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Not “Studying the Subaltern,” but Studying *with* “Subaltern” Social Groups, or, at Least, Studying the Hegemonic Articulations of Power

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Providing a brief history of this text will help contextualize it for the reader. It is the revised version of a position paper that I presented at the conference “Cross-Genealogies and Subaltern Knowledges,” held at Duke University, 15–17 October 1998.¹ Significantly, this conference was principally a meeting of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, to which a few colleagues who were not members of the group, and who do not even frame their work within ideas of “subalternity,” were invited to contribute. I was one of these few.² I found the invitation motivating and tried to prepare a paper that stimulated debate and that could prove useful to a dynamic and valuable intellectual project. Such an interest underlies this text and helps reveal its character. It seems to me that *Nepantla*’s reviewers’ comments on my article followed a similar vein and further informed my present elaboration of the subject. Reading those commentaries and writing this revised version have led me to the following conclusion: Our approaches, though different, share something very important in that they both focus on culture and power; both are motivated by a certain “power sensibility,” or attentiveness toward the issues of power inherent to social experience, as well as to our own practices as intellectuals. This conclusion explains precisely why my article exhibits a certain tone of self-reflection and personal narrative.

In light of these aspects of the paper’s history, I have decided to devote it to a critique of the idea of “studying the subaltern,” a central element of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group (LASSG), enunciated in

their founding statement (1993, 110). Considering the founding statement's general orientation, as well as the work of most LASSG members, one can assume that "studying the subaltern" does not entirely define the project's character. Nevertheless, it is a critical aspect of the statement, and, in my view, is ethically, politically, and epistemologically problematic, demanding criticism. In fact, this goal should not remain in the founding statement of such an intellectual project, because it is reminiscent of the area studies tradition. However, this idea's presence in the statement is not an accident. The notion of "studying the subaltern" and the legacy behind it reflect the institutional context of the group's inception. It is not incidental that the group emerged from the U.S. university context and is devoted to studying cases in a particular "region" or "area" of the world outside the United States: Latin America. It seems to me that regardless of the group's critical orientation, these circumstances have contributed to an acritical maintenance of the area studies tradition. Foucault's *L'ordre du discours* (1980 [1971]) is suggestive here because it emphasizes how mechanisms of control and the delimitation of discourses oblige us to consider the institutional context of the production of this particular discourse, thereby helping us explore both its biases and possible ways of transforming it.

Current debates about new approaches to area studies, which began in the United States about five years ago, have helped produce the general understanding that area studies (both in the United States and in Western Europe) have been historically marked by the interests of imperial or other forms of transnational and international dominance. As we know, this predicament did not originate during the cold war, but existed before and was intensified by it. Further, the cold war's end has factored prominently in current revisions of area studies' established conceptions, and much of the debate—as well as most of the current proposals to reshape area studies—emerges from this historical situation. Although some of these revisions accomplish more than merely dismantling certain effects of cold war politics, most of them do not effectively challenge more enduring globally established power relations. For instance, current criticisms of area studies question traditionally conceived geographical and cultural borders, as well as research questions and interrelations between areas and disciplines, but they rarely contest fundamental epistemological assumptions that predate the cold war. An example of such an assumption is the very idea of studying "others" in order to write and teach about them in languages foreign to them. The intentions and presuppositions that inform studies of this nature simply cannot remain unexamined and unchallenged.

Thus, efforts to revise area studies, which necessarily include a discussion of “studying the subaltern,” must be contextualized by acknowledging which interests shape our research agendas. It is ethically, politically, and epistemologically imperative that researchers find ways to promote the conscious incorporation of social groups that are usually targeted as subjects of study into jointly conceived research agendas. Experience has taught me that incorporating them into our research from its inception challenges the established practice of constructing “local communities” as objects of study, thereby shifting our investigative focus. It may change from studying the other (for example, “the subaltern”) to studying *with* that other. If such an ambitious project is not possible for some of us, we may at least shift from “studying the subaltern” to studying the practices of global agents, such as the World Bank or the United States Agency for International Development, and the articulations of power that connect them to hegemonic domestic/local agents. This important change of focus may produce knowledge that helps concerned social groups learn about global-local articulations of power, hegemonic global and domestic agents’ practices, and how these practices may impact their lives.

From this point of view, I suggest that the idea of “studying the subaltern” should not just be expurgated or limited in its scope within the mentioned statement as it is suggested (1993, 121). The idea of studying the subaltern requires a thorough critique whose consequences must be explored. In fact, the LASSG’s statement contains proposals that suggest a productive point of departure, such as “building new relations between ourselves and those human contemporaries whom we posit as objects of study” (1993, 121). In this article, I propose to begin with this suggestion, expanding it to outline an ethical and political shift with significant epistemological and theoretical consequences. I therefore wish to challenge the prevailing division of intellectual labor, particularly because it privileges “scholarly” practices at the cost of excluding “intellectual” practices that challenge established research questions, disciplinary boundaries, theoretical interests, and methods. I do not claim to propose a complete novelty. I hope to contribute to an ongoing discussion occurring not only in Latin America, but also in the United States and other latitudes. Specific examples of the trailblazing “intellectual” practices that have been produced in Latin America in recent decades—those carried out by Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda, for instance—certainly deserve mention. I will comment briefly on Freire’s and Fals-Borda’s work later.

