

Resonance and the Butterfly Effect: Feminist Epistemology and Popular Education

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Having first met in Nicaragua's literacy campaign in 1980, we continue to explore how educational approaches can contribute to the quest for justice, human rights and equality – the same quest that brought us to Nicaragua some thirty years ago. As feminist activists and popular educators, we are inspired by the stories of countless women and men who have struggled for peace and justice across the centuries and who continue to do so. They challenge us to look more deeply at the nature of power, patriarchy, and paradigms in relation to our lives today and our future on the planet. As we confront the constantly shifting dynamics of subordination, poverty, violence and environmental degradation, the rich history of feminist analysis and practice provides insights that help us address some of these challenges. Questions deepen our inquiry. How to tap our individual stories to find the collective wisdom and common ground necessary to transform these destructive trends into a reality of hope and possibility? What knowledge and inspiration can we draw from feminist epistemology and experience to enrich our approaches to learning-in-action and develop life-enhancing paradigms and more inclusive creative forms of activism? How do we encourage and deepen the resonances we feel with others as we share histories and generate butterfly effects that can build momentum and ever more dynamic movements for change across the globe?

Introduction

In this chapter we explore the integration between popular education and feminist perspectives on knowledge and power. Drawing on principles of feminist epistemology, we examine a variety of learning approaches that combine artistic expression with *resonance* and the *butterfly effect*. These approaches seek to develop and strengthen our personal and collective power and action as well as the feminist values and visions that give our lives and struggles meaning. The chapter includes a variety of vignettes from our work that illustrate this integration. We start with a scene from an educational gathering in Panama with women from around the Americas designed to explore such learning processes and perspectives and to deepen our connections with one another and our movements. The gathering is part of *Mar de Cambios*², an education-action initiative sponsored by Just Associates in collaboration with colleague organizations from around the region who share a

¹This chapter draws from the writings of Maria Suarez Toro that include among others [Mujeres: metamorphosis del efecto mariposa](#) (2008) and [Mi Propio Metamorfosis](#) (2009); and of Valerie Miller [Making Change Happen: Power](#) (2006) and [A New Weave of Power, People and Politics](#) (2002, 2007) with Lisa VeneKlasen; as well as a joint piece (2007) done for the bulletin, *Petatera*, on feminist epistemology and popular education, and documents produced for JASS and for *Wings of the Butterfly*.

² *Mar de Cambios* is a learning-action initiative focused on women's movement-building and empowerment developed initially by JASS, a cross-regional network of social justice activists, scholars and popular educators, in collaboration with colleagues and organizations committed to feminist movement-building. These include the *Petateras*, an activist group of Mesoamerican feminists concerned about issues of equality, peace and justice; *Feminist International Radio Endeavor*, *FIRE*, an international feminist internet radio station based in Latin America that provides a global channel of communication for women to have a voice in the world; and *Wings of the Butterfly*, a feminist movement-building initiative that incorporates theatre and other forms of art and action; as well as local organizations such as *Sinergia No'J* in Guatemala. Known as Sea Change Schools in English, *Mar de Cambios* was the Mesoamerican expression of JASS' global education and movement-building work. (see www.justassociates.org; www.petateras.org, www.fire.or.cr, www.alasdemariposa.org)

feminist vision of change – the Petateras, Feminist International Radio Endeavor and Wings of the Butterfly, among others.

*Mar de Cambios*³: On a steamy July morning beside the ocean waters leading to the Panama canal, a mix of 35 women from Mexico, Central America, Bolivia, Uruguay and the United States pay tribute to the women who have inspired them in their personal journeys of empowerment and change. The honorees include a colorful collection of mentors – from poets, professors, activists, and artists to mothers and grandmothers -- people mostly unknown to the world at large. Each woman's struggle and hope is honored through a page of photos and text which is read and placed on a multicolored cloth that serves as a backdrop for the gathering. These stories form a mural of ancestors and memory; a weave of lives that deepens people's connection to their own individual power and history and to each others'; a tapestry of resistance, complexity, and resilience.

The lives of unsung women resonate across the room as activists proudly present their honorees. An indigenous leader describes how her mother, who could not read or write, helped ensure that she did her homework and eventually went on to higher education by having her read her lessons out loud every night. A rural organizer, denied voice by others in the movement, honors a feminist leader who valued her contributions and provided opportunities for her ideas to be heard and respected. A popular educator recognizes how her father's wish for all sons benefited her and led her parents to do everything they could to give their offspring -- all daughters – the same opportunities and education that they would have given boys. A university activist pays homage to a seamstress who broke all tradition by becoming the head of a male dominated national labor federation in the 1950s. As president, she fought for a code of women's rights while bringing together trade unions fighting for worker's rights and an end to hunger and US hegemony in the region.

