La palabra según Clarice Lispector: aproximaciones críticas

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The Word according to Clarice Lispector: critical approaches
"Preciso cuidar mais de mim": Intrapersonal Ethics in *Laços de família*

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*By the mere appearance of the other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as an object...*  
- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

*A outra pessoa é um enigma. E seus olhos são de estúpidos cegos.*  
- Clarice Lispector, *A via crucis do corpo*

When it first appeared in 1960, *Laços de família* consolidated Clarice Lispector’s reputation as a “master of the modern short story,” and almost fifty years later it continues to be seen as one of her most original and influential works (Fitz 105). Several of the stories in this volume portray solitary, introspective characters that experience life-altering encounters with something or someone else — what philosophers of ontology and ethics are fond of calling an “Other.” When linguistic or physical contact ensues in the midst of such encounters, it is usually tentative and awkward, at times even oppressive or violent. During or immediately subsequent to such attempts to relate to the Other, the already sparse narrative action of the tales is suspended, giving way to prolonged moments of reflection in which the protagonists grapple with issues such as the relationship between thought and reality, the tension between the expectations of society and personal desires, the challenges of interpersonal communication, and the difficulty of self-discovery. This pattern, common to several stories in the volume, foregrounds ethical concerns on a number of levels, particularly those related to what Geoffrey Harpham has called “the decentered center of ethics, its concern for ‘the other’” (“Ethics” 394).\(^1\) The reader of *Laços de

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1 In this article, Harpham provides several definitions of ethics and discusses its reemergence in theoretical discourse after the discovery of Paul de Man’s collaborationist writings led many to question deconstruction’s neglect of
familia is continually exposed to and invited to consider a number of ethical questions that go beyond rendering moral judgments on decisions confronting characters to deeper concerns related to the existential nature of the Other, the self’s responsibility when confronted with diverse kinds of Others, and the related issue of whether meaningful communication with these Others is possible. I argue in this essay that in Las cosas de familia Lispector frames such questions in ways that suggest that her personalized approach to ethics diverges sharply from Emmanuel Lévinas’ influential view that ethics — and even subjectivity — is predicated on a sense of unmitigated responsibility for the Other. When stories such as “Amor,” “A imitação da rosa,” “Preciosidade,” and others from this volume are read with a focus on the ethical dimensions they foreground and in light of a broader theoretical base, it becomes clear that Lispector sees interpersonality as a problematic standard, preferring instead an approach that has more in common with the classical ideal that equated ethics with the notion of care of the self.

In “Ethics as First Philosophy,” Lévinas equates ethics with “responsibility for my neighbor, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner, to which nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me” (84). To be ethical, one’s responsibility for the Other must be absolutely selfless and unconditional, going “beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself” (83). Another point emphasized by Lévinas is that although the Other shares our human nature, ethical relationships are necessarily asymmetrical since “in the very heart of the relationship with the other that characterizes our social life, alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship” (“Time and the Other” 48). Another important feature of Lévinas’ face-to-face encounter with the Other is the linguistic communication that ensues as a foundational step in the negotiation of ethical subjectivity or selfhood: “Language is born in responsibility. One has to speak,

to say I, to be the first person, precisely to be me (moi). But, from that point, in affirming the me being, one has to respond to one’s right to be” (“Ethics” 82). Spanish philosopher Fernando Savater has also elaborated a theory of ontology based on an Other-centric model of ethical relations. In Invitación a la ética, he argues that not all relationships with the Other are ethical and that the fundamental difference between ethical and non-ethical relationships is that the latter are characterized by rational communication between equals: “[M]antener una relación ética con los otros es estar siempre dispuesto a concederles la palabra y a poner en palabras lo que exigimos de ellos, lo que ofrecemos o lo que les reprochamos” (36). Although Savater rejects Lévinas’ view that ethical alterity is necessarily asymmetrical, his dual emphasis on the centrality of the self-Other relationship and on the role of linguistic communication is consistent with the general Levinasian paradigm.

