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A book profile of Patricia A. Schechter, *Exploring the Decolonial Imaginary: Four Transnational Lives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 284 pp. ISBN: 978-0-230-33877-7.

According to María Lugones ‘decolonial feminism,’ is thought from, and at, the grassroots, and highlights what she calls, “historicized incarnate intersubjectivity.”<sup>1</sup> Patricia A. Schechter’s *Exploring the Decolonial Imaginary: Four Transnational Lives* is an exemplary deployment of exactly this type of decolonial feminism. Building on theoretical explorations of decoloniality Schechter artfully employs a decolonial methodology, putting into practice the epistemologies proposed by thinkers such as Lugones, Walter Dignolo, and Emma Pérez. It is in her ability to not only think but also *do* decoloniality that her work takes on its greatest significance for the field.

In this book Schechter approaches decoloniality historiographically, looking to the incarnate intersubjectivity of four women whom Schechter marks as ‘transnational.’ To do so she adheres to Pérez’s sense of decoloniality as “that which disrupts the dominant ordering schemas of modern society, especially the binaries of colonizer/subaltern and citizen/alien, identity pairings that usually map on to a white-black (or white/nonwhite) racialized social imaginary in the United States” (4). Reading her four figures—Amanda Berry Smith, Gertrude Stein, Josefina Silva de Cintrón, and Maida Springer (Mama Maida)—as transnational provides fertile ground for Schechter’s exploration of each woman’s particular disruption of binaries. Indeed, rather than anachronistically proposing that the women were consciously decolonial, Schechter navigates the complexity of their particular relationships to citizenship, empire, race, and gender, and uncovers how both what each wrote *and* how each lived expressed decolonial ethos particular to her historical context. Hence, structurally each of the book’s chapters is centered on one of the women. The first chapter focuses on the missionary work of Smith, a former slave, in Liberia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter explores Smith’s religious commitments and authority, particularly her belief in the Methodist concept of ‘sanctification,’ and its implications for transcending racial boundaries. The second chapter develops a decolonial reading of American Jewish writer Gertrude Stein, most particularly through her 1911 novel *The Making of Americans* and her 1946 opera *The Mother of Us All*. The third chapter discusses the life of Puerto Rican born Josefina Silva de Cintrón in 1930s New York City, and in particular her involvement with the journal *Artes y Letras*, the Unión de Mujeres Americanas, and political organizing around the 1939 World’s Fair. Finally the fourth chapter looks to how black labor organizer Maida Springer’s work both in the domestic labor movement and in Liberia in the 1950s and 60s disrupted the binaries: domestic/foreign, man/woman, American/African, and white/black.

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<sup>1</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 9.

In the first chapter it becomes clear that Smith's troubling of the binaries of race was dependent on her work as a missionary in Liberia at a time when Liberia's very existence was a troubling of National identities. Similarly, it was Stein's complicated relationship between her American citizenship and her life in France, which helps to illuminate the effects of Nation and war on race and gender. For Silva de Cintrón it was her refusal to participate in assimilationist projects in New York and her fiercely held ties to Puerto Rico which led to her own sense of intercultural Latina/o identities, and which politicized her stance toward Neo-colonial American projects and symbols. And finally, it was Springer's complex relationship between the white and male dominated domestic labor movement, and the growing labor movement in Liberia, which illuminated for her the complex entanglements of empire, gender, and race. By centering each chapter on one of the women Schechter attempts a decolonial gesture letting, as much as possible, each woman's life speak for itself.

Schechter's turn not only to the women's political goals, but also significantly to their artistic, religious, and familial commitments is exemplary of her decolonial methodology. For example, while Stein rejected traditional motherhood and marriage, Schechter finds important decolonial markers in *The Mother of Us All* when Stein names Susan B. Anthony as the matriarchal character that repositions concepts of race, gender, and citizenship within Stein's last creative refiguring of 'Americanism' (54). Similarly, for Silva de Cintrón rethinking concepts of womanhood and family from within both a Puerto Rican context and the perception of Puerto Ricans in the United States was key for what she called the 'fair progress of women,' (101). Additionally, Smith understood the Christian family as a mode of liberation for Liberian girls and women, however this commitment also led Smith to support the buying of Liberian girls for 'their protection' by Western male missionaries (39). Schechter crucially acknowledges the resonance with slavery in this practice, and so nuances Smith's role in Liberia. This nuanced reading of each woman forces Schechter's reader to resist any easy categorization.