A granddaughter remembers her grandmother and recalls the domestic violence so common in her family and how her 'abuela' tried to protect her from sexual abuse, inspiring her to join the women's movement and work to protect others. A colleague evokes the memory of a young Nicaraguan literacy volunteer, a teenage girl who braved the violence of the *Contras* and Reagan's wars during the 1980s to teach reading and writing in the countryside and ended up learning more about herself and the nature of power than she ever imagined; now an adult, she works in popular education. The tributes continue. A leader of today's struggles for women's human rights honors a prominent woman from her country's past who in the 1800s fought

³ In the 2009 Panama Mar de Cambios school, JASS partnered not only with the Petateras, FIRE, and Wings of the Butterfly but also with WW IFUN – International University for Women's Culture and Politics and CEASPA, a long-time Panamanian popular education organization. Responding to a request by the *Petateras*, JASS bequeathed the name *Mar de Cambios* to them in 2011 for their continuing education activities and JASS took the new name of *Alquimia* for its ongoing learning and action work.

against colonialism. Her historic feats are symbolized in a statue that portrays her with a canon by her side, a statue that graces the school in front of the childhood home of the woman honoring her. Others take their turns adding new faces and stories to the mural -- their tributes lasting through the morning. Tears and laughter fill the room as the women feel and explore their connections and resonances with each other, their ancestors, and different women's struggles throughout history, reflecting on the meaning that feminism has given to them.⁴

Several days into the workshop, these same women participate in a regional webcast organized by FIRE, Feminist International Radio Endeavor, reaching out to a larger audience across the Americas to convey the energy and excitement of their experience in *Mar de Cambios*. As part of the gathering, they analyze their current political contexts and make plans for addressing major concerns. The women respond to an urgent crisis facing colleagues in Honduras in the wake of an increasingly violent government overthrow. Building on their connections and previous collaborations, they organize an emergency multi-country initiative⁵ in support of Honduran feminists and their allies as they mobilize to defend basic democratic principles and overturn the coup. Similarly they explore ways to continue their support to Guatemalan and Mexican colleagues working to end violence against women in the face of government impunity and organized crime and drug cartels – forces working behind the scenes to usurp the state and undermine its ability to protect basic human rights. Participants propose a variety of other actions that are put on the agenda for consideration and follow-up over the next six months.

These different vignettes represent some of the possibilities and processes of feminist popular education designed to build and deepen women's own personal sense of history and power and their connections to each other and to their organizations and movements. Combining processes that promote both thinking and feeling, they reinforce a range of learning and approaches from critical analytical skills and attitudes of empathy and solidarity to creativity and strategy development. They are illustrations of the integration of feminist values, epistemology and popular education that encourage actions and ever stronger voices on behalf of equality, human rights, peace and economic and environmental justice. Drawing on a transformative and inclusive vision of feminism and a critical analysis of

⁴ The Mural of Ancestors was developed by Alda Facio, drawing on WW IFUN processes and her own teaching experiences. Probing questions help people look at how the underlying power dynamics of patriarchy have shaped both their own lives and those of their mentors and ancestors. Such questions allow for a more critical and historical appreciation of women's struggles and the forces they have confronted over time.

⁵ Feminist Transformation Watch (Observatorio de la Transgresion Feminista) is a constantly evolving methodology and political action approach initiated by the *Petateras* and supported by FIRE, JASS, the Nobel Women's Initiative, and other organizations and movements throughout the region. It is used to accompany, support, and highlight women's political change efforts in critical, sometimes dangerous moments, providing solidarity, publicity and opportunities for ongoing oversight, learning and communication. These experiences become the basis for important insights and lessons on social transformation and movement building. FTW mobilizes women from across the Americas and beyond to become eye-witness observers and virtual champions of these efforts. Magnified by FIRE and other allies, these witnesses lend their voices and credibility in support and defense of women crossing the line to challenge and transform inequitable and destructive power relations.

patriarchy, they promote ever more profound synergies and possibilities for change. These approaches go beyond an analysis of 'structures' to challenge paradigms and mindsets. They are aimed at re-building women's individual and collective strength in ways that interact and support one another. Integral to affirming new paradigms of power, they seek to build bridges and synergy between other groups and social movements as they resist and tackle the many different forces of oppression that affect women's lives, their families, their communities and the planet.

Always evolving, these processes emerge in the context of patriarchal systems and paradigms of power that over the centuries have reinforced inequalities and discrimination against women. These forces shape society's acceptance of such divisions and the subordination and exclusion they engender. Often rendered invisible, gendered dynamics of power help determine – at the same time as they are determined by -- both the overt politics of a given time and place as well as the internal mindsets that reinforce those power relationships. In shaping our understanding of ourselves, our relationships and our place in the world, they instill beliefs in each of us as to the superiority or inferiority of certain ideas, people, and life forms. By dividing the world into dichotomies and opposites, they justify the inequalities they produce. The integration of feminist epistemology and popular education helps us grapple with these dynamics, providing an alternative understanding of power and change. In tapping the best of our selves, such alternatives allow us to develop the analysis and actions necessary for transforming these inequalities and belief systems. Underpinning this integration and these examples is the search for more life-affirming paradigms -- paradigms that both foster greater solidarity and reciprocity between all creatures and expressions of life as well as promoting processes of inquiry and action grounded in feminist values and inclusive visions of power.

The use of *resonance* – a process that helps people see themselves in the lives, feelings, and struggles of others – offers one way to reflect on experiences of discrimination and resistance and inspire new visions and connections. It provides a compelling example of transformative processes that combine the heart, head, spirit and body. In constant evolution, *resonance* is a fundamental approach developed by the *Alas de Mariposa* project to support and strengthen feminist movements.

