalk and signal a taxi, or those who are upper middle class or rich simply wait inside until the doorman of the building gets them one. When one gets in a taxi, how much it is going to cost is something one does not know until the end, but having more than a minimal amount of money means one does not worry. The taxis in the area where I live, an area of middle-class and working-class people, are different. Here you negotiate with the driver how much the taxi ride is going to cost before you get in.

This example reveals the aspect of lo cotidiano that Certeau called the tactics of lo cotidiano: the “what” and the “how” at the level of the particular situation. Grassroots people, of course, would like to have a general strategy to deal with their transportation expenses, an established way of paying for them, but they simply do not have the resources to do

this. Their cotidiano is full of struggles to make ends meet. It is an *a pie cotidiano*—an on-foot cotidiano—in the sense that they have to deal with it with little resources other than their wit and popular wisdom. Their cotidiano deals with a reality that for the dominant group is a matter of routine. The dominant group does not have to decide whether to take the bus and pay \$2.25 or walk fifteen blocks in order to have that money to buy food or soap to do the laundry. Those of us with resources often go through the day without having to think much about how to feed and dress ourselves, how to pay for transportation to get where we are going, or to pay for doing the laundry. It is at this level of facing the particularity and specificity of everyday life that grassroots people—Latinas—embrace lo cotidiano and in doing so, lo cotidiano becomes the space—time and place—where they exercise their moral agency and determine who they are, who they become, and how they live their lives.

Why is it that lo cotidiano of the grassroots is not valued, is not taken into consideration when one analyzes reality and elaborates strategies for dealing with it? In philosophy there is both a valuing of lo cotidiano but also a disvaluing of it because it is seen often as a “place for inauthentic living.”¹⁹ When lo cotidiano enters the academic discourse it is often dislodged from the actual living of the vast majority of people. It becomes abstract; and this is not the abstraction needed to talk about any and all themes and issues. Instead it is an abstraction that loses its footing in the historical reality of peoples. This is because most of us in the academy often have no contact with lo cotidiano of the people, and ours is too different from theirs, so it does not help us to be mindful of what constitutes the reality of most people. Again, an example here might prove useful in establishing the poignancy and urgency of the grassroots people’s cotidiano and its difference from that of those of us in the academy.

I was at a bus stop last Sunday on my way to church, when I noticed a woman crossing the street. She seemed to be in her mid-fifties and had a little boy with her who was about six years old. The little boy was dressed in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, a white one clean and pressed. He happily skipped across the street and came to sit on the bench next to me. He looked healthy and rested, for he did not have a sleepy face even though it was early. The woman, in contrast, was wearing a faded dress that was not ironed. She was very thin and looked distraught. She

was munching on a donut and was drinking coffee from a paper cup that indicated she had bought her breakfast at a convenience store. The little boy sat next to me, and the woman sat next to him. After a few minutes the little boy, who in order not to bother me was crowded against the woman, said to her, “Mom, you stink.” He repeated it a couple of times in a soft voice. Previously the woman had talked rather sharply to him telling him he needed to behave. Now she mumbled softly to him, “Yes, I know.”

Their bus came before mine, and I was left to ponder on what I had just seen and heard. First of all I was surprised that the woman was the mother of the boy—he called her Mom—for she looked too old to have such a young child. I realized that most probably she was not in her mid-fifties but in her forties. She indeed looked older, her body wasted beyond her actual age. Then I thought about how smartly dressed the little boy was in contrast to how disheveled she looked. Most probably she had poured all her attention on the little boy and had little time, energy, or money left to get herself clean, to wash and iron her dress. She could have saved money by making coffee in her house instead of buying it at a convenience store. Well, that is, if she had a house and had paid for the gas or the electricity to run the stove, and owned a coffeemaker, and had the money to buy a can of coffee plus the filters needed to brew it, which all together would cost over \$5. She might not have had \$5; she might only have had \$2.00 to buy one cup of coffee and a donut.

I thought long and hard about all the decisions she had made by 9 AM that Sunday morning. She had to think about breakfast. She had fed the little boy, for if not, I thought, he would have been asking her for some of her donut, and she had fed him at home or his face might have smudges of powdered sugar or the glaze that covers the donuts. Her breakfast came second, given the fact that she was quickly eating before boarding the bus. She, perhaps, had to start thinking about breakfast the night before. Perhaps she had to decide not to buy a can of coffee. She needed the money for the bus fare.

