

TRACING THE LINEAGES OF DECOLONIAL THINKING THROUGH LATINX  
FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

# Letter-Writing as a Decolonial Feminist Praxis for Philosophical Writing

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(Received 1 December 2018; revised 12 September 2019; accepted 3 October 2019)

## Abstract

According to Chandra Mohanty, there is no apolitical academy; academic and scholarly practices are in themselves political, insofar as they are inscribed in power and validation relations, which answer to and have effects upon the patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist structures to which they belong. In the case of philosophical writing, this means that the forms that regulate writing, that is, what determines how one must write in different contexts, are expressive of the power structures within philosophical academia. These power structures are upheld through time because of, among many other factors, the rendering invisible of the diversity of places of enunciation belonging to those who write and think in philosophy, and of the universalization of the privileges associated with said places of enunciation. In this article, I propose a way of writing letters that appeals to grammatical persons and their relation to the authors of the texts. Through this writing practice it is possible to make explicit the places of enunciation from which we write philosophy. This enables, first, making visible the privileges and oppressions of those writing philosophy; and second, generating small spaces of resistance and transformation of the oppressive power relations within the philosophical academy.

One broad question serves as a backdrop for this essay: how to face the fact that in Colombia, and more generally in Latin America, we practice philosophy from the political South? Attempting an answer raises many questions about the implications of philosophical practice in general, because thinking from the South means being situated in a particular intersection of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, which the Angolan poet Raquel Lima calls, in the poem with the same title, “the three-headed monster.”<sup>1</sup>

I believe one way to answer these questions is not through theory, but rather through practice, that is, through experimenting with ways of doing philosophy within academia.<sup>2</sup> I will focus on letter-writing, because even though many philosophical texts in the Western canon are letters, contemporary ways of writing academic philosophy disregard letters as a valid way of doing philosophy. Letters, as opposed to articles and most books, are written explicitly from a first-person perspective and show clear connections between life and thought in a situated, contextual, and enriched manner. In

addition, letters are not engaged, as articles are, with a capitalist colonial system of indexing and ranking. The validation of knowledge in philosophy is determined by the rankings of journals and databases. As academic philosophers in Colombia, we are under constant pressure from universities and academic institutions to publish according to international standards. That means to write in a certain manner and in a certain language and about certain subjects: to write articles, published in high-ranking, indexed journals. In philosophy, all of those journals published in English are usually associated with the political North's universities or institutions and are interested in standard topics of Western philosophy. That is why writing letters in Spanish, addressed to us as philosophers, in order to share and think about the topics and subjects we care about, with our own community, could be an interesting way of transforming philosophical practices toward a critical and politically engaged academia.<sup>3</sup> Following this line of thought, I will focus on how, through experimenting with letter-writing within the philosophical academy, we can face the question of what it means to practice philosophy from the political South with an array of useful tools. This way of writing can be a means of resistance against colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal logics that we have inherited from the Western philosophical tradition, and that we have uncritically imitated from the political North's academies, viewed as centers of power and validation for what we do in the South.

In order to reach this sense of resistance, I propose an understanding of letter-writing in terms of a decolonial feminist praxis. I use the expression "praxis" because I am interested in pointing to a *way of doing* (a *how to do*) philosophy. This is clearly different from a *what is*, a content or result of practicing philosophy. Expanding the possibilities of philosophical praxis in Colombia from a feminist decolonial perspective allows for the expansion of decolonial feminist methodologies in philosophy as well. Indeed, it is possible to read "methodologies," in its broader sense, where I write "practices" or "praxis."<sup>4</sup> I understand philosophy as an activity, that is, as a practice that exceeds a set of theories, maxims, or truths. This understanding of philosophy can reinforce, or question, hegemonic worldviews not only by way of refuting propositions, or detailed arguments, but also by modifying the ways in which we do, write, read, and teach philosophy. I address letter-writing as intrinsically philosophical, and philosophical thought as situated in the first-person perspective (either plural or singular). I will show, first, what I refer to when speaking of decolonial feminist praxis; second, I shall give a general characterization of philosophic letters and provide some examples, to show that they allow for the enactment of the praxis proposed.