Processes of *resonance* can challenge the dichotomies, inequalities and narrow rationalist approaches so ingrained in our societies and mindsets that undermine the importance of connections and relationships. By encouraging a *butterfly effect* they have the potential for reaching far beyond the current situation or moment and unleashing an ever-expanding energy of hope and transformation. In discussing these processes of *resonance* and the *butterfly effect*, we first need to situate them within the broader history of popular education and feminism.

While recognizing the important methodological contributions of Paulo Freire and other popular educators to challenging discrimination based on class and other forms of

oppression, such efforts overlooked the invisible dynamics of women's subordination and thus were ineffectual in tackling gender inequalities⁶. By so doing, they ignored one of the most pervasive dichotomies that shape and buttress all other forms of oppression. Not surprisingly, they did little to question the prevailing paradigms of patriarchy. Nor did they challenge the reinforcing views of science that establish our worldviews and that operate on our minds to rationalize the divisions and hierarchies in human relationships and in our corresponding relations with nature. By envisioning new relations of power and knowledge, feminist contributions to challenging these paradigms have been fundamental to efforts aimed at re-conceptualizing popular education. Feminism has given it greater meaning and scope, not only for and by women, but for understanding the general theory and practice of oppression in society affecting all of expressions of life – women, men, children, and nature itself.

Feminist contributions to knowledge formation

Feminist epistemology -- a theory of knowledge building based on a feminist analysis of power – takes into account the way our understanding of the world and 'truth' is shaped by patriarchal mindsets. It helps identify how knowledge interacts with power and how knowledge is generated in light of these interactions. With a gender lens, it explores and reveals how people's understanding of life reflects and relates to their particular perspectives and places in society as men and women and also in relation to their race, class, age, and location, not in the abstract but in the concrete. Challenging the traditional scientific method based on the idea of objectivity and neutrality, feminist analysis explains how these places of power and discrimination invariably shape the ways knowledge is generated and interpreted. For example, a white male Wall Street banker experiences and understands the world very differently than his female secretary or the single mother of three from Guatemala who cleans his office every night. Feminist epistemology points out that knowledge is produced and acquired in specific contexts and situated in historical moments and life experiences where gender dynamics play a key role in what knowledge is considered legitimate and what is deemed 'truth'. Forms of patriarchy work to invalidate and undermine women's insights and contributions while privileging male perspectives and mechanistic views of science that reinforce social hierarchies, dichotomies and inequalities. How people understand and make sense of these dynamics, obviously, helps determine how they engage with such disparities and work toward transforming or reinforcing them.

Once the lenses of patriarchy are removed, people see the world and their place in it quite differently. Clarifying and naming how power operates and interacts with knowledge and our worldviews -- can offer everyone concerned about issues of justice a fuller understanding of these intersecting dynamics and, consequently, of the strategies necessary

⁶ While Freire explored some of the deeper dynamics of consciousness and power early on in his work, they were eclipsed as popular education was adopted more broadly. Moreover, they never included or addressed other forms of subordination and exclusion much beyond class.

to overcome them⁷. In particular, the knowledge and wisdom generated by feminist analysis reveals how patriarchy works to render these kinds of power relations invisible and make them appear natural. Without this kind of revelation and analysis, women and other social justice activists would not have the instruments to challenge or transform these relations.⁸

As elaborated by Alda Facio and colleagues from WW IFUN, feminist knowledge formation ... *is an ongoing process of deepening feminist consciousness...-- a contagious process of passion and pleasure,...liberating to both women and men.* It emerges from collaborative efforts that are ...*collective, multi-centered, contextualized, holistic, visionary, practical,* and based on values that reinforce alternative paradigms of caring, creativity and community. Affirming and identifying with women, these values form a set of feminist ethics that encourage a love of life in all its forms, and include among others: ... *generosity of spirit, joy, kindness, altruism, commitment to social justice, egalitarianism, diversity, sisterhood, solidarity, hope, respect for nature, and wonder in the face of the immensity and complexity of the universe.*⁹ By integrating concepts from feminist epistemology into popular education, this re-conceptualization can strengthen a range of transformative educational approaches aimed at deepening and broadening not only feminist movements but other social and environmental movements as well. Together these new weaves of ethics, learning and action can help create strong social fabrics of equality, solidarity, ecology and respect for human rights.

Challenges of Popular Education

The original Freirian approach to popular education was based on a process of consciousness-raising (concientización) and a corresponding methodology of political action which had at its core the analysis of 'reality' – usually expressed in terms of class issues as seen in the oppression of the poor by the wealthy. Such issues were analyzed on the basis of the structures and type of awareness that contributed to and perpetuated these realities. This analysis helped identify and encourage concrete actions designed to transform a given situation and related power dynamics. The point of departure was always how people understood and lived their reality of class. In a continuous virtuous circle of analysis and action, people deepened their knowledge on these issues and attempted to overcome oppression in a process of collective reflection and critical action.

Few can deny the significant role that these processes played in mobilizing, organizing, raising consciousness and challenging the military dictatorships of the last century that protected the interests of the rich in the region and their international links with globalizing powers – from corporate and financial capital to fundamentalisms. Nevertheless this type of education reflected and even reinforced a certain type of blindness precisely because it

⁷ Valerie Miller et.al. *Making Change Happen: Power*, JASS, 2006; Lisa Veneklasen with Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics, World Neighbors*, 2002, 2007.