In contrast, I had made no decisions about breakfast: I have all I need to make coffee at home and I have oatmeal to cook, or bread to toast. I did not have to choose between having money for the bus fare and eating a good breakfast. I have a fare-card that automatically gets recharged by debiting my bank card. I knew that if the bus did not come in time for

me to make it to the church before the service started, I could and would take a taxi. I had been preoccupied with other things than the routine of surviving since I had gotten out of bed. The decisions I had taken on that Sunday morning were so trivial that I do not remember a single one of them. It was different for this woman. This woman probably had made half a dozen decisions that impacted her values, her commitments, her responsibilities, and her obligations. How important the child was for her was obvious by the contrast between his appearance and hers. And the fact that he felt he could tell her that she was smelly meant that, though she had spoken roughly to him at first, he was not afraid of her. Her soft reply to the child, I thought, was one of embarrassment, embarrassment that I too might have noticed her condition. However, even if she paid no attention to me, how embarrassing for your own child to tell you that you stink!

From the perspective of liberation, socio-political-economic liberation, I also had many questions. I wondered if she is alone or has a family or community that helps her in her daily struggle to make ends meet. I doubt she is paid a just wage that would make it possible for her to care for herself and her child. Maybe she does not even have a job, a reality today in the United States for almost 10 percent of the population. The terrible economic situation of the world today is a consequence of a neoliberal economics that does not take seriously the lives of the majority of people around the globe, people like this woman and this little boy. Neoliberal economics considers this woman and this child surplus people, and they are not taken into consideration by present-day systems. She is, if anything, blamed for her situation, for the myth that in the United States anyone who is willing to work hard can “make it” continues to influence the way in which many in this country look upon this woman. Her cotidiano is not factored into the “reality” of this society, of this nation; it is never taken into consideration by the economic mechanisms at work on Wall Street. How she understands her life and how she deals with it every day are given no attention or importance by those of us whose work is to explain, in order to influence, the world in which we live, be it from a political, economic, social, philosophical, or religious perspective. Much less is the academic discourse willing to engage this woman and the millions like her in order to understand lo cotidiano of the majority of the human race. Why?

I think there are three reasons why the reality of this woman is not considered in our discourse about *lo cotidiano*. First, we are not in touch with our own *cotidiano*, maybe because we consider it trite, but I think it is because it would make us question it. Yet, one of the first considerations we need to pay attention to when dealing with *lo cotidiano* is that “we exist in the everyday in a permanent presence that makes all attempts to escape it useless.”²⁰ Our *cotidiano* is related to that of the woman and the little boy who sat next to me at the bus stop, for the privileges and economic resources that make it possible for me not to worry about getting coffee in the morning have to do with her not having enough money for a decent breakfast and for washing her clothes. Until we understand the connection between what some of us have and what this woman does not have, we will not be able to understand her *cotidiano*, much less will we be able to factor it into our considerations. We do not look at her *cotidiano*, for we do not want our way of life to be challenged.²¹

If we claim to be about unveiling and enabling subjugated knowledges, definitely a liberation and decolonial move, then we have to enter into the world where that knowledge is produced, for there is no knowledge without “encountering” the reality we claim to know. As a Latina living in the United States, I indeed have experienced oppression. I also have some understanding of other forms of oppression—poverty and homophobia, for example—of which I have no personal experience. However, without the constant commitment to “encounter” the reality of impoverished Latinas, as a middle-class woman, I cannot claim to value Latinas’ subjugated knowledges.²²