Before acknowledging these efforts in greater detail, however, I would like to return to the LASSG's founding statement. It is informed by the argument that Latin America is an "area" of study, within which certain social groups such as "the subaltern" are identified and researched. This is not the appropriate moment to discuss extensively an issue that merits deeper analysis,³ but in brief, "Latin America" is not a "natural region," but a historically constructed system of representations confined more often than not to geographical reference points that privilege so-called Latin American nation-states. Geographical references produce problems by omitting significant populations currently living outside a particular region. For example, significant numbers of people in Latin American countries have recently migrated to the United States and parts of Western Europe; others are descendants of earlier immigrants; and still others trace their descent to populations that never migrated, but whose historical territories were annexed, in one way or another, to the United States, such as Puerto Rico and southern U.S. states that were once part of Mexico. Populations like these, which hardly fit neatly into a geographical nation-state framework, represent around 30 million people, a significant figure not only in quantitative terms, but also in qualitative terms. Specifically, a significant portion of this "world" that escapes geographical definition is considered "subaltern" in the United States.

The LASSG is composed of scholars from diverse origins (some of them from Latin American countries) who work and live in the United States. I see no problem with their commitment to building new relations and studying with "subaltern" social groups in so-called Latin America, but what about making a similar commitment to "subaltern" social groups in the United States? Shouldn't particular attention be paid to those identified under the "Latina/o" label? What about others? I propose that a promising reevaluation of the LASSG's intellectual project should consider the three shifts outlined in this article: (a) a shift from studying the "subaltern" to studying *with* "subaltern" social groups; (b) in the case that studying *with* "subaltern" social groups is an overly ambitious goal, considering these scholars' institutional contexts, their practices should shift at least from studying the "subaltern" to studying the articulations of power that connect hegemonic global and domestic agents; and (c) a shift from studying cases of "subaltern" populations in Latin America from the United States to costudying cases in any place (or both in Latin America and in the United States) jointly with the concerned populations. Such a reevaluation of the project would entail a name change as well: from the Latin American

Subaltern Studies Group to the Transnational Subaltern Studies Group, an idea already articulated by at least one of the group’s members, Walter Mignolo (1996, 31).

Studying with “Subaltern” Social Groups

My proposals are not totally alien to the LASSG’s declared interests. On the contrary, they are an invitation to complete the epistemological and ethical turn outlined in the LASSG’s project, an idea that appears most clearly in the founding statement’s conclusion, which calls for building “new relations between ourselves and those human contemporaries whom we posit as objects of study.” The complete concluding paragraph warrants consideration:

We need to conclude this statement, however, with a recognition of the limits of the idea of “studying” the subaltern and a caution to ourselves in setting out to do this. Our project, in which a team of researchers and their collaborators in elite metropolitan universities want to extricate from documents and practices the oral world of the subaltern, the structural presence of the unavoidable, indestructible, and effective subject who has proven us wrong—she/he who has demonstrated that we did not know them—must itself confront the dilemma of subaltern resistance to and insurgency against elite conceptualizations. Clearly, it is a question not only of new ways of *looking at* the subaltern, new and more powerful forms of information retrieval, but also of building new relations between ourselves and those human contemporaries whom we posit as objects of study. Rigoberta Menchú’s injunction at the end of her famous testimonio is perhaps relevant in this regard: “I’m keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets.” (121)

I endorse the idea of “building new relations,” but not that of “studying the subaltern.” The latter practice still sustains some of the ethics and epistemology that the LASSG criticizes, because it insists on “extricating” information about/from the “subaltern;” that is, producing information about “subaltern” subjects or social groups, revealing their secrets,

all to advance the knowledge of other social groups. I ask: Who is interested in extricating this information? Have the “subaltern” groups asked to be studied? Who may eventually profit from such knowledge production? Whose interests will these research practices serve? Whose interests lead/inform/orient them? What will the “subaltern” social groups gain from such knowledge production? My point is that the extricated information will enhance knowledge about the “subaltern,” making it available to hegemonic agents in metropolitan societies through publishing—usually in languages foreign to the “subaltern” group in question—and other forms of information storage and distribution.

If we are committed to decolonizing academic research, these questions must be addressed. Decolonizing academic research should focus on these central factors: Historically established ways of constituting objects of study and drawing limits between academic disciplines; limits between the academy and other social realms; and research practices that produce certain kinds of knowledge. I have learned from personal experiences with indigenous peoples from several Latin American countries that, generally speaking, they are not interested in being research subjects, museum pieces, or exotic images in other peoples’ projects. They expect researchers to collaborate with them in fulfilling their own projects and agendas. I first grasped these problems in 1986 during my field research in Tascabaña, a Kariña village in the state of Anzoátegui, in Venezuela. It was then that Hilario Aray, the oldest man in the village, refused my attempt to interview him by saying that “when the white man seeks the Indian it is because he wants to take something from him, something that the Indian wants to keep secret.”