This tremendously influential brand of Other-centered ethics coincides with the first half of the Biblical injunction to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19.18, Matt. 5.43). There have been times, however, when the second term of the commandment — love of or care for oneself — has been the standard of ethical thought and behavior. According to Margaret Toye, the history of ethics “can be viewed as a shifting back and forth from an exterior locus in the other to an interior locus in the self” (204-05). A leading theoretical voice for the priority of self-oriented ethics is that of

2 The commandment is reiterated several times, including in Mark 12.31, Romans 13.9, and Galatians 5.14. Žižek, et al. see the emphasis on love for the Other as a radical break from Greco-Roman ethics, which emphasized moderation and temperance (4). Using a variety of philosophical approaches, their essays explore the tensions inherent in defining ethics as a balance between love for self and love for others.

3 According to Toye, paraphrasing Ideas from David Parker’s book Ethics, Theory and the Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), the tensions between other- and self-directed ethics can be “mapped onto the Enlightenment v. Romanticism opposition, which is often represented by the figures of Kant and Niezsche” (205). For Slavoj Žižek, however, it is the “violently imposed” standard of the Mosaic Law that fractures ethics by introducing responsibility for what he calls the Neighbor. According to Žižek, in contrast to New Age traditions that seek to neutralize otherness by integrating it into one’s own self-image, “Judaism opens up a tradition in which an alien traumatic kernel persists forever in my Neighbor” (149).
Michel Foucault, who in the years leading up to his death set out to document a genealogy of ethics rooted in the values of the Classical period. According to Foucault, what mattered to the Ancients was “transformation of oneself by one’s own knowledge,” but he argues that the duty to know oneself (the so-called “Delphic principle”) was in fact subordinated to the doctrine of caring for oneself (131; 228). He emphasizes that for the Greeks the notion of care for the self entailed knowledge of one’s own nature and attention to one’s own needs and was understood as an activity whose cultivation was the very mark of ethical behavior: “[Concern for the self and care of the self were required for right conduct” (Foucault 269, 285).

Tension between responsibility for the other and care of the self permeates many of the stories collected in *Laços de família*, structuring their ethical dimensions on two levels that could be referred to as diegetic and meta-ethical. The most obvious ethical concerns pertaining to the diegetic world of the characters foreground the self-other distinction in that they involve conflicts that arise when characters attempt to reconcile their individual desires with the externally imposed obligations that stem from living in proximity to others, particularly family members. Must a woman sacrifice simple pleasures because she chooses to be a wife and mother? What is an individual’s duty when confronted with the hunger and misery of the poor? Is it better to suppress symptoms of mental illness for the fragile peace of mind of friends and family? Is it selfish not to share that which we treasure? Do we have to love or even tolerate people just because they are related to us? Is it wrong to wish someone were dead? Why do we abuse and humiliate our partners? When is it acceptable to abandon or eat the family pet? These dilemmas evoke a basic understanding of ethics as the domain concerned with regulating how one “ought” to act and determining which actions or principles are morally right or wrong. Such considerations are by no means simplistic, but although Lispector seems intent on raising them, she leaves it up to her readers to work out the answers, a gesture of ambivalence that foreshadows the attitude expressed by G.H.: “Seria simplicio pensar que o problema moral em relacao aos outros consiste em agir como se deveria agir” (90). The relatively simple ethical dilemmas raised at the texts’ diegetic levels, then, could be said to function as preliminary or “warm-up” questions that alert the reader to a deeper meta-ethical meditation that runs through several of the stories and focuses primarily on broader philosophical questions related to the nature of the Other and our obligation and ability to respond to its demands. The most prominent elements of this reflection concern Lispector’s conceptualization of what could be called the ethically relevant Other, her portrayal of the nature and consequences of the Other’s gaze, and her attitude regarding the suitability of language as a means to interact with and understand the Other. An analysis of these factors and related motifs suggests that in *Laços de família* Lispector ultimately subordinates the standard of responsibility for the Other to an alternative, intrapersonal ethic that prioritizes discovery and care of self.