### Practices of Philosophy: Colonialism and the Universalization of Privilege

Academic philosophy has a great deal to learn from the South's feminist movements and feminist thought. I use the term *decolonial* in relation to Anibal Quijano's analysis of the coloniality of power;<sup>5</sup> I learned from his texts how urgent it is to tell multiple histories in order to deny a linear (and Euro-centered) interpretation of history with a white, European or Anglo-Saxon, male, heterosexual, wealthy subject as the icon of modernity, progress, and civilization. For Quijano, the crux of the problem is the colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal structure of power at a global scale since the formation of America about 500 years ago, and the invention of "race" as a method for classifying the world's population (Quijano 2014, 100). As a Latin American, my body, my mind, my work and their products, including intellectual ones, are marked by and judged through the position I occupy in that global system of power. That is why race and gender but

also sexual orientation and class are related matters that need to be present and visible in the way I do philosophy; they shape the position from which I was taught to think, act, and feel the world and my place therein. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's work helped me to understand the problem in the academic environment, where I am located. One of the first elements to highlight is the recognition that there is no apolitical academia: academic and scholarly practices are, in themselves, political, and situate us in relations of power and validation (Mohanty 1984, 53). In the case of philosophical writing, this means that the ways in which writing is regulated, that is, what determines how to write in different contexts, answers to power structures within philosophical academia and should, therefore, be taken explicitly into account when writing, reading, and teaching philosophy.

One of the ways in which it is possible to detect these structures is the use of the "grammatical person," that is, the way in which the writer is presented within the text. A text written in the first-person plural (that is, "We discuss . . .") can give the impression of a shared view, not only among those writing, but also frequently with those reading. The impersonal form, on the other hand (that is, "This paper argues . . ."), communicates the idea that reasons speak for themselves, and authors and readers are mere witnesses to what is being said. The first-person singular form (that is, "I shall propose . . .") raises the question whether the author writes from a situated *personal* perspective or from a tacit, shared "I," a neutral or universal form of subjectivity.

The grammatical person used in writing and the relation it establishes with the writer are discursive elements that express power structures and systems of knowledge-validation, which are not often questioned or acknowledged. Mohanty speaks of such discursive elements in terms of a universalization of privilege: the assumption that the academic writer's place of enunciation may be interpreted as neutral, objective, or, in any case, not situated or determined by social and political context (Mohanty 1984). This serves the purpose of hiding the privileges held by the person writing, and therefore gives the impression that such privileges are possibly or factually universal. In academic philosophy, such universalization comes from hiding the privilege of those who have traditionally written in/from the political North or who belong to the centers of power that determine what it is, or should be, a philosophical practice nowadays.

A feature of contemporary academic writing in philosophy is the construction of a "we" or an "I" who writes, thinks, and analyzes phenomena and denies any particularity to their place of enunciation. The tacit subject of philosophical writings' identity is not questioned, because it is not thought of as determined by social, political, or historical conditions; all particularities or contingencies are understood as exceptions to, deviations from, or biases of the "rational point of view." This discursive strategy is complicit with perpetuating power relations that attribute privilege to certain subjectivities and devalue or oppress all others. According to Mohanty, this is a discursive colonization and a way of appropriating and codifying, which is typical of academia and the production of knowledge (Mohanty 1984, 52).<sup>6</sup> The overwhelming majority of philosophers I read during my undergraduate and graduate studies were male, white, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, European, or Anglo-Saxon. I was taught that those philosophers' identities were not relevant philosophically, that what really mattered was their arguments, questions, and problems, the form and content of their writings. It took me years to realize that the philosophical canon has been written mostly by the same kind of subjectivities, whose particularities are kept invisible to their readers and interlocutors. At the same time, philosophical knowledge has been presented as abstract,

objective, universal (or at least, universalizable); the universal ideas of “Man,” “Subject,” “Agent,” and “Reason,” among others, are central categories and upheld by rigorous argument, logical consistency, and strict analysis. The way I was taught to do philosophy assumes there is no room for, or chance of, bias, compromise, or contamination by the contingencies of situated life.

The concrete and situated experiences of philosophers producing philosophical thought is inevitably shaped by their gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, political status, and cultural history, among many other factors. In more than one way, the luxury of interpreting these situations as something that does not determine the ideas expressed speaks of the privilege of writers, of their ability to assume that all other rational beings will understand and even agree with what they write, because all contingencies can be set aside when engaged in philosophical debate. To go through life without the experience of being discredited, silenced, or underestimated because of gender, class, race, and so on gives way to the impression of being a neutral subjectivity, a token of the universal “we.” This, then, allows for writing *from* a grammatical person that creates a distance between the concrete, lived, experience of the writer and the writer neutrally represented in the text. This, in turn, gives way to the normative constraint of writing philosophy from and for such a neutral subjectivity; the tacit “we” is not only the place from which philosophy has been written, but also from which it *should* be written.