Suggestively, Aray’s words echo those of Rigoberta Menchú cited in the LASSG’s statement: “I’m keeping secret what I think no-one should know” (1993, 121). My interest in interviewing Aray was to learn about Kariña styles of storytelling performance, as part of a larger project whose goal was to improve the appreciation and dissemination of indigenous peoples’ tales and styles of performance in Venezuelan cities, to emphasize their value within the national context. At the time I was very proud of my project, and it had already produced very satisfactory results. However, I was totally naive regarding other possible meanings of my own practice until I confronted Aray’s response, which left an indelible mark on me and was the beginning of an important change in my research interests and orientation.

In light of these indigenous peoples' statements, I wonder—and invite the reader to wonder—What are we going to do? Are we just going to rob their secrets to make them public? Are we going to help sustain present forms of colonization or of postcolonial domination? Many "subaltern" social groups and individuals are aware of the consequences of these unquestioned research strategies and are able to resist our attempts. Aray's reaction is an example, and here is another one.

The following difficult but educational experience also occurred in 1986, when I was doing research on storytelling with some Wuayuu collaborators. Three related experiences are worth recounting. First, the condition posed to me by Noelí Pocaterra, a Wuayuu person who is not only a leader of her people, but who was at the time also in charge of the Center for Indigenous Affairs of the Universidad del Zulia. Zulia is the public university closest to the Wuayuu's historical territory and one from which several indigenous and mestizo intellectuals strive to establish new kinds of ties with the region's indigenous peoples. Pocaterra made her intention clear: her people would help me to the degree that I was willing to help them. She asked me to direct workshops on storytelling research and performance techniques for Wuayuu teachers and cultural activists. The second experience of note occurred during one of those workshops, when several participants claimed that a state-sponsored publishing house had stolen two stories from Ramón Paz Ipuana, a recognized Wuayuu poet who was absent at the time. The stories, they argued, were his own creations, and did not belong to what anthropologists and other people who live in a written world conventionally call "oral tradition." The workshop participants rightly observed that the publishers had ignored the creative skills of a particular indigenous individual, an all too common practice that tends to deny indigenous people that which apparently pertains only to white individuals: a creative talent. A failed interview with Paz Ipuana was the third particularly educational experience from my time with the Wuayuu. He refused to be interviewed and alleged that his stories had already been stolen. He said he and his people were not animals or things to be studied.

Paz Ipuana and the Wuayuu workshop participants teach important lessons about the alienating consequences of the resemantization of indigenous cultural production into traditional academic contexts. These are very important issues and in another discussion would deserve greater attention.⁴ But for the purposes of this article, a summary of the cases and

what they reveal seems sufficient. The theft the Wuayuu denounced is unfortunately not at all uncommon. On the contrary, it represents a deeply rooted practice among anthropologists and folklorists who devote themselves to “collecting” what they consider “antique” and “authentic” oral narratives. Such a paradigm negates the creative powers of contemporary narrators, transforming them into what these scholars call “informants.” Only the “old stories” interest these researchers, who ask their “informants” to tell them the “true stories,” supposedly handed down from the former generation to the present one. My experience with the Wuayuu is particularly relevant to this article because it illustrates two different kinds of critical response: first, Paz Ipuana’s position, which coincides with Aray’s; second, Pocaterra’s request, which represents a more negotiatorial than resistant position.⁵

I perceived my research practices quite differently after these experiences, which led me to a new research agenda, one that tested new forms of articulating my practice with “subaltern” social subjects and their organizations.

Studying the Hegemonic Articulations of Power and Decolonizing Academic Research

Since the experiences mentioned above, I have learned to ask the “subaltern” subjects with whom I attempt to collaborate through my research practice about how my knowledge may be useful to them. In only a few situations have I found my work useful, and then not necessarily in my capacity as a researcher, but as an activist. These are experiences about which it was not always possible or advisable to write, although I have found ways to conceal the identity of the people or organizations involved (Mato 1996, 1997). Upon asking indigenous leaders if my research could be of use, I have very often received specific requests, like “we need water,” or “we need a medical doctor,” or others that I was unable to fulfill effectively, given my position at that moment. Nevertheless, conversations I held with some indigenous leaders (see first unnumbered note) brought us to the conclusion that most of these material requests were in one way or another related to situations of social disadvantage, which were in turn rooted in historically established power relations that kept these peoples in subordinated social situations. Therefore, instead of studying the “subaltern,” I would rather study those accountable for social injustice and make this knowledge available to those “subaltern” subjects.