⁸ Alda Facio, 'Los saberes que queremos crear en la Escuela de Mar de Cambios, Panama,' unpublished document, 2009.

⁹ Alda Facio and Angela Miles, 'Feminist Principles of Knowledge Formation,' International Feminist University: 2005 Meeting, unpublished document; Alda Facio, 'Los saberes...Mar de Cambios, Panama', 2009.

ignored other forms of oppression that interacted with those of class such as ethnicity, age, nationality, among others. And the most ignored of all was gender which not only was rendered invisible but was often times assumed to be a natural condition of human life -- men dominated and controlled; women subordinated themselves to that domination.

This acceptance of gender-based inequality, regarded as natural and therefore normal, represented a grave political problem that also has had an epistemological and methodological expression. Because that which is deemed normal is not subject to change, women's status remained off the agenda, therefore the related power structures and dynamics remained untouched. When an approach designed to promote social transformation leaves out of the picture one of the most pervasive forms of oppression that exacerbates and interacts with all the others, it keeps these dynamics invisible and thus, beyond the scope of action. In this way, forms of domination based on patriarchal structures, mindsets and relations of inequality remain sealed off from scrutiny and any processes of analysis, consciousness-raising and liberating strategies or actions.

A few examples illustrate the scope of this situation. When class is addressed solely through the prism of the gap between rich and poor, the problem of feminization of poverty remains invisible and ignored. Furthermore, the way in which poor women are frequently the sole providers for their families gives them a clear stake in the class struggle against poverty and inequalities, yet that connection has been undermined, or worse yet, utilized by political parties for their own narrow interests, instead of maximized as a liberating and empowering force. After all, "Women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive 10 percent of the world's income and own 1 percent of the means of production."¹⁰ And when women face additional forces of discrimination because of their race, age or ethnicity, their ability to provide for their families or live with dignity, free of violence and hunger, is further undermined.

History reveals further dimensions of the problem that continue today. In colonization processes throughout time, colonial powers used and abused women in specific gendered ways in order to keep them and their communities under control: they raped them, submitted them to domestic slavery and often separated their families and sold their children, including those who resulted from rape. Thus, colonization has not only taken the form of foreign powers occupying entire countries and exercising violence to beat the population into submission. It has also taken a daily form of violence against women within all societies that persists through history. In the context of patriarchy, this type of violence has a colonizing impact on women. It colonizes their minds, bodies and spirits, claiming them as objects that are defined and dominated by external, subjugating forces.¹¹ Today, 1

¹⁰ Richard H. Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*, (Allyn and Bacon, 1999), p. 354

¹¹ Drew University Theological School, ETATS-UNIS, Journal of Religion & Abuse ISSN 1521-1037, 1999, vol. 1, n° 2

in 3 women around the world have been beaten, coerced into sex, or other otherwise been abused in their lifetime¹².

What has become increasingly clear over time is the interrelated nature of oppression, violence and exclusion. If we do not deal with all forms of discrimination and subordination, we will be incapable of overcoming any of them. Their intertwined relationships make it impossible to attain justice or liberation by only tackling certain aspects and dimensions of oppression and brutality while leaving others intact. This realization has informed feminist popular educators as they come together to strengthen their approaches and integrate the knowledge they have gained from their own experiences and reflections on feminism.

Integration of Feminist Epistemology and Popular Education¹³

Feminist analysis and epistemology have challenged the historic blindness to gender oppression of women as women, so common in traditional popular education. This blindness has led to thought processes that have reinforced dichotomies and inequalities by dividing the world into opposite parts based on class in ways that eclipsed its interaction with other dynamics of power. As these less visible dynamics of gender discrimination, subordination and exclusion became more obvious and disquieting, women began to question them through self-organized processes of consciousness-raising that started with an exploration of their unspoken feelings of discomfort about their lives and their treatment as women. These explorations did not lend themselves easily to explanations based on a traditional approach to class analysis and awareness-raising that “emerges from the consciousness of the group” found in popular education at that time.

Feminist activists and scholars took a different epistemological approach. They began naming their own experiences as women, while also looking, listening and interacting with women everywhere. Feeling that something basic was missing in people’s understanding of their actions and relations, they grappled with questions that shed a new light on their lives and experiences. With these perspectives, they developed a theory of women’s oppression which offered other ways of understanding the world and people’s place in it. “The real genius of feminism has been the capacity to transform the learning and experience born from the subordination and discrimination of women into the foundations of a liberating theory and epistemology that reveals how power dynamics, considered natural and immutable, are actually questions of politics and the way knowledge and truth are conceived.”¹⁴ These ideas have deepened women’s realization and understanding of their situation and the dynamics behind their feelings of discomfort and their place and condition in society.

¹² World Health Organization, 2006.

¹³ See Maria Suarez Toro, *Mujeres: metamorphosis del efecto mariposa*, 2008, *Mi Propio Metamorphosis*, Publicaciones Puertoriquenas, 2009 and Lisa VeneKlasen with Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics*, 2002, 2007.