This normative constraint fails to notice an important asymmetry: when someone writes from a place of unacknowledged privilege, it is easy for them to think that the same thoughts could be produced from any other place within their society; that is, that privileges are merely external and contingent conditions that do not interfere with how someone sees him/herself or the world, or how they formulate philosophical questions. However, when someone occupies a place of oppression, he or she frequently recognizes it is not possible to simply ignore his or her oppressive conditions. People can resist and act with/against diverse forms of oppression, but this does not entail the possibility of removing oppression at will. Yet that is what philosophical methods demand of writers. Speaking from a place of oppression is regarded, and therefore internalized, as particular, nonobjective, not universal, *ergo* not philosophical.

In this context, a proposal for a decolonial feminist praxis starts by recognizing there is necessarily a place of enunciation for authors in philosophy, and that it cannot be neutral, objective, or universal. This place of enunciation expresses the power relations that run through the writer’s experience and condition the experiences of readers and learners of academic philosophy.

This being said, it is important to consider that positions of privilege and oppression are not absolute, and I do not intend to simplify the complexities of the places of enunciation within the matrices of power. In the context of a colonized nation, such as Colombia, the distribution of power, privilege, and prestige is far from being transparent and homogeneous.

When I speak of places of enunciation, I am referring to singular places from which we write, theorize, and speak in a complex matrix of influences, circumstances, histories, identities, preferences, and expectations. Places of enunciation are necessarily complex: they integrate experiences crossed by multiple dimensions of oppression and privilege such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, abilities, and so on that are historical and, therefore, geopolitically situated.

María Lugones quotes Lorraine Bethel’s poem “What Chou Mean *We*, White Girl?”: “I wrote this paper from a dark place: a place where I see white/Anglo women as ‘on the

other side,' on 'the light side.' From a dark place where I see myself dark but do not focus on or dwell inside the darkness but rather focus on 'the other side.' To me it makes a deep difference where I am writing from" (Lugones 1991, 35). These beautiful words make Lugones think about a layering of voices of women of color, crowding her thinking space, speaking this knowledge: "One just does not go alone (lonely maybe)... To know oneself and one's situation is to know one's company or lack thereof, is to know oneself with or against others" (35–36). That dark place from which Bethel writes is the kind of place of enunciation I am interested in, because it is sensible to differences and is the opposite of neutral, objective, universal, homogeneous. Finally, it interests me because dark and light could refer to different places in a complex matrix of privileges and oppressions, probably linking the ones around us, either in the books and texts we read or in our daily lives. It is precisely this complexity that is overshadowed by the universalization of privilege in discursive practices, both at the political and theoretical levels. Universalization of privilege entails subjects blind to differences, blind to their own positions within a complex matrix of privileges and oppressions. Philosophical writing will be enriched if we as authors, philosophers, and students of philosophy in the political South acknowledge and consider the complexities and differences of our places of enunciation.

Within philosophical academia, the universalization of privilege implies that those who have traditionally practiced philosophy, or who do it in the centers of power where what philosophy is today is determined, assume uncritically and perhaps unconsciously that all philosophy is practiced, or should be practiced, from their standpoint: They believe that the abstract nature of philosophical knowledge entails the possibility, if not the need, of a neutral place. However, this place coincides with the political North and with particular intersections of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, among others. Homogenization of the objects and subjects of philosophy is an effect of the universalization of privilege, because with regard to Western tradition and what has been the interest of those supposedly neutral subjects of philosophical thinking, it tends to determine what questions, problems, and issues are philosophically relevant, but ultimately because it normatively shapes the subjects who do or practice philosophy. In other words, the common-sense idea of The Philosopher manifested in texts, theories, and aspirations of those doing, studying, and teaching philosophy is enforced in the political North, and replicated in the academies in the South.

According to Frantz Fanon, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization" (Fanon 1994, 17–18). The author explains why the Antilles' black men become whiter in proportion to their mastery of French. Given that the possession of language implies the possession of the world expressed and implied by it, Fanon argues that "mastery of language affords remarkable power" (18). Thus understood, people who come from historically colonized regions of the world, like Latin America or the Antilles, are colonized people, in Fanon's terms,<sup>7</sup> or nonwhite people, in Rita Laura Segato's terms (Segato 2014). Colonized people aspire to talk like the colonizers, like white people. In the case of Latin America, this points to the fact that Spanish is the language of the colonizers, and to speak Spanish makes people and their discourses whiter.<sup>8</sup> Spanish is not only Colombia's official language, it is the only language spoken in academic contexts. Recently, however, the use of English as global academic discourse's language makes academic discourses whiter in English. This kind of aspiration—to be the colonizer, to talk like the colonizer—is central to the *praxis* of philosophy in the political South. Either in English or in Spanish,