Thus I reoriented my research practice toward focusing not on the "subaltern," but on the practices of hegemonic agents and the global-local articulations of power. This response was only a general solution I put into practice when I could not find a way to study *with* the "subaltern," which is my preferred orientation, but one that has been feasible only a few times in my life. Significantly, however, this reorientation has enabled me to give some of these peoples' organizations the practical support they requested as part of their negotiations with global agents such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and U.S.-based environmental organizations that operate at a worldwide level. These experiences have also taught me a great deal, but, as noted above, it has not always been possible to write about them, or at least not in a scholarly article. Another obstacle arises because global and other hegemonic agents are reluctant research subjects, to say the least. For example, it has been difficult and generally unproductive to attempt conducting field research in the World Bank's headquarters. Still, I think that adopting the perspective proposed here opens a fertile arena for collaboration between researchers and "subaltern" social groups, at the same time that it makes our research skills particularly valuable within the context of the current age of globalization. Thus the rest of this section will be devoted to a discussion of this perspective.

The basic idea is to reverse the established order of things from studying "subaltern" social groups in order to make this knowledge available to hegemonic agents (e.g., through publications in languages foreign to those studied, but directed at and available to hegemonic agents) to studying hegemonic agents' practices to make this knowledge available to "subaltern" social groups (e.g., not necessarily through publishing but through diverse forms of collaboration). Since the idea of studying the other lies behind the foundational projects of both anthropology and area studies in world-dominant countries, this project may also be seen as decolonizing academic research.

The motivations for shifting my research practice are numerous. But foremost are the positions of resistance and negotiation that I confronted in several exchanges with indigenous peoples, as well as the advice some of them gave me to reverse the orientation of my research. Another motivation has been my own interest in understanding how current global processes affect ongoing sociopolitical transformations at diverse societal levels.

In the present age of globalization, social representations and institutions are shaped not in isolated social spaces, but through transnational processes with the intense participation of both "global" and "local" agents.

This latter category comprises a range of agents who develop their practices from the local to the national levels.⁶ In previous articles I have discussed relations between global and local agents that affect socially constructed representations of civil society as well as of indigenous peoples' identities in certain Latin American countries (Mato 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1999). I have chosen to study the transnational production of these particular social representations because they have helped establish the agendas of two very active categories of social agents in several contemporary Latin American societies: civic/civil society organizations and indigenous peoples' organizations.

Focusing on the relations between global and local agents and their effects has enriched my approach to what is usually called "globalization," a word that has become too fashionable recently and that often lacks precision. Thus I find it necessary to explain my use of the term. In my view globalization is most fruitfully regarded not as a single process, nor as a new phenomenon, as it is often represented, but as a long-standing historical tendency toward the increasing interconnectedness of social agents worldwide that is the result of numerous and very diverse social processes. These latter processes may be called "globalizing processes," that is, those that produce globalization. The pace of globalization has greatly accelerated and become increasingly complex in recent years, up to the point that I think it appropriate to name the present historical period the "age of globalization." This expression emphasizes the growing cultural and political relevance of worldwide interconnections; the increasing social and political relevance of diverse social agents' transnational practices, particularly regarding a wide range of "global agents"; and the relatively recent worldwide development of diverse forms of consciousness of globalization.

The uneven development of forms of consciousness of globalization is perhaps the most salient characteristic of the current age, and it is central to this paper's discussion of the potential articulations of our research practices with the practices of "subaltern" social groups. The examples of the social production of representations of civil society and identities that I have analyzed in earlier studies (Mato 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999) highlight how transnational networks constituted by domestic and global agents—for example, indigenous peoples' organizations and environmentalist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as civic organizations, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and other global agents—legitimize representations that play critical roles in shaping the agendas and practices

of those local and domestic agents. These representations constitute part of what I have named forms of consciousness of globalization. Other forms of this consciousness concern how information about global processes is managed. Thus we must also consider that subaltern social groups sometimes do not have all the knowledge they may need in order to take advantage of the global processes in which they take part, as in the cases of pharmaceutical corporations that cheaply acquire valuable knowledge from the shamans of the Amazon Basin and later gain disproportionate benefits from it, and other instances when indigenous botanical knowledge is traded with alien agents (Blum 1993; Carr, Petersen, and Ramaswamy 1993; Gray 1990). A focus on such global processes and their effects will help us reorient our research practices toward producing and supplying information to "subaltern" social groups so that they achieve better positions in their symbolic, economic, and political negotiations with global and domestic hegemonic agents.

To avoid a possible misinterpretation I must highlight that the existence and significance of these networks and global agents cannot be interpreted in simplistic terms of domination or imperialism. My findings show that the processes of globalization—and in particular, the transnational production of representations—are much more complex and usually involve experiences of learning, coproduction, appropriation, adaptation, reelaboration, negotiations, and other dynamic interactions between social agents in heterogeneous scenarios.