The book's structure provides the opportunity for the uplifting of the overlooked life and work of each woman, but at times also engenders certain obstacles or weaknesses within this decolonial project. One such obstacle can be seen in the disparity between available sources of, and audience familiarity with, the work of each woman. For instance, there is a palpable difference in both tone and method in the chapter on Gertrude Stein. While the themes of national belonging, citizenship, empire, race, and gender are prominently featured in all of the chapters, Schechter seems to partake in a closer reading of primary texts written by Stein.

To be sure, in this chapter there are significant passages on historical context. Schechter helpfully situates Stein's work within the backdrop of World War I. For instance, when Stein and her partner Alice Toklas applied for American passports in France in 1914 whether they would be marked as native born or naturalized (often meaning European) US citizens was up to the custom agent's observation of their physical appearance. The agent marked both Stein and

Toklas as “dark,” and so “native” (75). Hence, war in this context necessitated identity categorization not of Stein’s own making.

Despite this historical contextualization, the main thrust of the Stein chapter is on Stein’s literary and theatrical work. The chapter contains a wealth of quotations and plot points from both *The Making* and *The Mother of Us All*. Particularly striking is how the following quote from *The Making* acts, I argue, as a leitmotif not only for the Stein chapter, but also for the book as a whole: “‘Sometime then there will be a history of every one and so then every one will have in them the last touch of being a history of any one can give to them’ (180)” (69). Schechter locates a decolonial approach to history in Stein’s move from ‘everyone’ to ‘every one.’ Any and every concept of history has to deal with histories of particular ones, and the histories of particular ones must say something about the history of everyone. Hence, in this intimate reading of Stein’s work Schechter’s tone becomes more poetic and dialogical; she begins to employ the language of Stein’s ‘every one,’ to make her own point.

While the Stein chapter is engaging its unique character problematically stands out when read amongst the other chapters. In the Smith, Silva de Cintrón, and Springer chapters Schechter dedicates more space to unpacking historical contexts. While this is helpful for situating the complex role each woman played within broader movements, it also means that passages go by with barely a mention of the chapter’s main figure. This disparity matters for two interconnected reasons. First, it may point to an imbalance in the availability of source material on each figure. Second, it might represent Schechter’s acknowledgement that her readers may have a greater familiarity with Stein’s work. No matter the reason, that Stein’s voice stands out in these ways points to the need for the very decolonial efforts made by Schechter. For while Stein’s Jewish identity certainly complicates her racially, that her transnationalism comes through Europe, whereas Springer and Smith’s comes through Africa, and Silva de Cintrón’s through Puerto Rico has implications for the availability of Stein’s work, and marks the need for a continued decolonial imaginary.

A second obstacle or weakness, one that we might also read as a strength, is each chapter’s singular focus. On the one hand this focus aligns with Schechter’s decolonial methodology in that it asks the reader to make her own connections across the women’s lives. On the other hand, the reader is, at times, left wanting more of Schechter’s voice. In the few pages that make up the conclusion Schechter begins to discuss her coming to work with these four figures. Yet one wonders what might have been brought out if she had welcomed the reader further into that process. For instance, might Schechter’s fuller naming of the key connections she finds helpful in placing these women side-by-side actually provide a greater opportunity for her readers to press Schechter’s own boundaries, stretching each in new and decolonial ways?

Despite these two concerns, Schechter’s book is a successful and crucial work, one which models how we might put decoloniality into practice with both intellectual rigor and nuanced empathy for the incarnate lives of transnational women.

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