Second, *lo cotidiano* is seen as trite. We consider the decisions that deal with structural issues, the ones that we believe impact society at large, and tend to not think about *lo de todos los días*—what happens in the dailiness of our lives and of the whole human race. We fail to value *lo cotidiano* of grassroots Latinas because we see it as belonging to the private sphere, not having political consequences. Yet it is the struggle about *lo cotidiano* that often sparks the great movements for justice, showing the political implication of everyday reality. Consider the fact that the spark for the Civil Rights movement in the United States was one trite, tiny event: Rosa Parks’s refusal to move to the back of the bus, where the “people of color” were supposed to be.²³ Or think about the

impact of Mexican American farmworker Cesar Chavez's fast in bringing powerful companies and rich landowners to the table ready to make concessions.²⁴ Or, to make it really contemporary, think what set in motion the tumultuous struggles of people in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula to rid themselves of dictators and exploiters, even as this essay is being written. It was Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in the town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, who on December 17 fought to defend himself from abusive power. A policewoman had confiscated his scale. Without it he could not make a living to sustain his family. When he protested, she slapped him, spat on him, and tossed aside his cart and the produce he was selling. He went to the governor's office to complain, but the governor refused to see him. Humiliated and weighed down by his situation, less than an hour after the altercation with the policewoman, he poured gasoline over himself and set himself on fire. Protests against what had been done to Bouazizi started within hours of his self-immolation and continued to grow, moving into affluent areas and eventually into the capital. Bouazizi died on January 4 and on January 14, 2011, President Ben Ali, after twenty-three years of authoritarian rule, fled Tunisia with his family.²⁵

Third, I think that the lack of attention to *lo cotidiano* of grassroots people is because they are not valued as intellectuals; they are not thought of as having and producing knowledge. In my experience the contrary is true. I have found grassroots Latinas admirably capable of explaining what they do and the reason for doing it. Their lives are not unreflected. On the contrary; the urgency of their situation makes them think and choose constantly. Their lives are indeed a constant action-reflection-action that keeps them alive and searching for ways to flourish. They might not be able to explain their lives in terminology that we in the academy find acceptable, or even understand. But they deal with their lives intelligently, that is, in ways that illumine the structures that they face and in which they have to find ways of fitting in in order to survive.

The lack of value given to Latinas' *cotidiano* goes hand in hand with the lack of appreciation for the epistemology of all oppressed people. Ignorance about the value of subjugated knowledges contributes to the oppression of the vast majority of the people in the world. The recognition and valuing of their subjugated knowledge are intrinsic to their liberation, which indeed is part and partial of the flourishing of all life.²⁶

THE OPTION FOR THE OPPRESSED AND THE IMPOVERISHED

For a while, for a couple of decades, at least among those calling themselves liberals in the academic and church world in which I move, it was fashionable or politically correct to talk about an option for the oppressed and impoverished. However, for the last ten years approximately, we have been watering down such an option and, I propose, in doing so we have rejected it. We do this in great measure for the same three reasons given for not valuing *lo cotidiano* of the oppressed. We attempt to assuage our consciences by talking about a “preferential” option, an understanding that allows those of us who have some privileges in the dominant world, to keep them. A preferential option is not an option for the oppressed. It is merely a way of straddling the fence that shows as not true what we claim to do and invalidates much of our discourse, for it falsifies the ethical implications of opting. I believe we soften the option in order not to antagonize the liberals that we think are willing to struggle for justice, but who in fact are against any radical structural change.

A preferential option is an oxymoron, for to prefer is not the same as to opt: the two are mutually exclusive. Preferences are operative before one opts, but once an option is made, other possible preferences one might have considered cease to exist. You can prefer more than one thing among many others. As a matter of fact, the process of opting goes through a process of clarifying preferences and evaluating them. But when the moment of opting comes, one opts *for this*, and in doing so, one opts *not for that*. The option for the oppressed, as is true of all options, cannot be qualified. It can be changed, but once this happens it is not any longer an option for the oppressed. To claim to have a preferential option is a way of rejecting the demands of what it really means to opt for the oppressed and impoverished.

There are three reasons given for claiming that to opt for the poor is not correct. The first one has to do with the claim that such an option limits one’s freedom; the second reason talks about fairness and impartiality as central elements of ethics; and the third one proposes that one cannot opt against the powerful and the rich, who constitute about one third of the human race. The discussion about these three points follows somewhat abstract arguments of the kind generally used in analytical thinking, the kind that yield “knowledge that.” However, as in the first

section of this essay, I also use narratives about experiences that yield “knowledge about,” that is, knowledge “in which the qualia of the experience are among the salient part of the knowledge.”²⁷ I point this out because apart from the coherent analytical explanations I give—at least I think they are coherent and, therefore, convincing—the option for the poor is a commitment to a praxis (the intertwining of reflection and doing) that requires the nourishing of knowledge that knowledge about can provide much better than knowledge that.²⁸