It is also important to note that "global agents" are not "deterritorialized," as may be inferred from some literature about globalization. Neither are they neutral or representative of universal interests. Whether they are governmental or nongovernmental, many global agents are "domestic" to certain societies (mostly to the United States, Canada, Japan, or Western European countries), and therefore their representations and associated agendas and practices depend upon conflicts and negotiations mainly, but not exclusively, related to those societies, within which they do not usually represent the interests of the respective "subaltern" social groups. For instance, these agents' agendas and budgets are tied to public opinion and government institutions and bureaucracies. Other global agents include multilateral banks in which the representatives of just a few countries control the decision-making process. These representatives and their officers greatly influence their organizations' institutional representations and agendas, which in turn inform their practices. The representations that inform the practices of other global agents, like the U.N. system and

other international organizations, are produced by more complex systems of conflicts and negotiations, which are generally related to diverse domestic contexts, as well as to transnational networks of experts. Some global organizations' officers have acknowledged the importance of this fact, not only in personal interviews with me, but even in their published writings (Carroll 1992, 153; Moseley-Williams 1994, 55). Still, we cannot ignore that some global agents are foreign government agencies like USAID and its Canadian and Western European counterparts, whose missions and restrictions are established by their respective governments. Moreover, the influence of these countries' governments surpasses their own state agencies' activities, because some of them also grant money that contributes significantly to the budgets of transnational nongovernmental organizations. These are often disbursed for exclusive purposes, and the organizations that receive them must observe rules and restrictions imposed by these governments. Similarly, many transnational NGOs have now become little more than subcontractors of USAID and the World Bank. Thus their projects are, to a significant degree, predefined by bilateral or multilateral banking agents, not by the subcontracted NGOs, and even less by "local" agents. Although global agents' rhetoric often stresses that "local" agents' views are considered when designing projects, the strong restrictions on this "participation" have been recognized even in World Bank documents (Clark 1991; Salmen and Eaves 1991; Tendler 1982). As a consequence, certain global agents' representations inform these projects and reinforce certain social representations in local social spaces, with or without the participation of domestic hegemonic agents, although often through specific forms of articulation with national governments' agencies.

It is impossible to generalize about global agents and the forms of articulation between their practices and those of domestic hegemonic agents. Each global agent—as well as the specific forms of the articulations between their practices and those of domestic hegemonic agents—must be considered a potential case study. I have studied several global agents and the networks they support with an eye toward showing these issues to indigenous peoples' organizations and other popular organizations in Latin America. Nevertheless, meeting this goal is not an easy task. The agents I aspire to support would not learn about global agents through the publication of scholarly articles. I have partially accomplished my aim of supporting their struggles by direct personal communication with the leadership of some indigenous peoples' organizations who were willing—

and in some cases even eager, as for example the leadership of the Shuar-Achuar Federation from Ecuador—to use my knowledge.

I think that researching global agents' practices and global-local articulations of power will help our research be useful to "subaltern" social groups. However, some problems remain. First, we must learn how to make this knowledge effectively, and not just rhetorically, accessible to subaltern subjects and their organizations; and second, differences and relations of power—for example, along lines of gender, age, lineage, and other forms—within "subaltern" social groups must be considered. Further, what segment of a certain indigenous population would we be supporting, for example, when putting our skills to the service of the leadership of a certain indigenous peoples' organization vis-à-vis a global agent? What kinds of intraethnic differences are reinforced?

Nevertheless, and above all, I have to stress that reversing the orientation of research from studying the "subaltern" to studying hegemonic agents is still an unsatisfactory solution, because this would not mean studying *with* the "subaltern," but studying *on behalf of* the "subaltern." Thus my proposal does not solve the problem of studying *with* the "subaltern," except when, as in some of the cases described above, they called on us and requested a certain kind of work. Nevertheless, in Latin America several experiences of studying *with* the "subaltern" have occurred. I do not have sufficient documentation on most of them, nor do I have enough space in this article to present a satisfactory report on these kinds of experiences. Instead, I would like to discuss briefly the practices of two well-known Latin American intellectuals, Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda, whose groundbreaking work has provided the ethical, political, epistemological, and theoretical foundations for many of the current experiences of studying *with* the "subaltern."

Learning from Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda

Let me begin by briefly discussing the work of Paulo Freire (1921–97), whose name and importance are most likely very familiar to a global audience of readers. The impact of his work has been so profound that the Mexican intellectual Carlos Núñez Hurtado has stated that a good part of all current liberational practices in Latin America and beyond—be they educational, cultural, social, or political—have originated in or been fundamentally influenced by Freire's work and ethical commitment (Núñez Hurtado 1998 [1997], 16–17). Similar acknowledgment of Freire's importance appears in Richard Shaull's foreword to the 1993 English edition of

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: "This is the twentieth anniversary of the publication in the United States of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Since the original publication, this revolutionary work has gone into more than a score of printings and sold over 500,000 copies worldwide" (1993 [1970], 9). For the sake of those readers who do not know his work, I prefer to run the risk of being redundant, in order to highlight Freire's importance, especially regarding its relevance to the main argument of this article: not to study the "subaltern," but to study *with* the "subaltern."

Some readers may associate the name of Paulo Freire exclusively with popular education or adult literacy. Certainly, he did devote most of his time to adult literacy campaigns, and they provided the context in which he began to develop his approach. Nevertheless, the most important and distinctive features of his approach to adult education—and, in the opinion of many (including my own opinion) the secrets of its success—have been the relationship between theory and practice, and what, based on Freire's own words, I would call his "with-the-subject, dialogical approach." Freire defines it in the following self-reflective words: "My experience as an educator *with the people*, using a *dialogical* and problem-posing education" (1993 [1970], 22; my emphasis).