the accepted ways of writing philosophy and the uses of language allowed and encouraged in academic spaces are framed by the coloniality of power. Thus, we can find an internalization of the hegemonic position from and by nonhegemonic positions. Hegemony is, from a colonized context, an aspiration. The desire to replace the colonizer is expressed in philosophical practices that emulate the privileged position of those doing philosophy in the centers of power, according to *their* traditions and *their* normative constraints. Philosophers in the political South should then aspire to participate in the “universal subject,” a subject by default. This discursive strategy not only erases all particularity in the places of enunciation, historical context, or connection to vital concerns, but also the possibility of understanding the proper philosophical character of certain problems “outside the canon,” of many other ways of providing arguments for ideas and establishing dialogue with non-Western traditions.

Trinh Minh-Ha, quoted by Karina Bidaseca, sheds some light on the patriarchal and colonial system expressed in writing:

A woman battles with two linguistic representations of the self: the “I” in all caps (the master subject, a warehouse of cultural tradition) and an “i” in small caps (the personal subject, with a specific race and gender). The process of writing represents an act of violence: in order to write “clearly” it is necessary to trim, to eliminate, to purify, to mold this “i” in small caps, to adapt it to a tradition, to localize it. A woman needs to “achieve a distance,” which is no more than a way of alienating herself, of adapting the voice she has stolen or borrowed, but mostly to internalize the language of the master subject. Trinh proposes, on the contrary, a map of enunciative relations, where language reflects the paradoxes, multiplies and subverts the notion of an original “I” that cultural traditions regarding gender try to fix.<sup>9</sup> (Bidaseca 2014, 587)

In order to combat discursive colonization, or to resist it, it is necessary to multiply the differences in places of enunciation, to multiply the subjects, and to enlighten their diversity in terms of their history, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and so on as a topic and a tone of voice. For Kimberlé Crenshaw, pioneer thinker and activist of the intersectional perspective, the “absence of diverse narratives” (Crenshaw 1991, 1256) of black communities’ experience of oppression in the United States is one of the main issues antiracist struggles must grapple with. This applies to academia insofar as the lack of diversity of voices, their construal as invisible or unimportant, is a way of oppression, as Iris Marion Young shows in “Five Faces of Oppression” (Young 2004). Since there cannot be an apolitical academia, it is important to combat discursive colonization by making the narratives of what counts as philosophical more diverse, renouncing the ideal of a neutral or universal subject, and developing new practices that counterbalance the weight of a colonizing tradition.

As I said earlier, a “neutral” subject, who carries with *him* the perspective of a male, heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon, or European thinker, must be broken not only through one axis. Audre Lorde denounces racism, sexism, and homophobia as inseparable. As a black lesbian woman, her statement “Define and you will empower!” (Lorde 1988, 92) invites us to educate others into recognizing that diversity is a crucial force “playing a creative role in our lives” (91). Diversity is not a cause for separation, as we have frequently been told by universalist theories, but rather a force for emancipation. As Crenshaw says, it contributes to the diversification of narratives, and to the awareness of the mutual reinforcement among sexism, racism, and homophobia (Crenshaw 1991).



Therefore, one of the first ways to emancipate from a capitalist, racist, and heteropatriarchal hegemony in philosophical academia is to start writing from our own “i.”

Something more should be said about the intimate relations among coloniality, patriarchy, and capitalism. Insofar as coloniality and patriarchy are mutually reinforcing and depend on the unequal distribution of power, they find an ally in capitalism and its allocative logics of wealth, prestige, and power (Cunha and da Silva 2016). Philosophical academia, as much as any other discipline currently inserted in the globalized commodification of knowledge, has fallen prey to the idea that, though: research can be measured as “products.” The value of such production—the value of ideas, one could say—depends, in most areas and disciplines, on how profitable they are to the industry, and their impact is determined by how many times they are quoted in “relevant” journals, by “relevant” academics, all of which are situated in the political North.

The relative relevance of a new knowledge product is established by newborn disciplines such as bibliometrics and scientometrics, which set criteria for measuring visibility and impact on an international scale. This is done by following communities considered to have influence in shaping global problems, and the way they interact by way of quotes, references, reviews, and so on. This gives way to indexing systems and databases, which not only rank the “best” journals, researchers, and institutions, but also make the products available to institutions or individuals who can pay, usually, large amounts for access. This system makes a circle quite visible: in order to be part of the community of “relevant” researchers and research centers, philosophers in the political South, such as myself, must already be in conversation with philosophers in the political North; we must already be recognized as peers and have the acquisitive power to have access to the databases both as users and producers. We philosophers in the political South are not recognized as peers, because philosophical texts produced here in Latin America are not read, analyzed, and discussed in the philosophy departments of the political North. The asymmetry is overwhelming, because in the South we read, analyze, and discuss texts predominantly produced in the political North.<sup>10</sup>

The way capitalism has influenced the academic world is related to the coloniality of power. What is recognized as an adequate product of knowledge is determined by standards of academia in the political North. In the case of philosophical writing, this means writing from an impersonal, objective, neutral perspective, and about the standard topics in philosophy.

