

A History of Resistance: Ivone Gebara's Transformative Feminist Liberation Theology

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Abstract

This paper explores the life and work of Brazilian Catholic nun and leading Latin American feminist liberation theologian Ivone Gebara. The paper aims to examine Gebara's commitment to social justice based on her calling. I argue that Gebara's search for liberation has shaped her understanding of what the theological task ought to be, and contend that she serves as an example of a progression from a purely liberationist viewpoint to the ecofeminist perspectives emerging out of localised experiences; and that these in turn largely contributed to the development of her methodology and feminist theological vision. The paper attempts to show that her pioneering feminist work and her own life have inspired Christian women locally and globally to contest the androcentric theology that objectifies and diminishes women's place within the Church.

Introduction

Ivone Gebara is a Catholic nun, a Brazilian Sister of Our Lady (Canonesses of St. Augustine), and a pioneering Latin American feminist liberation theologian. The focus of this paper is on stories from Gebara's autobiography and work that illuminate her leadership role in a context of socio-economic and cultural struggle.

Christian religious leaders are often understood as receiving a special calling from God to perform a specific role in the community or in cloistered orders. This calling is generally identified with a summons from the Divine, after which the individual must change his/her ways of life and work. American Catholic queer liberation theologian Mary Hunt has rightly explained that nuns are generally and mistakenly given “a quasi-clerical status ... they are consecrated to religious life, but are not clergy” (Hunt 2012). In similar vein, Gebara has noted that although women do not have a recognised clerical status they often make up the majority of members of a church, and also constitute the unrecognised leadership of a religious community (Gebara 2008: 324-331).

The stories from Gebara’s autobiography and work foregrounded in this paper demonstrate her status as a religious leader, unrecognised by Church authorities. Her vocational career ruptures naturalised associations between God’s will and men’s exclusive right to religious leadership. The themes and questions that arise out of a feminist critique throughout this paper echo Gebara’s own feminist commitment, and her search for freedom and the right to lead her own life liberated from conventional religious roles imposed on women. Gebara’s theology, I argue, is “on-the-move”, as it is grounded in the changing needs of the marginalised in her own environment, and by her engagement and dialogues with global realities that intersect with local concerns. Gebara’s intellectual trajectory traverses an embodied theology that mediates the people’s *agora* – now, at this moment – and the need to “do” theology in the context of poverty.

Gebara’s Life Trajectory

In her autobiography, *Águas do Meu Poço: Reflexões sobre Experiências de Liberdade* (*Waters from My Well: Reflections on Experiences of Liberation* [2005]), Gebara highlights and reflects on the notion of *liberdade* (freedom). In addition to constituting an important and inspirational resource for Christian women who seek equality in public and private spheres, Gebara’s reflections on *liberdade* emerge as a treatise that illuminates her own search for freedom throughout her liberationist journey, as reflected in her considerable intellectual work.

Gebara was born in 1944 into a middle-class Catholic family. Her parents were first-generation Lebanese immigrants to Brazil. Gebara’s relationship with her mother was profoundly interwoven with her relationship to Rica, the family’s domestic worker, a Catholic devotee of Black African origin (Gebara 2005: 81-83). Similarly to Gebara’s own family trajectory, Rica came to São Paulo searching for a better life. It is possible that Gebara’s mother

and Rica had much in common as immigrant women, but the socio-cultural parameters and existing racial hierarchies would not allow them to have an egalitarian relationship. Reflecting on Rica's presence within the family and impact on her own life, Gebara narrates: "Rica woke inside me the desire to search for freedom, but a freedom according to my own understanding, and to fight for the liberation of others" (2005: 89).¹ Rica never married; rather, she decided to devote herself to God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary.

In an interview given to Argentinean journalist Mariana Carbajal (2012), Gebara explains that her search for freedom importantly influenced her decision to become a nun, somewhat reflective of Rica's chosen path. She told Carbajal:

In 1960, I began studying philosophy and at university I met some Catholic nuns who were very political and extremely involved with the struggle for liberation and against poverty. I began seeing that as an alternative lifestyle for me. It was not very clear, but it seemed a better life, with more freedom than having a husband and a traditional family life. (Carbajal 2012)²

Seemingly, religious life became the door to freedom for Gebara, in that she could break away from her family's expectations, destabilising the traditional gendered private/public dichotomy that places women solely in the domestic sphere.

In 1962, at only 18 years of age, Gebara formally entered the public and intellectual space dominated by men. She taught philosophy at a public college while also working as a secretary. Joseph Comblin, a liberation theologian and Belgian priest living in Brazil, became an influential figure in her life, teaching her the importance of critical thinking, particularly pertaining to the injustices endured by the poor. In the absence of female role models, Gebara was forced to carve out her own path to becoming a critical thinker.