Freire's practice has not been developed solely in his books, but has emerged more directly from applying and continuously revising his ideas in numerous practical situations in several countries of the world. Thus his books are reflections on his own learning process—characterized by the application and revision of his ideas in numerous contexts—as well as a system of propositions for others' learning. As Freire himself notes, "None of the few books I have written up to now has been anything else than a certain kind of report . . . of experiences" (1982 [1977], 237). I will mention here only some of his most important books. His first book was *Educação como prática de liberdade* [published in English as *Education for Critical Consciousness*], written in 1965 during his exile in Chile, first published in Brazil in 1967 and published in Spanish in 1969. This book was based on his experiences in adult literacy campaigns that began in Brazil in 1961 and ended abruptly in 1964, when a military coup interrupted his work. Freire was jailed and later exiled to Chile. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is probably his best-known book. The original Portuguese edition and the Spanish version appeared in immediate succession, both in 1970. This book was also his first to be published in the United States, in 1973. Another of his important books is *Cartas a Guiné-Bissau: Registros de una experiencia em processo* [published in English as *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*], published

in 1977 in Portuguese and Spanish. *Cartas* recounts Freire's experiences cooperating with the literacy program of Guinea-Bissau's revolutionary government from 1975 to 1976. Freire has repeatedly affirmed that his experience in Guinea-Bissau was one of cooperation and that he was not solely a technical expert brought in to teach. As Freire explains, "who is called to teach something must first *learn*, in order to be able to keep learning once he or she begins to teach" (1982 [1977], 16; original emphasis). *Pedagogia da esperança: Um reencontro com a Pedagogia do oprimido* [published in English as *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*], published in 1992 and translated into Spanish in 1993, is a return to his first book and a self-critical analysis of some of his earlier ideas. In the later book, Freire is particularly critical of his notion of *conscientização* (critical consciousness), which he found contradictory to his own ideas because it suggests that there is one individual who already has a critical consciousness and another who does not. Freire also criticized the gender-biased vocabulary of his earlier work.

Significant to the purpose of this article, in the first chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire clearly states:

This book will present some aspects of what the writer has termed the pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade. (1993 [1970], 30; original emphasis)

Regarding the relationship between theory and practice, a central focus of the same book, Freire emphasizes:

I shall start by reaffirming that humankind, as beings of the *praxis*, differ from animals, which are beings of pure activity. Animals do not consider the world; they are immersed in it. . . . But human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and

practice, it is reflection and action. It cannot . . . be reduced to either verbalism or activism. (106; original emphasis)

Later he adds, “The leaders cannot treat the oppressed as mere activists to be denied the opportunity of reflection and allowed merely the illusion of acting, whereas in fact they would continue to be manipulated—and in this case by the presumed foes of manipulation” (107).

Paulo Freire has elaborated a fertile reflection on, and developed a lifelong practice of, studying *with* “subaltern” social groups, one which is closely associated with the ideas of praxis, and a dialogical approach, both crucial concepts of his work and essential guidelines for his life. Freire’s model of reflection and practice has been illuminating for many of us in Latin America and beyond. I was involved in the early 1970s in experiences with indigenous peoples in the northeast region of Argentina that were based on his proposals. Since then I have maintained the idea that I have to study *with* the “subaltern,” and I have experienced some success. But, as explained above, it has not always been possible. Therefore I have more recently developed the proposal of studying the hegemonic global-local articulations of power. Nevertheless, neither my own limitations in achieving the goal of studying with the “subaltern” nor the institutional frames that condition my social practices allow me to forget that the idea of studying the “subaltern” is marked by a colonial legacy and has to be criticized. Before discussing further the issue of institutional implications, I will briefly review the work of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda (1925), whose name is strongly associated with Participatory Action Research (PAR).⁷

Although the impact of Fals-Borda’s work has perhaps been less notable in the intellectual milieu than that of Paulo Freire, it has nonetheless been profoundly important. As an indication of his work’s prominence, one may consider what happened at the Eighth Participatory Action Research World Congress, held in Cartagena in 1997. The purpose of the congress was to assess the experience of two decades of the PAR approach, itself introduced to the world in the first congress in 1977, also in Cartagena. With an expected attendance of four hundred, the eighth congress became a massive meeting of over fifteen hundred, including hundreds of Colombian students from many cities and over two hundred international participants, not only from Latin America, but also from Africa, Asia, Europe, Canada, and the United States.

Fals-Borda directed the first sociology department in Colombia between 1959 and 1967, when he decided to abandon the university for a

life of independent research and activism. Before leaving, Fals-Borda and Camilo Torres, who was at that time working in the same sociology department, spearheaded two key reform processes. The changes they introduced (later to be manipulated for entirely different purposes) established the Agrarian Reform and the Juntas de Acción Comunal, or local community boards. Fals-Borda's writings from that time include several landmarks of Colombian and Latin American sociology, such as the trendsetting *La violencia en Colombia: Estudio de un proceso social* [Violence in Colombia: A study of a social process] (1962, with German Guzmán, Camilo Torres, and Eduardo Umana Luna), and the much debated *Ciencia propia y colonialismo intelectual* [Endogenous science and intellectual colonialism] (1968, currently in its ninth edition).