As academics in Colombia, we learn we should aspire to be read and discussed in the global community; we rarely show genuine interest in the writings of our own local colleagues and students. But this is not merely to satisfy an interest—a colonized interest, as has been said—to be part of the universal subject of knowledge, but rather because the possibility of doing any research is becoming more dependent on this system. Colciencias is the Colombian Institute that grants funds for research and scholarships, and ranks research groups, researchers, and journals. These rankings serve to determine the wages for professors and researchers in public institutions and are part of the criteria for distributing public resources for research, development, and innovation. In its mission statement, one of its main objectives is to position Colombia within the production of knowledge’s global system. This means making research by Colombians visible and with an impact on a global scale, as well as making it useful for the economy in a neoliberal state.<sup>11</sup> The recent acceptance of Colombia into OECD has made Colciencias adjust some of its criteria for ranking production, by making local journals less interesting to researchers (awarding fewer points per publication in Colombian journals that previously had been ranked more highly), and discouraging local dialogues between

thinkers. The new criteria for validating research are imported from the political North; this highlights the distribution of power and prestige's disparity and forces the political South's think tanks to emulate the North or disappear.

This imposes ways of writing, researching, and thinking that perpetuate the universalization of privilege I have talked about. When writing in the political South, the need to pose as neutral subjects of knowledge, as members of a universal community of speakers, usually carries with it a way of undervaluing what is written in Spanish, in local journals, about situated problems, and by nonhegemonic authors.

Following Trinh's map of enunciation, the decolonial feminist praxis for philosophical writing that I propose seeks to strengthen ways of practicing philosophy that do not answer to these capitalist, patriarchal, colonial ways of producing knowledge. This means writing philosophy without considering whether the text is publishable in a "top" journal, without having as an aim a neutral reader, an increase in reputation, or an insertion into a global scheme. Its objective is generating alternative resilience and resistance spaces within and outside academia by using our own voices with our colleagues and students.

### Letter-Writing as a Decolonial Feminist Method for Writing Philosophy

We (the female we) are subjects of discourse, perhaps merely objects or second-class subjects. I start by paying no attention to the formal and material standards of academic writing, as seen from the perspective of "journalization." I will write free prose, or a poem, or a letter, to you, or us, or them, on a paper, with my hands. Or I will write an entry on a blog, or a webpage, so that anyone can see it and comment. Second, I will try to include you, and us, and him and her, as multiple subjects in our dialogues; I will make explicit who I am, where I speak from. My "i" is already a diversification of the usual places of enunciation within the classroom, within the texts. Third, I will write making sure that what matters to me, whether or not it matters to the universal subject, is visible in its relation to what I write. My privileges will be visible, as well as the places I occupy that signal oppression. I will write from me. My gender, my class, my race, my sexual orientation, but most of all my life story and the things that matter to me are relevant here, as are yours. I will read you, your ideas, your concerns; I will try to respond from a place of recognition, rather than from a place of "superior neutrality." We will write each other letters.

Letter-writing as a method for doing philosophy makes explicit use of our places of enunciation, it makes us visible to one another as thinkers and contributes to eradicating the common indifference within academia toward the systems of oppression that shape experience with an indifference that contributes to their perpetuation.

I want to make clear that I do not suppose that letter-writing is the only way of resisting the power structures within philosophical academia, or that all letter-writing is a philosophical practice, let alone a decolonial feminist one. This is one alternative, among many possible others, and is not a new genre of philosophical writing. However, I believe the explicit selection of a grammatical subject, an "I," is key for decolonial feminist writing, as it makes it possible to frame the thinker as a situated author.

The types of letters I am interested in require something quite simple: for the grammatical subject to include or refer to the personal and contextual determinants of the author, which hold a relation to the philosophical concerns contained in the letter. In other words, letters are not written from an abstract or neutral point of view, but from a first-person and historically, psychologically, and emotionally charged perspective.



On many occasions, this means writing from an uncomfortable place, from a place of openness and vulnerability. It is a kind of writing that takes risks, for it implies a close and almost intimate connection to the reader. The kind of letters that interest me are also read by unique, situated, concrete subjects with whom we dialogue and make ourselves understood. It is not the same to write, for example, for a double-blind reviewer as it is to write to someone whose name, history, and character I know and consider.