A fundamental and particularly revealing component of Lispector’s formulation of ethically relevant otherness is her rejection of the notion that relationships with other human beings are the only interactions worthy of ethical consideration. *Laços de família* portrays a number of situations in which protagonists are confronted with non-human “Others” that are nonetheless capable of evoking ethical concerns. In “A imitação da rosa,” for example, the question of the ethical “ought” first surfaces about midway through the story when Laura spots a vase full of roses. Significantly, from that point on the key verbs — and nouns — of the text become “olhar” and “clever.” Laura, somehow entranced by the beauty of the roses, cannot stop looking at them, despite an intuitive awareness that sustaining their gaze prolongs her exposure to an unspecified risk (43). She is likewise unable to

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4 Although the terms moral and ethical (or morality and ethics) are often used interchangeably, in “Ethics” Harpham defines morality as a specific “moment” in the ethical process: “Ethics constitutes a general imperative to ‘act on principle’; morality constitutes a further imperative nested within the ethical that commands us to act now and on the right principle, that is the one that we want to stand as principle” (397).

5 In Savater’s model, for example, only humans can qualify as ethically relevant Others: “[No] hay relación ética más que con hombres, los besugas, las aceñas y los dioses escapan a mi competencia moral” (38). Lévinas’ notion of ethics as the domain of the face-to-face encounter and the key role played by speech in his model reveal a similar disregard for non-human subjects.
overcome the sensation that “devia manter a resolução e dá-las” (48). Similarly, Ana, the protagonist of “Amor,” is momentarily paralyzed by the beautiful but somewhat sinister presence of the plant life surrounding her in Rio’s Jardim Botânico, where she has sought refuge after catching an unexpected and strangely unsettling glimpse of a blind man on a busy street. Although the contrasting silence and stillness of the park initially impose a sleepy sense of calm, the atmosphere begins to change when Ana spots a solitary cat that quickly disappears into the shadows. Seemingly aware that someone or something else continues to watch her, she cautiously surveys her surroundings, beginning to fear that she has fallen victim to some sort of an ambush. She slowly begins to perceive the plants and trees around her an organic and abundant otherness that pushes back with an ethical message quite different than — and even oblivious to — the moral demands symbolically imposed by the anonymous figure of the blind man:

As árvores estavam carregadas, o mundo era tão rico que apodrecia. Quando Ana pensou que havia crianças e homens grandes com fome, a náusea subia-lhe à garganta, como se ela estivesse gravida e abandonada. A moral do Jardim era outra. (25)

For Ana, the discovery of an ethics opposed to the ideal of responsibility for the disadvantaged Other is at once liberating and deeply troubling. Aware that her contact with the blind man and, perhaps more significantly, the monstrous plenitude of the Botanical Garden imply a responsibility to choose between competing ethics, she remains unsure “se estava do lado do cego ou das espessas plantas” (27).

In “O crime do professor de matemática” and “O búfalo,” Lispector further broadens the category of the ethically relevant Other to include animals. “O crime do professor de matemática” is perhaps the most obviously ethics-focused story of the entire volume in that it centers on feelings of regret and guilt in connection with the professor’s morally questionable act of abandoning the family dog and on his need to atone for his “sin” by accepting a sort of punishment capable of endowing forgiveness and restoring personal freedom. The identification of the two dogs involved in the story’s plot with the philosophical category of otherness is insinuated early on as the narrator reveals the professor’s rationale for burying one of them: “Então, já que o cão desconhecido substituía o ‘outro’, quis que ele, para maior perfeição do ato, recebesse precisamente o que o outro receberia” (119). As the contrite professor’s reflections and memories unfold, it becomes clear that the alien or animal aspect of his pet poses no real barrier to its status as an ethically relevant Other. Aside from introducing a series of details that effect a subtle personification of the animal — not the least of which is his every-man name José — the text emphasizes the paradoxical nature of an insistent canine gaze that demands too much of its master by not demanding anything: “[M]e olhaste mudo e irreductível. [...] E, inquieto, eu começava a compreender que não exigias de mim que eu cedesse nada da minha [natureza] para te amar, e isso começava a me importunar” (122). The professor remembers José’s gaze as unavoidable and insatiable: “Às vezes sentado sobre as patas diante de mim, como me espiava! E então olhava o teto, tossia, dissimulava, olhava as unhas. Mas nada te conmovia: tu me espiava” (123). The use of an animal to underscore the problematic nature of the Other’s gaze is also a central concern of “O búfalo,” in which an anonymous female protagonist, distraught at having been rejected by a lover, wanders the zoo in an attempt to discover the animal that will teach her to hate rather than to forgive and love again. Avoiding any human interaction, she moves from animal to animal, silently staring into their eyes in search of a primordial hatred. She examines a group of monkeys, a camel, and finally a coat, only to be repelled by the love, patience, and curious naiveté expressed in their respective gazes. The story ends on an enigmatic note when the protagonist encounters a buffalo and finds herself captivated and immobilized by its hate-filled gaze.7