¹⁴ Maria Suarez Toro, *Mujeres: metamorphosis del efecto mariposa*, Grupo Editorial Norma, Costa Rica, 2008

For example, by introducing the notion of *subjectivity* grounded in an analysis of power dynamics, women have been better able to grasp how different contexts, historical factors, and forces affect their lives. Making explicit people's subjectivity -- their constellation of views, experiences and interpretations of the world and of themselves -- in processes of consciousness-raising has been an epistemological contribution of feminism to present day popular education. How people's subjectivity is shaped by history, circumstance and power relations is key to each person's own empowerment and agency. The recognition of these forces and their interactions provide us with the ability to actually see how they operate in our lives and thus allow us to better confront them. This involves understanding how our drives, thinking, feelings and actions are shaped and constructed through a complex mix of factors and power relations. These forces and interactions include a combination of our particular desires, needs and impulses, our individual and shared experiences, and the historical contexts in which we live. In these differing contexts and dynamics, political, economic, social and cultural forces work to insert our hearts, minds and bodies into their logic.

At the end of the day, therefore, transformative education processes are not only a question of an awareness and transformation of visible social political structures on the outside but of inside dynamics as well since external factors are intertwined with one's internal consciousness and personal history. Change processes, therefore, also involve transforming the invisible forces of patriarchy and hegemony that shape our desires, emotions, patterns of relationships and our vision of what is normal and possible in the world. Such processes are about breaking out of these boundaries to establish more egalitarian and caring paradigms and practices of power that emerge from processes of *self-organization* where people come together to create their own paths of empowerment and liberation. Here we use self-organization to mean an organic decentralized network or process of learning, creativity and interaction among people and nature that evolves autonomously, developing its own dynamics and organization, in a constant swirl of adaptation, renewal, and reflection to ensure the continuation of life in all its forms.¹⁵ To illustrate this idea, some people have used the example of learning organizations and processes of emergent design in contrast to organizations run by rigid planning approaches and structures that follow preset immutable ideas and frameworks. Women's consciousness-raising groups from the 1960s and 1970s are often identified as further examples of self-organization as is the Underground Railroad network that helped US-held slaves escape to freedom in the 1850s and 1860s.

Resonance: Another notion that feminists have brought to popular education is the idea of *resonance*. To our knowledge, *Wings of the Butterfly* is one of the first efforts to develop and apply this concept in any systematic and ongoing way. Through its *resonance workshops*¹⁶,

¹⁵ For further reflection on self-organization see also work on chaos theory, organizational development, systems and complexity as well as the ideas of Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela who introduced the related concept of autopoiesis in 1973 to explain the nature and operation of living systems.

¹⁶ As part of *Wings of the Butterfly*, resonance workshops are conducted in cities, villages and communities in conjunction with the Labyrinth of the Butterfly performance and other related activities to allow women from different experiences and backgrounds to reflect

Wings allows women to feel and learn from their own experiences in light of the lives and experiences of others, generating new knowledge, insights and action in more holistic interactive ways. If knowledge is to engage and transform power at a profound level, it needs to have this self-organized and emergent quality. As such *resonance* goes beyond the strictly rational 'identification' with others or with a certain discipline of knowledge that is abstract and 'objective'. It encompasses and weaves together emotions, consciousness, the sub-conscious, and subjectivity, all interacting within our bodies as a dynamic whole, not as isolated intellects, disembodied and separate from our more complex selves.¹⁷ It refers to the different forms in which we listen, read, and acquire knowledge about other experiences that allow us to vibrate and 'be deeply moved' with them when they relate to a direct or indirect experience of our own. When we tap these insights, allow them to emerge and critically reflect on them, we create collective knowledge that includes each of us as part of a larger process of learning and self-organization. Such processes thus form an important foundation for movement-building.

As experienced in the mural of the ancestors from Panama, these enhance our ability to empathize and draw connections between our experiences and each other's, using our intuition, feelings and rationality in an integrated way as part of a more organic process of inquiry, learning, reciprocity and solidarity. *Resonance* consists of being able to look in the mirror of other women's experiences and feel ourselves, recognizing that these experiences are not particular to just one individual woman but rather are part of the condition of women in general -- in the context of the overall dynamics of patriarchy and women's conscious or unconscious resistance to its power.

Through processes of *resonance* and reflection, women name and define their world according to their own experience and knowledge, developing and enriching a critical understanding of gender dynamics and societal roles through questions posed by feminist perspectives and analysis. Such reflections challenge the notion that the exercise of power in the world is the exclusive domain of men. Furthermore, feminism redefines power by challenging the way dichotomies, domination and control have been made to seem normal and natural and the very basis for the definition of power itself.

Over the centuries, this worldview has reinforced the idea that men are the ones who define what is valued and visible in society and what is not. That which is deemed unworthy and rendered invisible, of course, has been the experiences and contributions of women which remain largely ignored. One of the significant offerings of feminism to popular education and social struggles responds precisely to this *invisibilization* and the need to counter the mindsets and worldviews that justify women's subordination and inequalities of all kind. Reinforced by the dichotomies that underpin patriarchal thought processes, women's issues are separated into two opposite categories – public and private. By relegating issues such as

on their lives and build connections with each other and movements for transformation. The performance also generates reflections among men about patriarchy and their own roles in society.