There is no one single model or formula for writing letters, and there could be none proposed by a decolonial feminist perspective. This is important, because part of the method proposed, part of the *praxis*, implies a certain plasticity, an emancipation of the writing subject, that fluctuates according to the dynamics of the conversation. It would not be possible or at all coherent to strive for the multiplication of narratives, subjectivities, and interests by establishing tightly normative standards of writing. It is, precisely, this difficult, moving, ever-changing space of conversation that denies the idea of a universal subject stating universal ideas in universally accepted ways.

One common critique of the kind of writing I propose has to do with the idea that speaking from one's own voice constitutes a kind of fallacy or an appeal to an unacceptable relativism. If my voice is so singular, so attached to myself, and it is indeed philosophical, how could I ever be contradicted or refuted? The need for a universal, neutral, detached "I," we have been told, has to do with a search for truth, objectivity, and the rejection of authority as a source of argumentative legitimacy, described in informal logic as fallacies concerning appeals to authority, expertise, or experience. Anonymity is a useful tool for guaranteeing objectivity in an evaluation (Fricker 2007), especially once we recognize that there are systems for distribution of power that tend to make already oppressed and marginalized voices more invisible, less valued. The search for a more diverse field seems to be riddled with a paradox: to make ourselves more visible, we must sometimes make ourselves invisible. However, I think this is not the case. I am interested in displacing the idea that writing philosophically is necessarily tied with practices of evaluation, validation, and universal truth-seeking. If we do not aspire to satisfy hegemonic standards, we might escape the puzzle.

Philosophy, as a practice, as a way of living, perhaps has more to do with thought, in Arendtian terms, than with Truth. Thinking means multiplying meanings, turning things around and seeing them in their complexity, in their diverse nature. Thinking means rethinking, Arendt tells us, and recognizing ourselves in our dialogues with others might mean rethinking ourselves as well. That I speak from an "I" does not necessarily mean that I am always the same "I." Decolonial feminist letter-writing nurtures this kind of thinking: what we say in the letters expresses who we are, and in turn affects our lives and our conceptions of ourselves. When we write about what we see as important, we begin to live philosophy as intrinsically ours.

I will illustrate my points with an example. In a seminar on epistolary writing, I established correspondence with Y. C., one of the students attending the seminar. At the time, Y. C. was writing her BA thesis on correspondence, and I was her tutor. One of the first things that emerged from our correspondence had to do with the institutional distance we had as teacher and student. How were we to establish a closeness, a certain horizontality, when our relationship was to remain hierarchical throughout the seminar and the tutoring process? It soon became clear that the limited roles we played within that hierarchy were not all we were. We both realized, through our letters, that writing explicitly to each other (Dear Y. . . . Dear X) was not the same as writing to our roles (Dear Miss C. . . . Dear Professor X). Using our names and the familiar pronoun

for “you” (in Spanish, the formal way is “usted,” the familiar is “tu”), bridged a gap and enabled us to speak from a place where our philosophical concerns were caringly stated.

Throughout the discussions in the seminar, where we publicly analyzed our own correspondence and that of the other students, we began to understand that the person writing and the person to whom she writes establish a lasting relationship through the letters, one that exceeds the classroom dynamic both personally and intellectually. Since we cannot write from outside our social, political, and cultural contexts, and we place ourselves in vulnerable spaces with our particularities, interests, and concerns, we write and read having the other always in mind. The dialogue transforms the academic space as it builds a community based on mutual interest and recognition. The practice of letter-writing, by making explicit what is usually left private (our emotions, our situations, our vulnerabilities) and giving it importance in the transformative role of thought and academia, is decidedly feminist: the private becomes academic and political.