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6 The episode narrated here is illustrative of Lacan’s concept of the gaze as an awareness or perception that we are being looked at: “I can feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not see, not even discern. All that is necessary is for something to signify to me that there may be others there. This window, if it gets a bit dark, and if I have reasons for thinking that there is someone behind it, is straight-away a gaze” (215).

7 García-Moreno emphasizes the specifically feminine approach to the gaze used by Lispector in this story, contrasting it to what she sees as Julio Cortázar’s ungendered treatment of gazing in “Axolotl.”
These examples illustrate that for Lispector the Other need not be human to provoke awareness of ethical dilemmas or metaethical reflection. Significantly, as we have seen, a key characteristic of these non-human Others is their capacity to project an unsettling, threatening or objectifying gaze. Lispector likewise emphasizes the menacing nature of the Other's gaze in her portrayals of self-Other encounters between humans in *Lacos de família*, invariably casting the act of perceiving the gaze as an oppressive and traumatic experience which, far from facilitating mutual understanding or compassion, more often provokes shame, anxiety, and the desire to flee. Characters in these stories tend to exhibit a hypersensitivity to being looked at and almost invariably respond by looking away to evade the gaze, a maneuver that disrupts identification with the Other. In "Amor," upon shrieking and dropping her groceries after noticing the empty gaze of the blind man, Ana immediately perceives the collective look of her fellow streetcar passengers. After exiting onto a busy sidewalk, she avoids eye contact with any of the anonymous pedestrians: "Junto dela havia uma senhora de azul, com um rosto desvios o olhar depressa" (23). Upon arriving home, her frightened son, having escaped her nervous hug, retreats to a safe distance and gives her "o pior olhar que jamais recebéra" (27). In "A imitação da rosa," Laura associates the collective gaze of her family and friends with the shame of a past nervous breakdown whose return is to be avoided at all costs: "Era preciso tomar cuidado com o olhar de espanto dos outros [...] Nunca mais essa coisa de todos olharem-namudos, e ela em frente a todos" (45). At the end of the same story, the inability of Laura's husband to look at her seems to indicate that, despite her best intentions, she is likely headed for a relapse (53). In "Feliz aniversário," the avoidance of eye contact complements the theme of forced or awkward communication. This is clear from the moment the family members begin to arrive and shake out their positions: "a nor de Ipanema na fila oposta das cadeiras fingindo ocupar-se com o bebê para não encarar a concunhada de Olaria"

8 Lispector's notion of the gaze is clearly influenced by Sartre's thoughts on what he calls "the look" or "being-seen-by-another." In *Being and Nothingness* he observes that the sense that one is being looked at and judged by an Other initially produces intense feelings of shame (222, 261). For an interesting discussion of the influence of Sartre's existentialism on Lispector, see Pontiero.

Later, one of the old matriarch's sons recalls his mother's gaze as harsh and difficult to bear, the "olhar firme e direto com que sempre olhara os outros filhos, fazendo-os sempre desviar os olhos" (65). Even as they go their separate ways, the siblings, "andando meio de costas," cannot bring themselves to look at each other (66). It is in "Preciosidade," however, that the connection between being looked at and the potentially dangerous nature of interactions with the Other is made most apparent. When the teenage protagonist senses the presence of two strangers on her usual route to school, her initial concern is that they will look at her: "elas vão olhar para mim, eu sei, não há mais ninguém para eles olharem e eles vão me olhar muito" (88). As the strangers pass by, she musters the courage to glance at them quickly, but immediately realizes that by looking she has made herself even more vulnerable, almost ensuring that the encounter escalates into some kind of violent interaction: "Não deveria ter visto. Porque, vendo, ela por um instante, arriscava-se a tornar-se individual, e também eles. [...] tendo visto o que os olhos, ao verem, diminuim, arriscara-se a ser um ela-mesma, que a tradição não amparava" (89). As if impelled by her gaze the strangers do indeed double back to clumsily grope the paralyzed teen, but this time she looks away, "sua cara [...] voltada com serenidade para o nada" (90).