It is safe to say that Fals-Borda's passion for PAR is a definitive constant of his work of the past twenty years. Beside his unfailing involvement in public intellectual life in Colombia and elsewhere, Fals-Borda is largely credited with developing, along with a handful of other people, the PAR methodology. PAR seeks to articulate the production of knowledge with social change. Central to PAR philosophy—a radicalization of earlier Freirean approaches—is the belief that every person and community possesses self-knowledge that must be considered a key element in designing any research project and/or political work. According to the PAR approach, the articulation of expert and local knowledges results in a productive synergy. Fals-Borda's investigative and political work in the Atlantic Coast region during the 1970s and 1980s provided the fertile ground for PAR's development. His *Historia doble de la costa* [Twofold history of the coast], published between 1979 and 1986, relates this experience.

Fals-Borda further refined and popularized the PAR approach through publications in various countries and with colleagues from various parts of the world, including South Asia, which testifies to the international scope of his work. These publications include *Conocimiento y poder popular: Lecciones con campesinos de Nicaragua, México y Colombia* (1987 [1986]) [Knowledge and popular power: Lessons with peasants of Nicaragua, Mexico, and Colombia] and *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action Research* (1991, with Anisur Rahman), works that coincided with his intense collaboration with the Consejo Latinoamericano de Educación de Adultos. In the 1980s, Fals-Borda was the head of the Consejo, the institutional home base of the highly politicized popular education approaches on the continent.

Fals-Borda has repeatedly stated that the PAR approach is “a process of intellectual creation and endogenous practice of the peoples of the Third World. In the case of Latin America its emergence and meaning are closely associated with the economic, social, and scientific context of the region from the 1960s” (1987 [1986], 14; my translation). Among the approach’s conceptual reference points, Fals-Borda highlights dependency theory, liberation theology, Freire’s dialogical approach, the theory of exploitation, and a reinterpretation of Marxian and Gramscian theses about intellectual “commitment.”

It is important and worthwhile to discuss in more detail the very concept of the book *Conocimiento y poder popular*. This book was part of a program developed and coordinated with populations in Nicaragua, Colombia, and Mexico with the support of the International Labor Office, as well as of several public and private organizations in each country. *Conocimiento y poder popular* is a description of the program and the experiences of its participants. Significantly, it also represents a “devolution,” a return on the investment of the populations whose efforts produced the book, because it has become an important source of support in training experiences with popular leaders.

The concept of “devolution” certainly deserves elaboration, since it is an important and integral element of the way of “studying *with*” proposed by the PAR approach. Fals-Borda states that devolution is an obligation, and that it is an aspect of the participatory research praxis (1987 [1986], 112). He also stresses that the devolution of knowledge and techniques cannot be reduced to publishing books or booklets, but must adopt many other forms, including diverse communicational forms and other communal projects and activities (114). As with Freire’s work, the ideas of praxis and of a dialogical approach are significant elements of Fals-Borda’s work. In his view, in a PAR praxis it is not enough to integrate theory and practice, but knowledges from several sources must also be included (44). Central to the approach is the insistence upon breaking with “relationships of subordination” and related forms of knowledge production (e.g., the subject-object relationship). Fals-Borda also insists on promoting the “potential redundancy” of intellectuals and on building symmetrical relationships of cooperation. He also emphasizes that the PAR approach is not compatible with some academic constraints, such as the time pressures of writing a dissertation (64).

As in the case of Freire, the discussion of Fals-Borda’s work takes us again to the question of praxis and its possible contexts. In light of their emphasis on this question, it seems useful to reflect on praxis in relation to

institutional contexts, and to focus on our own practices and their relations with certain institutional contexts. This focus turns our attention to how appropriate these contexts are in terms of the extent to which they permit us to study *with* the "subaltern." Further, reflecting on our practices and their institutional contexts will help us change them in order to make such study possible. I will return to this issue at the paper's conclusion. First I want to stress that I have not presented the teaching experiences of Fals-Borda and Freire in order to suggest that we have to replicate them. There are aspects of their work that one might not necessarily share, but they are undoubtedly inspiring references in the process of creating our own viable ways of studying with the "subaltern."

A Few Remarks for the Debate

In light of what has been discussed here, I think the LASSG's proposal represents an important departure from hegemonic epistemology, ethics, and politics. Nevertheless, it is not critical enough regarding either the colonial legacy of area studies or the limitations posed by the established division of labor and institutional contexts that tend to keep intellectual practices within a format of academic careers, separated from "subaltern" subjects. The goal should not be "studying the subaltern," as proposed in the LASSG's founding statement, but "studying *with* subaltern groups," and studying whatever they may propose. In case institutional or personal limitations do not allow us to study *with* the "subaltern," we may at least study hegemonic articulations of power.