Personal Freedom and Moral Subjectivity or Agency—Self-determination

One of the reasons given for modifying the option for the oppressed (I will refer to it simply as “the option”) with the word “preferential” is that the option coerces, that it limits one’s freedom and self-determination. This might be true from the liberal perspective that understands freedom in an individualistic way. However, there is a difference between an individual and a person. A person knows herself and thinks about herself as a social being. An individual, in contrast, thinks himself to be unrestrained by social ties and believes that to be fully himself he does not need to take anyone else into consideration.²⁹ The individual has a sense of totally unrestrained freedom. For the person, on the contrary, being herself carries a social mortgage; she knows her freedom is related to that of others.

The problem with the liberal way of thinking about freedom is that personal freedom is not without limits precisely because, even if they do not recognize it, as human beings we need others and others need us. As human beings we owe ourselves to others; we are accountable to others for who we are and what we do. As social beings, our personal freedom is restricted, and we are not free to opt without taking others into consideration. Taking others into consideration when opting does not limit one’s freedom but rather helps us understand freedom in a realistic way, in a way that recognizes the sociality of human beings.³⁰ To recognize that we have to take others into consideration when we choose is to accept the finitude of human beings, a finitude that is ever present to the oppressed in their cotidiano.

Besides the social-relational ontology behind the claim that our personal freedom has a social mortgage and, therefore, has to take others into consideration, our freedom to be self-determining also is limited by

the historical reality in which we live. The circumstances in our lives, some of our own choosing but many of them not necessarily so, also limit our freedom. Some claim that circumstances not only limit our choices but determine our choices. I believe the possible options that we have are often given to us, thus determining partially what we will choose. An example helps clarify this point.

For seven years, 1997–2004, I stayed in my birth-country, Cuba, to teach at the Seminario Evangélico de Teología in Matanzas, to work with women's groups, and to work in a Catholic parish in Santiago de Cuba. While I was there some of the options I made were different from the ones I would have made were I in New York, where I live, because the choices I had were different. I was still free to opt, but the choices I had were different; the options I would have made in New York were not possible to make when I was in Cuba. However, I did not consider myself less free to opt while I was in Cuba, but the fact is that my choices were restricted by the limited possibilities among which I had to choose. The same is true when thinking of the inverse situation. In Cuba I had choices I do not have in New York.

Not individual but personal self-determination, responsibility, and the exercise of moral subjectivity happen socially, that is, they happen in and through the communities of which we are part.

Human existence is a participatory and evaluative process, that is, a communitarian ordering by means of which a human conceives her or himself as a “self” who, precisely because of knowing that her or his own subjectivity or self-consciousness is in relation to an “other,” or is a consciousness among others, conscious of others, and that, therefore, her or his subjectivity is an involved-with-others subjectivity.³¹

Human subjectivity—self-definition—therefore, which is part of the process of ethical formation, is a coming to know that to be human involves a being-with-others subjectivity. Such self-definition or affirmation of one's subjectivity is “concrete and alive, nourished by the memory of the liberation of all those who have struggled against their humanity being denied, [and is] based on a communitarian existence in resistance.”³² This resistance is not negative but refers to establishing for

oneself what is right and good as we stand in solidarity with others. Resistance speaks to being human among others, particularly when one protests against oppression and struggles for liberation. The process of self-definition, or of becoming one-self/oneself is, therefore, relational-communitarian, and it happens in the process of being in solidarity with an-other. Liberal individual freedom is simply impossible.

Fairness and Impartiality

Impartiality has to do with giving the same consideration to all, without prejudice, and without being influenced by one's self-interest. Deciding what is fair takes into consideration merit and the importance of the person involved. These two moral values, fairness and impartiality, seem to be ignored or violated by the option for the oppressed and impoverished. The fact is, however, that these values, as is true of all values, cannot be considered abstractly. What we have mentioned above regarding the materiality-historicity of reality and the sociality of human beings is the basis for insisting on the need to take into consideration the situations of those involved in order to be fair.