¹⁷ Suarez Toro, *Mujeres.....*, p. 12

gender violence to the supposed private realm of the family and couple, these social problems are removed from public debate and action in the political sphere, essentially rendered invisible. As women have gained acceptance for the idea that gender violence is a legitimate societal concern, they have managed to get it on the political agenda in many countries where it no longer can be denied or ignored. The maxim of women's movements, 'the personal is political' gained greater meaning in this battle over public and private spheres of life and exposed the need to tackle the idea of dichotomous thinking that provides a rationale for all forms of inequality and injustice.

Butterfly Effect: In these struggles, feminists also are drawing on the notion of the *butterfly effect* whereby seemingly insignificant acts can generate a cascade of additional actions and unanticipated results. This creative process disturbs the status quo in some way and ripples out across the world leading to a spectrum of unforeseen outcomes that offer the possibilities of greater social connection and profound change both within us and society at large. In other words, small actions or disturbances in one place on earth can have unknown consequences of enormous magnitude elsewhere on the planet. Buddhists talk about a spiritual *butterfly effect*. Believing that everything in the world and universe is intimately related and connected with one another, they think that our actions, even the smallest ones, can help encourage transformation and justice far beyond the initial gesture or act.

As a political tool, women use this process in their efforts to build on the resonances and connections between what happens in their particular lives as women – lives shaped by paradigms of patriarchy and fragmented science -- and in other people's lives similarly shaped and constructed by these paradigms. In understanding these intersections and overlapping forms of discrimination and subordination -- whether based on gender, race, class, age, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or location – people can more clearly identify and engage the overarching paradigms of patriarchy and domination that exert control over everyone. As they recognize these links and the necessity of coming together in solidarity, they can better collaborate and challenge the status quo in processes of co-creation and action. By extending their collective wings to gain greater lift and energy, the disturbances and changes they create in the air and context around them have the potential for producing the ultimate transformations they seek. As such the butterfly becomes a powerful symbol of both individual and collective metamorphosis.

A compelling example of the *butterfly effect* comes from the African-American struggle against racism in the United States. In an imaginary letter to activists of today,¹⁸ Rosa Parks, the US civil rights leader who helped spark a nationwide movement for freedom, speaks about her refusal one December evening to move to the back of the bus as was the law for blacks in certain states in the 1950s. Her experience and imagined conversation reflect some

¹⁸ A literary approach, based on careful research, which conveys the ideas of historical figures in the form of imaginary letters to readers in the present day, allowing the writer to pose questions that underscore the figure's concerns and challenges and relate them to today's realities.

of the basic concepts that feminists have recognized in their analysis and popular education work – subjectivity, naming, *resonance*, and the *butterfly effect*.

I was born at a certain time and place in history. These circumstances influenced my development as a thinking- feeling person and set me on a path where my own life story and sense of rights would cause me to act. On that December evening, I made a deliberate decision that would help trigger major changes in US society, albeit unpredictable at the moment. As the theoreticians of systemic approaches to knowledge like to say, we are co-creators of our worlds. Our circumstances and context shape who we are and we, in turn, interact with our environment to shape our world in an unpredictable process of mutual creation. Such a lovely concept!

But as I have explained over and over again, I was not singly responsible for triggering those effects. My small disruption of the system was coupled with the actions and vision of countless people who fought for our freedom -- actions and awareness fueled by the racism experienced by blacks everywhere in the United States. This combination of action, understanding and experience rippled out across society leading to a range of consequences unforeseen at that moment.¹⁹

As part of integrated processes of feminist popular education, these elements can contribute to strengthening women's ability to spread their wings ever wider as agents of change and political actors -- challengers of the status quo and producers of ever stronger ripples across society. These processes ripple inward as well, affecting women's lives at a deeply intimate and psychological level. By imagining new forms of personal and collective power based on feminist values, women tap their potential for more affirming, more inclusive forms of agency and action in their own lives as creative voices and agents of 'the change they want to see in the world.'

In our own work, we have seen the power of these processes to catalyze women's action, knowledge, collaboration and political creativity as evidenced in the development and activation of the Feminist's Transformation Watches in Mesoamerica since 2006²⁰, the formation of the *Petateras* at that same time, and the ongoing alliances between groups such as the *Petateras*, JASS, Feminist International Radio Endeavor, and Alas de Mariposa. These initiatives have generated a rich combination of feminist choreographies. Imaginative and compelling, they provide new paths of interconnectedness, solidarity, insights, and support to activists challenging all forms of patriarchy and power -- from those found in traditional electoral politics, neo-liberal economic policies and free-trade agreements, to

¹⁹ Maria Suarez Toro, *Mujeres, metamorphosis del efecto mariposa*, Grupo Editorial Norma, 2008, English chapter on Rosa Parks, translated and edited for the English version by Valerie Miller.