After concluding her degree in philosophy in São Paulo at 22 years of age, Gebara entered the religious life and travelled to Louvain, Belgium to study theology. This was just after Vatican II (held 1962-1965), a time of great transformational change within the Catholic Church. It was in 1973, while still studying in Belgium, that she was invited to return to Brazil for three months in order to replace Comblin, who had been exiled due to his revolutionary theology (Gebara 2005: 69). Gebara returned from Belgium to Brazil during the sprouting of the liberation theology movement. She began teaching theology and philosophy at ITER (Institute of Theology in Recife).

She was the only female theologian there, soon to become vice-director (Gebara 2005: 69).

During her time at ITER – and in collaboration with Don Hélder Câmera, another pioneering liberation theologian – Gebara contributed substantially to the development of liberation theology and the Christian Base Communities (CBCs; see below). It is important to emphasise that she was in charge of the theological foundations of community development projects that focused on promoting social change through educational programs. Working as an educator became a form of experiencing freedom for Gebara (2005: 68-69). Through her teaching, Gebara also learned from the experiences of those she educated – an important and methodologically central dynamic that would critically inform her later work.

The closing of ITER by the Vatican in 1989 radically impacted on Gebara's role as an educator within the Catholic institution, as well as on her own theological and philosophical viewpoints (2005: 71). Gebara was disappointed with the Church's resistance to transformation, and she was also increasingly uncomfortable with the liberationist discourse because it was oblivious to the issues raised by feminist liberation theologians. Gebara, among other feminist liberation theologians, charged liberation theologians of being blind to the patriarchal power relations existing in the domestic sphere. For instance, she argued that male liberation theologians failed to recognise the naturalisation of the caregiver role as oppressive and resulting from the same hierarchical and dualistic worldview that divided society on the basis of race and class.

The patriarchal views of both the Catholic Church and most male liberation theologians influenced Gebara's theological perspectives, perhaps in the opposite way from what many expected. Even without the institutional support of ITER, Gebara took it upon herself to continue giving spiritual support to the community in Camaragibe, one of Recife's poorest suburbs, situated on the city's periphery.³

Gebara has carried out her work as a spiritual counsellor, preacher, teacher, instructor, and theologian. Her vocational life defies the traditional theological anthropology advocated by the Catholic Church, which holds that only men are suited to represent God's work and image on this earth.

Positioning Feminist Theology in Latin America's Liberationist Context

It was in a postcolonial context that feminist liberation theology began to take shape as part of a larger liberation theological movement throughout Latin America. Liberation theology gained force as male and female

theologians from various Latin American countries pioneered a unique way of theologising as a form of political resistance against the oppressive systems of militarist regimes. Their theology was essentially focused on the struggle of the poor. These Latin American theologians' critique of traditional theology exposed the need for an alternative way to theologise that engages people's daily realities of oppression. Positioning the poor and marginalised as their hermeneutical locus, liberation theologians opened up new and fertile avenues to *socially engaged* readings of the Bible by applying the methods of the social sciences to the study of social realities.

One remarkable, key characteristic of the liberation theology movement across the Latin American continent was the development of the "Comunidades de Base" — Christian Base Communities (CBCs). In essence, the CBCs were physical locations where strategic meetings were organised in order to educate poor people and offer informal theological education. This educational work was performed by religious women and men in various ways, such as adult literacy campaigns and night schools. By engaging the current social issues, people in the CBCs began to develop methods of resistance within their own religion.

Towards the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s, Latin American women liberation theologians began to identify the patriarchal oppression(s) existing within their Christian tradition. Women liberation theologians started to conceptualise their own particular liberationist stance. Leading this theological transformation were, among others, Ivone Gebara, Beatriz Melano Couch, Nelly Ritchie, Elsa Tamez, and Maria Clara Bingemer. Foregrounding societies' poor and marginalised as their theological locus, women theologians exposed the oppressive multirealities of poor women from different contexts and backgrounds.

Poor women's experiences, in particular, inspired women liberation theologians to develop the groundwork for their critical feminist theology. In the face of multiple forms of oppression deriving from the colonial legacy — the *machista* system,⁴ the present structure of capitalism, and environmental degradation — women liberation theologians also criticised male liberation theologians for their lack of engagement with the reality of poor women's experiences of oppression. Gebara (1993) challenged liberation theology's inability to agree that women had been objects of domination and oppression in capitalist-driven societies. According to queer liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, feminist liberation theologians exposed the paradoxes and patriarchal fabric of mainstream liberation theology, and criticised male liberation theologians' inability to engage the "ideological apparatuses beyond the field of political economy" (Althaus-Reid 2009: 9).

Gebara's Contribution to Liberation Theology

Gebara's astute critique of the scant focus on women's lived experiences within the discourse of liberation theology was also perhaps informed by her chosen vocation. Gebara was not a regular nun; she was never attached to a saint. She was more interested in listening to people's real-life stories of sacrifice than to those of any saint's life and death. Hence, Gebara's critique of liberation theology coherently interlinked with her search for freedom and her generosity of spirit in helping the marginalised. Gebara began to notice how women's suffering, in particular, commonly went unnoticed by her teachers and colleagues. In many ways, Gebara's theological vision traversed and navigated the religious polemics within which she carved out a space for gradually developing her feminist hermeneutic.