The situation of the oppressed and impoverished is different from that of the dominant group. It is not only different. It is worse. It is extremely bad. It is precisely this difference that demands partiality. The option is not unfair because its goal is to create circumstances in which there can be fairness for the oppressed and impoverished. To be unfair because one is partial to the oppressed is the result of an undistorted and full appreciation of their situation needed for the sake of applying moral norms fairly.

Partiality, which is considered unfair and is used in arguments against the option for the oppressed, does not "violate cognitive impartiality"³³ if it is based on a reasonable gathering of relevant facts that uses a critical selectivity, aimed at presenting a picture that takes into consideration the situation at hand within the context of its societal reality and the reality of those involved. Neither is partiality in the case of the option for the oppressed intellectually dishonest; it is not "a bias that distorts experience, obstructs understanding, and undermines judgment."³⁴ On the contrary, partiality in favor of the oppressed urges profound honesty in examining the implications of the circumstances that are being assessed and the values used in evaluating them. Honesty requires a hermeneutics of suspicion when analyzing any situation that involves the oppressed.

The fact that the poor and impoverished constitute over two-thirds of humankind has to make one suspicious about the reason for their predicament.³⁵ Honesty entails a critical assessment of the persons doing the so-called impartial evaluation as well as a serious consideration of who benefits from the actions resulting from the analysis they present. Partiality in favor of the oppressed, therefore, does not undermine judgment but rather enriches it by highlighting previously ignored elements that must be taken into consideration when making decisions. The option for the oppressed does not distort but rather takes into consideration experiences that have been ignored or discounted, for example, women's experience of gender bias, Latinas/os' experience of ethnoracism, gays and lesbians' experience of heterosexism. Consequences of what is decided or chosen, that is, of how the decision or option will affect the oppressed also must play a key role in decision-making by those in charge of present structures and organizations.

Partiality in the case of the option is not only justifiable but desirable because it contributes to inclusiveness.³⁶ An understanding of impartiality has to include fair inclusion of the oppressed in all spheres of society and in the processes that set or influence what is normative for society.³⁷ The partiality of the option for the oppressed contributes to inclusiveness by insisting on the human dignity of the oppressed, remembering that lack of recognition of their dignity also diminishes that of the oppressor. It is important to note in this regard the contribution that has been made to the argument for partiality by affirmative action, a significant outcome of the U.S. Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Affirmative action is indeed partial; it is in favor of those in society who have been systemically excluded from opportunities—economic, social, educational. It has been a way of leveling the field so that those who are members of minoritized and marginalized communities can have an opportunity to contribute to society. The inclusiveness made possible by the partiality of affirmative action contributes not only to a particular person. Its goal is the enriching of society at large, making it possible for those who have been discriminated against to participate in creating the world in which we all live. Affirmative action is not about opening doors for those who are not qualified, as those who oppose such a program often claim. It is about making possible consideration of those who have been excluded, so that their talents can be used for the good of all.

Those who benefit from affirmative action merit the jobs they are hired for, being accepted into an educational institution, and being economically successful. Partiality does not dispense with merit but rather provides opportunity for the merit of all persons regardless of their ethnicity, ethnorace, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and so forth to be taken into consideration.

To be able to fairly concentrate on merit requires equality of opportunities and capabilities, which do not exist in our world today. Merit always has to be contextualized. And given what we have indicated about the need for partiality for the oppressed, the analysis of the context when it comes to judge merit has to pay particular attention to the oppressed. Merit as an abstract measure for judgment does not lead to fairness. Fairness is not possible if impartiality is taken to mean identical treatment for all.³⁸ Material and nonmaterial dissimilar needs and capabilities require a discriminate respond—a partial response.³⁹ Insistence on privileging the oppressed is a denunciation of “apolitical neutrality,” which in reality yields not impartiality but partiality or bias in favor of the oppressors.⁴⁰

The arguments against the option for the oppressed based on impartiality and fairness are part of the tendency to privilege the fixed, formulaic, and blandly categorical, instead of being, as is often claimed, an attempt to be theoretically rigorous.⁴¹ Since the meaning of fairness is not static but is influenced by historical human claims, today there is an urgent need to consider those who suffer oppression, allowing them to exercise their moral agency by participating in deciding what is fair, taking into account their demands, their rights, and their human dignity. Therefore, partiality toward the oppressed emphasizes adequacy, which corrects the invalid attempts at “categorical uniformity” by “a vigorous emphasis on facing up to the particular reality of each person [the majority of whom are oppressed] . . . and on refinement of perception, acuity of communication, flexibility of perspectives, and use of a range of moral categories,”⁴² such as the needs and the rights of two-thirds of humanity. Without this emphasis on the needs and rights of the oppressed the understanding of impartiality is inadequate.