In the epistolary writing seminar, one of the methodologies was to ask each participant to choose a partner to address and to share letters to him/her throughout the semester. The topics of those letters were dependent on each pair of writers’ interests in the seminar’s topics and their own ways of reacting to and thinking about them. The experiment included a moment when our letters turned into the source and main issue of the seminar. In analyzing and discussing the letters we wrote to each other, we found something very interesting. The first thing we discovered was that the particular “I” enunciated in the letters and addressed to a particular “you” situated philosophical problems at stake in the participants’ lives, emotions, life stories, and expectations, in other words, what mattered for each of us emerged naturally in an actual dialogue.<sup>12</sup> In one of the letters R.H. wrote to N.G., he talks about being surprised by her letter. He echoed some aspects of her life story in his own: his father was an important figure in his relationship with philosophy, and he realized this through reading N. G.’s reflections about why and how to do philosophy in which she talked about her father’s story. R. H.’s father was illiterate, and he lived homeless in the streets of Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia. He wrote beautiful and deep thoughts on the relation between discourse and life, on the ways he understood rationality, among other topics. He, as an author, was somehow empowered by the careful attention and reciprocated recognition that letters allowed his thoughts. This was the first time for students in third- and fourth-year undergraduate philosophy studies when their lives and personal perspectives were relevant in a classroom. This was the first time I allowed myself to write and share my own philosophical interests with my students, talking from my life story and the things that really matter to me. It was also the first time we did not require extensive quotation of the ideas of Western philosophers to formulate our own. There were quotations and references to Western philosophers in the letters we wrote, but somehow their role was different from that in traditional essays: those philosophers’ thoughts and ideas were as important as those of the participants in the seminar. Most of the participants described their experience writing letters as liberating. As a professor, I understood that the way we learn to write philosophy restricts the kind of engagement we can establish with the problems we think about. We read letters of Western philosophers, such as Descartes, and probably the first letters we wrote for the seminar were imitations of those letters of “actual” philosophers. But throughout the seminar, that sort of imitation became appropriation, became a path to find enriched subjects of philosophical thought among us, a path to find our own

voices. In that process we realized that who we are matters with regard to the kind of philosophy we do and want to do.

In some of the letters written throughout the seminar, the issue of gender arose as a salient matter. The diverse experiences of being women in a philosophy program, in many cases with diverse sexual orientations, and coming from popular classes in a colonized country, became a fundamental viewpoint for understanding traditional philosophical problems. For many of the students, this was the first time in an academic context where these elements were philosophically relevant. This imposed a way of reading letters (both those addressed to them and those written to others) in which making sense of their content required care and attention to the person writing. The attention was at the center of the process and not merely an afterthought. This is relevant, because frequently within the seminar dynamic, we are told, after being demolished by peers or teachers, to “not take it personally,” as if, in writing, we were not there. As a teaching experience, but more important, as a philosophical experience, to regard the other as a subject of thought and care manifests the possibility of transforming oppressive practices.

Usually, discussions in philosophy separate the public sphere of reasons from the personal space of concerns. This tends to leave the experience of oppression unattended, invisible, or unthinkable, leaving the person who suffers it to deal with it alone. In dominant academic spaces in Colombia, aggression, condescension, or flat-out omission of a woman’s voice is usually treated as a personal problem, not an issue that philosophy or even pedagogy should think about. There are, of course, dissonant voices: Colombian scholars generating spaces, methodologies, and pedagogies of criticism and resistance to this colonial and patriarchal system. But it is important to acknowledge that academic philosophy in Colombia tends to disregard and/or undermine the academic value of those scholars.<sup>13</sup> Very often, the colonial and patriarchal mandate prevails: we women emulate the forms, tones, and arguments of our male peers, and distance ourselves from our academic selves in the process. We must not show—or feel—insecurity, vulnerability, or a close tie with our lived life. Demanding care is understood as recognizing weakness, and philosophy is no place for the weak, we have been told.

When we write letters from the political South, and claim our place as subjects of philosophical thought, when we expose our feelings, our beliefs, our histories and stories, when we build spaces for the validation of multiplicity, diversity, and plasticity in the production of philosophical thought, thus transforming philosophical practice, we give an answer to what is philosophically relevant from a decolonial feminist point of view. Diverse places of enunciation emerge in this kind of writing, thus they become more visible for us as philosophers and students of philosophy in a colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal context. We realize we are necessarily situated; we realize that the things that matter to us are sometimes related to violence, discrimination, or injustice in our lives. Traditional philosophical writing prevents us from realizing these kinds of issues, and particularly prevents us from incorporating them in philosophical thought and *praxis*.

Decolonial feminist letter-writing contributes to resisting systems that oppress women and other feminized subjectivities. By subverting the logics by which women’s problems and concerns are relegated to a private sphere outside philosophical practice, the ideals of neutrality, homogeneity, and objectivity are questioned. This way, it is possible, for example, for a white homosexual woman from the third world to write philosophy from what is important to her; her fears, expectations, and emotions related to her particular experience of being a woman are philosophical.

The former allows for a reconsideration of what philosophical academia has traditionally regarded as an adequate object and methodology of philosophy, but more important, it transforms the common-sense idea of The Philosopher as someone who does not concern *himself* with the situated life *he* leads. It also allows for signaling and questioning the power structures that have been insufficiently considered in shaping philosophical thought, particularly from a perspective of teaching and learning philosophy. The use of a grammatical person that signals a concrete person can serve these purposes and can be a useful tool in the development of philosophical practices within the classroom.