This shift will bring to light new research questions and the development of new methods conceivable only when both parties—researchers and involved social groups—fully participate in the research process from the earliest stages of research design. In this kind of relationship, we must be aware of the ever-present risk of developing a patronizing attitude. Developing such an attitude may be prevented by recognizing that through working in this proposed way researchers are not performing favors for the involved populations. In fact, if we work in this way it is because of our own interest in learning about social experiences, our fascination with developing points of view not envisioned before, our thirst for social justice, our democratic values, and our need to find meaning in our lives and work. By recognizing these aspects of our position we become conscious of the fact that to study *with* the "subaltern" is by no means a kind of favor we may do for our contemporaries, but the result of a sincere effort to find a point

of convergence of all of the interests involved, ours and those of the social groups with whom we study.

Challenging the area studies legacy will open the door for overcoming the biases and limitations produced by studying Latin America from within the context of U.S. universities. It will also stimulate new research questions that combine problems currently faced by diverse “subaltern” social groups in different regions of the Americas. Adequately combined with the proposed challenge to the prevalent division of labor, challenging the area studies legacy may also facilitate the development of transnational networks of mutual support between these social groups. Hence my proposal that the group transform itself into the Transnational Subaltern Studies Group.

It is imperative that we change the institutional contexts of academic practices. Although it is also possible to develop ways of studying *with* the “subaltern” outside the academy, if we, as academics, cannot create innovative and viable ways of studying *with* the “subaltern,” and we do not find the study of hegemonic articulations of power appealing, we must study our own practices and their contexts rather than studying the other. This is why I think Roland Barthes’s invitation (1981 [1978], 37) to obstinately displace our intellectual work so that it cannot be alienated by power is something we should always bear in mind.

Notes

This article is a revised version of the paper presented at the conference “Cross-Genealogies and Subaltern Knowledges.” The current version has benefited from the debates at that meeting, and I am grateful to its participants in this regard. I am also grateful to Arturo Escobar, Walter Mignolo, Alberto Moreiras, Rosa Aura Valera, and three anonymous reviewers of *Nepantla* for their comments. I have developed the perspective that I present in these pages from exchanges with several indigenous peoples’ leaders, who helped me to understand their views of conventional academic research, as well as some of their expectations regarding researchers’ possibilities to collaborate with them. I have since worked with a few of them in efforts to advance the proposed line of work, experiencing both difficulties and diverse forms of fulfillment and satisfaction. For such an enhancement of my vision I am grateful to Hilario Aray and Neptalí Tamanaico (Kariña people, Venezuela); Cacique Leonidas Cantule Valdés and Nicanor González (Congreso Kuna, Panama); Mónica Cheuquián (Casa de la Mujer Mapuche, Chile); Marcelino

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1. See Mignolo 2000 on the motivations and structure of the conference. See also Beverley 2000 for a better understanding of my position.
2. I feel unsatisfied with the use of the expression *subaltern*, because it seems to me that it tends to reify the social condition that it names. In my view, such a term may reinforce the idea that the social groups with whom we get involved in our research are actually “subaltern,” or subordinate, groups of people. This reification carries the risk of undermining these social groups’ political capacities to build their own sociopolitical projects. The LASSG’s statement offers evidence enough that the group’s interest is not to subordinate these social groups, but exactly the opposite. It is because of this problem between the use of this category and the interest of the LASSG that I feel inclined to propose a revision of this category. Nevertheless, at this moment I do not have an alternative category to propose. It is because of this critique and limitation that in this paper I use the word “subaltern” in quotation marks. I did not experience this problem in my previous writings related to the current discussion, because I did not attempt to make generalizations beyond the limits of my direct research experience with indigenous peoples’ organizations. In those cases, I simply used the expression “indigenous peoples,” or the appropriate word for the specific people with whom I was working.
3. See Mato 1998b.
4. See Mato 1992.
5. A note of caution may be necessary at this point. The cases to which I have just referred are those of individuals who hold positions of power within their communities, along lines of age or education. But this fact does not delegitimize their claims. I have discussed this issue and the need to avoid representing indigenous peoples as homogeneous bodies in earlier articles (Mato 1992, 1995).
6. I call “global agents” those that actually or tendentially develop their practices on a worldwide scale, or at least a continental scale, in contrast to the cases of “domestic agents,” which develop their practices at a single country level, and of “local agents,” which develop their practices mainly at local levels. Although local and domestic agents increasingly engage transnationally in

working relationships with both global and foreign local and domestic agents, such engagement is not their main purpose.

7. My direct knowledge of Orlando Fals-Borda's work and life is relatively scarce.

In fact I have read only his *Conocimiento y poder popular* and a few short pieces that have circulated in photocopies, and, as have many Latin American intellectuals, have directly or indirectly known of experiences based on or inspired by his work. I am grateful to my colleague and friend Arturo Escobar for his generosity in providing me with more information about Fals-Borda's life and work. Of course, I am solely responsible for the ideas and information expressed in this text.

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