In conclusion, the option not only indicates the need to reinterpret the traditional way of understanding fairness and impartiality, freedom and self-definition, but it also shows the need to highlight other values, like

the value of all life, of the dignity of all human beings, the importance of needs and desires, and the importance of human beings as persons and not as individuals, and the requirements to stand for and privilege the most vulnerable.

Not an Option against the Oppressor as Person

The option for the impoverished and the oppressed is a fundamental option, one that makes clear not only what one is opting for but also what one is *not* opting for. Options always put aside other preferences because opting has consequences that cannot be ignored and that oblige until the option is rejected. No matter how much one insists that the option for the oppressed is not against the oppressor, the fact is that one cannot opt for both: to opt for one is not to opt for the other. Faced with the reality of how prevalent injustice is in our world today, one has to choose; one is forced to choose. One cannot decide not to opt, not to choose. Options must be made: One cannot escape.⁴³ The option for the oppressed cannot be put off; it is an urgent matter—a matter of life and death for two-thirds of humankind. Indecision and delay when it comes to the option for the oppressed and the impoverished are “as criminal as resolutely evil acts.”⁴⁴ Indecision and delay bring enormous suffering and even death to the oppressed.

Is the option for the oppressed and impoverished an option *against* the oppressor? For sure, the option for the oppressed questions and negates the perspective and rationality of the oppressor. It is an option to struggle against the structures that benefit the oppressor at the expense of the oppressed. It is an option not to be on the side of the oppressor: not to think, imagine, plan, and act the way the oppressor does. The option is to struggle to bring about radical change, change that the oppressors oppose at all costs.

However, the option is *not* an option to destroy the oppressor. It is *not* wishing the oppressor evil. On the contrary; the option for the oppressed and impoverished is also an option *for* the oppressors even if they do not understand this or accept it. The option to change the present death-dealing world order benefits not only the oppressed and impoverished but also the oppressors. The economic downfall being experienced all around the world makes this obvious: The present world order—a death-dealing world order—is prejudicial to all.

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Lo cotidiano and the option for the poor are of such importance for *mujerista* discourse that they function as intrinsic elements of a *mujerista* worldview, that is, *mujerista* assertions, values, and praxis. This is why they are part of the *locus theologicus*—the source and context—we use to do *mujerista* theology. In saying that they are the source of *mujerista* theology, we reject the traditional division of the sources of Christianity into primary sources—scripture for all Christians, to which Catholics add tradition—and secondary sources—church teaching, theology, liturgy—adding to these latter ones others such as history and context. *Mujerista* theology makes explicit the *prima facie* consideration that for some of us scripture and tradition are always mediated through those interpreting them, who are in a given context and respond to certain interests.⁴⁵ *Mujerista* theology insists that the context and interests that should be at play in the reading of scripture and tradition are those of the oppressed and impoverished: their reality, how they come to know such reality, and how they interpret it. The option, which carries with it a valuing of lo cotidiano of the oppressed, operates, therefore, at this very fundamental level of doing theology.

In *mujerista* theology, we understand God's grace—God's free and efficacious self-disclosure and self-giving—to be present mainly among the oppressed and through the oppressed.⁴⁶ Such an affirmation is not a metaphysical claim, that is, we do not claim to be talking about God's nature *per se*. This is what we understand and believe based on our reading of the Christian Bible, using a *mujerista* hermeneutical lens shaped by the struggle for justice for Latinas. One can indeed point to passages in the Bible that, though the authors of the Gospels most probably were not making metaphysical claims—in the present-day understanding of metaphysical claims—they may be read as such. For example, our belief that God is in the midst of the oppressed and impoverished is based, among other passages, on Matthew 25:31–46 where the Son of Man, a title used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus, welcomes those who have favored the impoverished and oppressed and rejects those who have not helped them. Also relevant here is the first beatitude found in Luke 6:20, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” We believe that Jesus made clear that God is with the oppressed and

impoverished, and because we value immensely what Jesus proclaimed, we make what Jesus proclaimed a matter of belief. We find further reason to believe in God's option for the poor in the argument presented by the author of the first letter to the Corinthians 1:26–31: God chooses the unimportant and those the world judges to be fools, to shame the wise, to bring the important people to naught so that no one will be able to be presumptuous in the face of God.