²⁰Valerie Miller, et. al. "Feminist Transformation Watch: Women Crossing the Line, An Action Approach to Strengthening Collective Power", unpublished, *Petateras* and JASS, 2008; translated and drawn from Roxana Arroyo, et. al. "Observatorios de la Transgresion Feminista," unpublished, *Petateras* and JASS, 2008. (See www.justassociates.org and www.petateras.org)

those evidenced in religious fundamentalisms, ethnic discrimination, and government coups. Activists find they must also challenge the pervasive impunity that allows human rights violations to continue unabated, despite policies that are designed to protect them. These intersecting dynamics of impunity, policy and human rights violations shape the oppression and exclusion experienced in people's daily lives while simultaneously being shaped by those same forces. We see this specifically in the relations of violence against women and all the other forms of social aggression and brutality; in the feminization of poverty and the deepening gap between rich and poor: in the criminalization of any form of politics organized by women outside the box of existing political parties, etc. The alliances and initiatives begun during 2006 in the face of these dynamics have continued to this day, evolving to better address the ever-shifting contextual forces and challenges affecting women's lives and survival.

These bonds and actions were deepened recently in Panama by further processes of *resonance* and the *butterfly effect*. After creating the mural of ancestors in the morning, as described at the beginning of the chapter, women activists went on to experience connections and energy that night through another art form that weaves history, feeling, analysis, and life stories together. Let us set the scene.

It's a warm July evening. People stroll through the narrow colonial streets of Panama City, passing muted pastel buildings that date back to the 1600's. They walk under iron balconies bright with pots of bougainvillea until they reach a small white-washed theatre cooled by palm trees and breezes from the bay. Women and men gather there on the steps in the hazy twilight waiting for a much anticipated performance.

The play, *Labyrinth of the Butterfly*, brings to life the courage and resistance of women across the centuries²¹ and pays tribute to all of humanity's and nature's capacity for change and transformation. It forms part of the *Mar de Cambios* Panama workshop and is the foundation of *Wings of the Butterfly*, a movement-building initiative that integrates art, theatre, education and action. *Wings* honors invisible women who have been ignored, misinterpreted or simply forgotten by history, despite the fact – or precisely because of it -- they contested the status quo with new forms of knowledge and new contributions to scientific theories. Through their lives, the play highlights women's contributions to a more just and generous vision of the world -- to a life-affirming paradigm that challenges both the current destructive relationships among humans and nature as well as the paradigms of patriarchy and traditional science that reinforce these relations and justify their inequalities. As the play evolves over time, it will include other women's stories who have been identified in the *resonance* workshops accompanying the *Wings of the Butterfly* efforts.

²¹ Directed by Ailyn Morera based on the book *Women: Metamorphosis of the Butterfly* by Maria Suarez Toro; The Labyrinth play and Wings of the Butterfly are part of an organic interactive process of artistic expression in movement building.

Slowly the crowd moves from the steps overlooking the bay and enters the theatre to a stage where five chrysalis hang from the ceiling, each one illuminated from the inside by soft lights that glow against a midnight blue backdrop. As they wait, audience members buzz quietly with eager anticipation; some move about the aisles greeting old friends and sharing news of their lives. Occasional laughter rings out above the hum. Soon the house lights dim and the stage fills with scenes from women's personal histories. Past meets present.

Labyrinth of the Butterfly: Lucy, our primate ancestor who once inhabited the lands of current day Ethiopia some three million years ago, opens the play -- bringing her ancient wisdom and empathy to modern times. Ambling onto the set from between two chrysalises, her arms swing back and forth with a certain grace and freedom. Suddenly, she stops to get a sense of her surroundings. She is not alone. A bit confused but curious, she watches as an unknown creature sporting shiny red high-heels jerks into view. Molly, statuesque and sexy-shoed, is actually a robotic battery-powered invention of some male futurologist. Confiding to the audience in a low gravelly voice, she tells her tale of acquiescence and resistance. She is his dream come true – performing all the female duties for which he programs her. Of course, she has done everything with absolute perfection, until, that is, she begins to question her situation and renames herself Celeste, Strong and Brave and declares her independence. As her batteries run down, Lucy moves in to protect and cradle Celeste. Forces of inevitable backlash emerge on stage to threaten her metamorphosis. Gently and firmly, Lucy holds her body close, fighting off two ghostly figures who ridicule her attempts at change.

Walking with a limp, Mileva Maric emerges from another glowing chrysalis -- a mathematician and physicist from Hungary born in 1875. As a precocious student, she has excelled and often surpassed the men in her university studies and theoretical work, yet she has been largely ignored for her major achievements in science. Love and marriage and patriarchy have gotten in the way. Often maligned, this petit woman peers out at the audience and explains how she worked alongside Einstein to perfect and verify his equations and theories. Albert, the wild white-haired scientist and her one-time husband, prances across the stage praising and berating her -- first, as his guardian angel and then, as his dreadful housekeeper incapable of keeping his home in order. With the arrival of their children, she describes how potential employers now shun her and she is left without any real means of support except Albert. When he falls in love with his cousin, Mileva quickly notes that it took this betrayal for him to finally recognize her contributions to his Nobel Laureate. In exchange for a divorce and her silence, he gives her the Nobel prize money. Holding herself tall, Mileva walks slowly up to the front of the stage and laughs quietly: "You know, if women could speak, there would be at least one more theory about the genius of the 20th century's greatest scientist. Albert used two brains, his and mine!"