Very much intertwined with the motif of the gaze is that of the difficulty or impossibility of meaningful linguistic communication with the Other. Lispector's conspicuous use of objects, plants, and animals as viable catalysts for ethical reflection obviously foregrounds barriers to communication, but the stories of *Lacos de família* offer little hope that language will be any more useful as a means to facilitate interpersonal understanding among humans. Indeed, the treatment of language in these stories is very much in line with Earl Fitz's observation that "Lispector figures among the most adept at showing how the eternal human struggle with words, with communication, tragically culminates all too often in a state of silence. Her intense tales make one wonder whether meaningful communication is ever really possible" (35). The narrator's description of the restaurant in which "Devaneio e embriaguez dumra rapariga" is set emphasizes the related motifs of distance and miscommunication: "E tudo no restaurante tão distante um do outro como se jamais um pudesse falar com o outro" (14-15). At the close
of "A imitação da rosa," when Armando realizes that Laura has once again become "luminosa e inalcançável," he seems ambivalently aware that words would be a futile reaction: "[N]ão tinha uma palavra sequer a dizer" (53). In "Feliz aniversário," conversation among the family members is portrayed as redundant, absurdly stilted, and painfully awkward. No one quite knows what to say or is willing to engage in meaningful dialogue, and the insincerity that characterizes the entire evening is underscored by the emptiness of their formulaic goodbyes: "Adeus, até outro dia, precisamos nos ver. Apareçam, disseram rapidamente" (66). In terms of interpersonal communication, the commemoration has been a total failure. Unable to access the appropriate words to say to each other, "olhavam-se sorrindo, mudos" (66). As if Lispector were intent on signaling the difficulty of linguistic communication among family members in particular, the volume's title story also casts linguistic failure as symbolic of interpersonal distance and incompatibility. This comes across most clearly when, on the way to the train station, Catarina and her mother, Severina, are suddenly thrown into contact with one another as their taxi lurched. After looking at each other and realizing that something akin to a "disaster" or "catastrophe" has just occurred, the climate of the cramped cab becomes increasingly uncomfortable as they realize that "não tinham o que falar" ("Laços de família" 96). Instead of chatting with each other at the station, "ambas esperavam sem ter o que dizer" (96). As the passengers begin to board, a sense that something should be said overcomes both mother and daughter, but to no avail: "Que coisa tinham esquecido de dizer uma a outra? e agora era tarde demais. Parecia-lhe que deveriam ter dito assim: sou tua mãe, Catarina. E ela deveria ter respondido: e eu sou tua filha" (97). The communicative difficulties that befall Catarina, Severina and many of the other characters portrayed in Laços de família serve to separate and isolate them from one another. As Fitz puts it, "When they do attempt to communicate some messages to other beings, they are doomed to failure and their hopelessly subjective, fragmented, contradictory utterances resist any clarifying interpretation" (58).