We do not choose the impoverished and oppressed as a categorical good among others; one does not opt for an austere style of life in order to be coherent with the growing poverty and oppression in the world. We respond to the teachings of the Bible by believing that God makes the reality of the poor divine reality.

If it is so, the preferential option for the poor in our times, becomes stronger, because it does not depend on empirical verifications. . . . Today the poor are more oppressed, suffering more daily dyings, and yet, the commitment to justice, the option, and hope continue to be anchored in the faithfulness and the saving workings of God.

If this is so, the option for the poor is a condition for the possibility of all knowledge. Furthermore, one's personal position in view of the poor, connotes and configures the moral personality of the agent.⁴⁷

A second theological consideration is extremely important to our argument of using the option without "preferential" as a modifier. It is important because the argument for modifying the option has emerged as an explanation of the belief in the unlimited love of God. Therefore, those who want to soften the option say that love for the oppressed and impoverished cannot limit God's love for the oppressor and the rich. The option for the poor is seen as excluding the rich and the oppressor from God's love. God's option for the oppressed and impoverished, it is claimed, leaves no room for God to love the oppressors and the rich.

Together with a few others I argue that there is no need to soften or deradicalize God's option for the oppressed in order to assert God's love of the oppressors. However, that God loves the oppressor and the rich does not mean that God loves them because they are rich and because they are oppressors. On the contrary, God's rejects the rich as rich and

the oppressor as oppressor. That God loves them means precisely that God demands them to denounce unconditionally their benefits, privileges, and riches for their own sake. God's love for them comes in the guise of a demand to abjure their richness and privileges.

In God, we claim, there are no contradictions. Then God cannot love both, the oppressed and the oppressor, the impoverished and the rich. God cannot opt just a little—preferentially—for the impoverished and the oppressed. There is no possibility of “a little” when it comes to options and much less is there a possibility of “a little” when it comes to God. In opting for the oppressed and impoverished, God questions the rich and the oppressor about their richness and privileges—a questioning that cannot be ignored, to which they must respond (Luke 9:109).

The option of the poor, which will never exclude that person of the rich—since salvation is offered to all and the ministry of the church is due to all—does exclude the way of life of the rich, . . . and its system of accumulation and privileges, which necessarily plunders and marginalizes the immense majority of the human family, whole peoples and continents.⁴⁸

Because God's grace is extended to all, and God's grace is precisely what makes possible human acceptance of God's commands, the rich and the oppressor are constantly being given the opportunity and strength to repent and radically change their ways. Just as the oppressed and the impoverished are being given constantly the opportunity and strength not to covet what the oppressor and the rich have.

Finally, there is an important ecclesiological consideration when it comes to the option for the oppressed and the impoverished. I believe the opposition to the option is not because it is theologically questionable but because it requires a radical change of ecclesiology. The option for the oppressed and the impoverished means that the church is *not for* the oppressed and the impoverished; the church must be *from them* and must be *their* church. The option requires a radical change in church structures, structures that privilege the church's hierarchies, its ministers, and those theologians recognized by church authorities. To radically affirm the option requires from the church a willingness to consider radically changing how it understands itself and its relationship to the kin-dom of God.⁴⁹

The church has to be a church *of* the impoverished and oppressed, not a church *for* them, which is a church where they have no say in creating its meaning. The church has to privilege the oppressed and the impoverished epistemologically, hermeneutically, and in its ongoing praxis—both how it operates within as well as its pastoral activity. This is an extreme demand, but it is a Gospel commandment. The flesh is weak, but as Christians we are called to heed the Gospel and not to change its central visions and stipulations so we can continue to sustain structures that do not privilege the oppressed and impoverished.