The play goes on to highlight the voice of Boc Dong Kim, a Korean woman who was taken prisoner by the Japanese in World War II to become in polite parlance -- a 'comfort woman.' In straight talk, she served as a sex slave to their soldiers, traveling from camp to camp, providing them with constant satisfaction. Hunched over in a white well-worn kimono, she stands in a pool of light, hesitantly telling her story in a soft, often broken, voice. As she reaches the moment where she testifies before the 1993 United Nations Human Rights conference in Vienna, her body straightens; her voice gathers volume and power. The illumination around her brightens and casts her figure in a single beam of light and energy. She breaks her silence and, with it, the silence of countless women who have suffered sexual violence across the world in fields of battle, places of work, and in the supposed safety of their own homes. Her dignity touches all who listen as does the question she poses – *what happens to women while the world continues with its wars, what happens to the women of Rwanda, Bosnia, Guatemala, or Burma, to those of Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Iran?*

The lights fade for a moment and suddenly the striding, confident body of Rosa Parks takes center stage. An African-American activist, she gives us the context for her story – the 1950s, the segregated south of the US where blacks cannot vote in many places, where they must drink from separate water fountains and go to the back of the bus, always facing the potential dangers and wrath of white mobs. Just as she concludes, a white bus driver rushes in front of her driving with a frantic intensity, not looking where he is going. She mounts the almost full bus and sits in the designated area for blacks, only to be told that she must give up her seat as soon as a white man enters since there are no more seats left in the white section. Simply tired of one more instance of racism, she refuses. The bus driver madly tries to get her to move, threatening her in a loud tight voice. *Get up*, he screams, *Get up*, he shouts. *No*, she answers firmly with calm assurance and dignity. She seems to grow taller before our eyes.

Resonances from the play were expanded upon during the *Mar de Cambios* workshop the next day. By using the symbol of Rosa Park's chair to spark conversations, participants' spoke about their unfulfilled aspirations and their own powers they bring to their dreams.

The same women who paid tribute to their ancestors and mentors and watched the play the night before, are invited to sit in Rosa Parks' chair²² to tell about the places and spaces of power they would like to occupy and the personal powers they would bring with them. Women eagerly take the chair, placing a gold and silver butterfly mask on their face to symbolize their metamorphosis and capacity to fly.

²² Maria Suarez Toro and Margaret Thompson, "Building Feminist Movement through 'The Wings of the Butterfly' Project;" Development (2009), Society for International Development.

One indigenous woman from Guatemala tells the group that after so many years of being part of organizations headed by others, she now wants to form her own and be able to work with colleagues and communities to exercise her own agency -- her own capacity to act, create and imagine in collaboration with others. Another participant from El Salvador states that she has always been told by women's organizations that she cannot be a coordinator or leader of a group because she is too 'soft.' She tells everyone that she wants the chance to take on this role because she knows that there are many forms and styles of leadership. The declarations go on with applause and encouragement from the group. A woman from Mexico declares that she has always wanted to be a writer, another from Panama has wanted to be a radio producer. While sitting in Rosa's chair, they both make the commitment to follow through on their dreams, pointing to the experiences of the last five days as inspiring them to finally take the steps...at long last.

The play and related processes of *resonance* grounded and gave meaning to the examination of paradigms and manifestations of power that were at the heart of the gathering. As an integral part of *Mar de Cambios*, they helped spur further actions and collaborations as evidenced by the Feminist Transformation Watch that was planned for Honduras during the workshop. The ensuing discussions reflected an integration of ideas around patriarchy and evolving paradigms of vital life-affirming power. These dialogues and exchanges helped make the connection between different manifestations of power and the kinds of strategies necessary for transformation²³ -- strategies that are emerging from the feminist perspectives we gain from our own experiences and reflections with others.

The play closed with some of the questions and examples of power at the core of our work as feminist popular educators and activists and further deepened our workshop discussions.

A Mayan weaver from the heartlands of Mexico or Guatemala kneels on the floor, unrolling a ball of thick cotton thread before her as she prepares to weave a *huipil*, the multi-colored blouse of Mayan women whose designs identify their village and portray their community history. She is the weaver of change who brings together the different threads of women's experience. As the ball rolls closer to the audience, she leaves us with questions.

What provokes war and greed? Who is responsible for the earth burning with rage? Are not the inequities of a world divided into unequal parts the worst harm we can do to ourselves and our planet? When and how did society decide that humans are worth more than nature, that men are more worthy than women? What mindsets keep us trapped in these dynamics of violence and abuse -- abuse of power, of resources, of others, of violence against our own bodies?

²³ Valerie Miller et.al. *Making Change Happen: Power*, JASS, 2006 (see www.justassociates.org)

Will a single thread be strong enough to resist the wear and tear of life? If I place the red thread, under the yellow, will the weave be stronger? Why separate that which is connected?

The chanting voices of Rosa, Mileva, Boc, Molly and Lucy echo in the background, their singing grows stronger as they enter the stage and begin to tie their flowing skirts together, forming a circle of dance amidst interwoven strips of white fabric. Their bodies sway back and forth coming together in movements of transformation and metamorphosis. As the collective weaver of change and connection, the Mayan clothmaker asks the audience her final questions.

*These women of courage and caring -- what do they bring to this moment?
What do you?*

*What would they do if they were faced with the inequalities and broken lives
of today?
What will you?*

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