As we have seen, in Laços de família Lispector systematically questions the concept of the Other and, by extension, the ideal of an Other-oriented approach to ethics by proposing the ethical viability of a number of non-human Others, by emphasizing the tendency of the Other's gaze to provoke anxiety, paralysis, and flight, and by calling attention to the inadequacy of language. When confronted by an Other for whom assuming responsibility would be problematic, traumatic, or impossible, many characters in Laços de família react by focusing their attention inward, back onto themselves. Unable to sustain the Other's gaze, they turn to their own reflections; unable to establish meaningful dialogue, they resort to monologic introspection. Protagonists who seek out their reflections in mirrors either before or after a failed encounter with some form of otherness represent a recurring motif in these stories. In "Amor," Ana's journey of ethical reflection ends with her standing in front a mirror, brushing her hair. Significantly, Laura begins the next story in the exact same position, asking herself a question that succinctly encapsulates the tension between responsibility for the Other and care of the self: "Interrompendo a arrumação da penteadeira, Laura olhou-se ao espelho: e ela mesma, há quanto tempo?" (35). In "Preciosidade," the young victim of the street groping retreats to the privacy of the school bathroom where she lets out a series of shouts that reveal her extreme pessimism regarding Other-centered relationships: "Estou sozinha no mundo! Nunca ninguém vai me ajudar, nunca ninguém vai me amar! Estou sozinha!" (92). She later returns to the lavatory for a scene in which the idea of specular reflection and its connection to an ethics of self care reappears. Gazing at herself in the mirror, she undergoes an epiphany, a conversion to an ethics of self care, the importance of which is only amplified by its understated simplicity: "Preciso cuidar mais de mim" (92). These mirror scenes are significant, since, as Harpham notes, ethics imposes a doubled demand of action and reflection (Getting it Right 43). Certainly, the protagonists of stories such as "Amor," "A imitação da rosa," "O crime do professor de matemática," and "O búfalo" are prone to the paralyzing consequences of ethical introspection as it is described by Harpham: "Proliferating questions, generating perspectives ever more spacious and general, making us uncertain of what we know and doubtful whether we know anything at all, ethical reflection subverts the assurance, the 'knowledge' upon which action is based" (43). In these stories and others of the volume, action is clearly subordinated to intense ethical reflection, an activity which, due to its exclusively intrapersonal nature, defers any possible responsibility to act in the interest of the Other.
The narratives of *Laços de família* consistently reject the ideal of an ethics based strictly on the notion of responsibility for the Other. Lispector's stretching of the definition of the Other to include objects, plants, and animals is in and of itself a challenge to the Levinasian ideal of face-to-face encounters. Furthermore, it calls attention to the isolating effects of the gaze and the challenges of linguistic communication that frustrate interpersonal interactions as well. Despite all this, the Other remains a formidable figure that resists total effacement. In this regard, Clarisse Fukelman's observation regarding the narrator of *A hora da estrela* is also relevant to Lispector's approach to the self-Other dialectic in *Laços de família*: "Pois ao mesmo tempo que sabe que é um ser independente e gosta de sê-lo, anseia por uma identificação completa com o outro, por uma comunicação direta, sem obstáculos" (8). In *Laços de família*, Lispector's position seems to be closer to that of Foucault, who, in clear opposition to the Levinasian perspective, writes that: “Care for others should not be put before care of oneself. The care of self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior” (287). Lispector's ethical imperative is not necessarily to disregard the Other, but rather to think about and to care for oneself first. By the time Lispector finishes *A paixão segundo G.H.* four years later, the lessons learned by her protagonists in *Laços de família* have distilled into an ethical aphorism used by that novel's narrator to summarize the key lesson of her own traumatic and bitter encounter/struggle with the Other or — perhaps more importantly — with herself: “O primeiro passo em relação ao outro é achar em si mesmo o homem de todos os homens” (*A paixão* 178).

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SARTRE, Jean-Paul
The Death of a Chicken, or the Birth of a Liminal Heroine: Resisting Hetero-Patriarchal Conception Coercion

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Feminist scholarship-activism has made an important contribution to the “objective understanding” of the world by identifying the significance of gender in the epistemological, cognitive construction processes of knowledge and reality. For almost four decades, feminist empiricist research has raised questions regarding the incommensurability of difference, between reality and human perception of it. In her address to the First National Conference of Stewardesses for Women’s Rights, for example, Kathie Sarachild argued that through consciousness-raising, it is possible to reinterpret human experience and thus transcend the limits/boundaries imposed by the dominant logic. This world traveling “movement” requires a conceptual rather than a spatial dislocation, which makes possible the creation of what lesbian separatist philosopher Sarah Hoagland has termed “conceptual separatism — [the creation of] spaces that operate with a logic distinct from (in some respects, incommensurable with) the dominant paradigm” (Hoagland, “Resisting Rationality” 133). Understanding and validating conceptual separatism as a viable option, a hybrid conceptual framework from which new ways of knowing and acting emerge, is an essential strategic-tactical movement shift to complicate postmodern understandings of agency and to conceptualize “the possibility of theorizing resistance from the subaltern position from within the concreteness of body-to-body engagement” in the midst, instead of in the absence, of oppressive structures/systems of institutionalized coercion (Lugones, “Playfulness” 207).

1 See Lugones (“Playfulness”).