It is possible to open spaces of resistance to the three-headed monster of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, even inside academia. One such space is experimentation in writing, in this case, correspondence. By refusing the universalization of privilege and opening the philosophical sphere to multiple subjectivities, narratives, and the recognition of a concrete other, letter-writing becomes a political philosophical activity. It is decolonial in refusing the idea that the political North should set our theoretical and practical standards when doing philosophy. It is feminist by refusing the power asymmetry of gender, and by assigning value to the emotional, the contextual, the personal, the situated. It is anticapitalist by not aspiring to produce profitable material and refusing insertion in the global economy. To answer the question raised at the beginning: How do we face the fact that we make philosophy from the political South? I might just say by making visible that we *make* philosophy from the political South; in other words, answering what it means for each of us, philosophers of the political South, to do philosophy from here. The answers will probably be diverse, and that is desirable. I ask myself this kind of question and I invite others to do the same: What matters to me when doing philosophy? What do I care about? Where am I speaking from? With whom do I want to philosophize? I, a cis-gender, homosexual, middle-class woman, racialized whiter than others here in Colombia, make philosophy with my students, my peers, and my readers from this uncomfortable place where the things that matter to me shape my practice.

**Acknowledgments.** This work is part of the research project “Non-Conventional Writing in Philosophy” (FHU-242), financed by Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. I want to thank Adriana Urrea for her inspiring ideas on epistolary thinking and writing, and Yessica Cortés, who has motivated and supported many of the activities done within the seminar on epistolary writing and other academic spaces; I have used as a source and support many of the records she prepared for that seminar. Finally, I want to give special thanks to María Lucía Rivera for reviewing and discussing previous versions of this article; her input greatly improved my arguments and her work as translator was key in rendering my ideas intelligible for English-speaking readers.

## Notes

1 “Monstro das três cabeças” is a poem read by Raquel Lima in the Aula Magistral do Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Coimbra University (Lima 2006).

2 This is not to say, of course, that philosophical thought is limited to academia. However, in academic and scholarly practices, features of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy are evident and pervasive. These practices, particularly in the context of teaching philosophy, must be critically examined and transformed in order to make philosophical education a tool for oppressed and marginalized communities in the political South’s emancipation and empowerment, at least in those communities with access to higher education and those affected through teaching in different contexts after graduation.

3 Some of the letters and writings associated with this project are published at <http://escriturayfilosofia.blogspot.com/>.

4 I thank one of the manuscript’s referees for recommending the use of the term *decolonial feminist methodology*.

5 I am not considering here the difference between “des-colonial” and “de-colonial,” as addressed by Karina Bidaseca, regarding the lines of thought and interpretation of coloniality of power by Rita Laura Segato and María Lugones (Bidaseca 2015, 32).

6 Mohanty speaks of the universalization of privilege as a discursive colonization in the case of third-world women (that is, women in/from the political South), whose experiences are the subject of research and discussion by women who implicitly identify themselves as Western (from the political North), thereby becoming objectified by a discursive procedure that represents them as a homogeneous group. This is done by supposing that a shared experience of oppression allows for a grouping under the same category (third-world woman). The political effect of this is the suppression of the historical and situational diversity of the struggles and resistances, of the subjects’ and agents’ own histories, and the invisibility of the power relations between the political North and South.

7 “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation” (Fanon 1994, 18).

8 This issue is very important to the debate about the ways in which to establish actual dialogue among indigenous and nonindigenous women in feminisms from the political South. Francesca Gargallo has documented key aspects of this debate (Gargallo 2012).

9 Original in Spanish. My translation.

10 Rita Laura Segato calls this “la gran frontera,” the great border: “This is the great border dividing the global landscape, leaving nations grouped on either side along the hierarchical and vertical axis. . . this is the first parting of the waters between those who give and those who receive modernity, and the systems for the flux of power and prestige established among them” (Segato 2007, 44; my translation). For her, only a few theories are able to cross “la gran frontera” from South to North, one of them being the theory of the coloniality of power (Segato 2014, 15).

11 Several documents illustrating this can be found on Colciencia’s webpage: <http://colciencias.gov.co/>.

12 These letters can be read in *Escritura y filosofía* 2019.

13 A careful characterization of the experiences of diverse women in philosophy in Colombia remains to be done, from the point of view of participation, representation, sexual and other forms of violence, stereotyping, racism, homophobia, and so on. The recent creation of the Colombian Network of Women Philosophers may be a first step in this direction. For more information, see <https://rcmujeresfilosofas.wordpress.com/>.

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