During the 1970s, the belief in a God of justice that sided with the poor formed part of the liberationist discourse. Gebara believed that bringing this message to the population was one of the Church's greatest contributions to the people (Gebara 2005: 114). For Gebara, it was crucial to learn how to theologise from both listening to and observing people's lived experiences; that is, highlighting subjective modes of engagement when producing religious knowledge. Her praxis-oriented theology uncovered a reality that had been overlooked by liberation theologians, including herself: liberation theologians argued for a liberationist praxis that allowed individuals to make connections between their own experienced realities and knowledge production.

In approaching Gebara's learning process through her own lived experiences, the empowering effects of a praxis-oriented, on-the-move theology is revealed. Her liberationist methods led Gebara to not only critically engage with her socio-economic context and reread the Christian scriptures through a liberationist lens, but also to deconstruct knowledge from a liberationist theological perspective. She was able to discern the hidden forms of oppression that had been naturalised throughout the history of patriarchal and hierarchical ideologies. The praxis-oriented theology she proposed emerged as a hybrid from the space where the dialectics between theory and practice were most visible: namely, among the "outcasts" of society. In this way, Gebara's liberationist theology is not only grounded in the daily needs of the marginalised; it has the potential to transform, depending on the specificity of social contexts. The following story demonstrates this liberationist praxis through Gebara's own life experiences.

During the 1970s, Gebara (2005: 114-115) travelled to support a health team in the *sertão pernambucano* (a semi-arid region in Northeastern Brazil). She accompanied a *parteira* (midwife) to help a young woman in an extremely poor environment to give birth. Gebara held the pregnant woman's hand

during labour. She reports that while witnessing the young woman's pain and suffering and offering words of encouragement, she empathised with her experience. In Gebara's words, "I felt as if I had already undergone something like that" (2005: 114).⁵ Although as a nun Gebara had never birthed a child, through this process of witnessing and sharing she felt that her own body identified with what the young woman was going through. The new father expressed his gratitude by presenting Gebara and the *parteira* with a chicken and a bottle of Coca-Cola.

The shared energy and the fulfilment of that experience led Gebara to reflect on the joy of being alive. She connected this joy with her search for freedom and the meaning of being alive as something beyond the struggle of addressing people's immediate needs. The feeling of being alive could then also come from observing and sharing personal historic moments like this one.

This particular experience further informed Gebara's teachings on salvation. Like most liberation theologians, she taught that salvation starts now, in this life. However, unlike most male liberation theologians, she articulated that salvation is for the present, not for the afterlife (Gebara 1986; 1988). She taught that the hope for a better life should be focused on this Earth, instead of on a future Earth.

Gebara also realised how profound was the gap between her theology and the lived reality of the people she had encountered in this particular context. She was made acutely aware of liberation theology's difficulties in helping people from various social groups to make connections between economic, political, and religious realities, on the one hand, and their own suffering, on the other. Gebara questioned whether the liberationist ideals were being effectively communicated to people experiencing various levels of oppression. Liberation theology's struggle for liberation of the oppressed, although engaged with the reality of the poor, was the result of debates among educated people. By contrast, one of Gebara's main focuses throughout her work has been listening to the poor and creating awareness of the ways in which cultural and (but not exclusively) economic systems affect people's experiences and subject-positions in diverse contexts.

A second story draws attention to the silent injustices experienced by women in Latin America. This anecdote illustrates the importance of listening as a significant self-reflexive lens. From 1978 to 1980, Gebara worked with a group of industrial labourers. Gebara provided theological training for this group in home meetings. During the meetings, Gebara noticed that the homeowner's wife was always busy preparing coffee and bringing fruit to the participants. Though frequently invited, this woman always declined to participate in the meetings. One Sunday, Gebara visited to ask the woman why she did not join in. Gebara was shocked by her answers. The woman

bluntly explained that she did not understand what was being discussed. “This is not a language of my world — and you, Miss [Gebara], speak like a man” (2005: 122).⁶ Gebara explained that as she was herself a woman, not a man, she could not understand the woman’s point. The woman responded by explaining that Gebara spoke only about the male reality of the industrial labourers: their claims, their need for better pay, and their political struggles. She continued:

I never heard you speaking about our children, about women, and about how much they struggle to feed their children ... You don’t speak about the women industrial labourers’ difficult life conditions, about their particular struggles during work hours when having their menstrual cycle, or when they have to breastfeed and work at the same time. You never speak about our sexuality and submission to men. You don’t speak about our daily reality. (2005: 122-123)⁷

Gebara credits this exchange for helping her understand how her theological discourse, though socially engaged, was profoundly alienated from women’s reality — and from her own reality as a woman. Her eyes were opened to the fact that the oppression women undergo daily was never mentioned in mainstream theological discourses. “I began seeing what I never saw before: that the female body, my own female body, is a space of social and cultural oppression” (2005: 123).⁸

The experiences outlined above intimately reveal how Gebara, although a liberation theologian, a nun, and woman, was not initially in tune with the daily realities of poor women; neither was she fully aware of the levels of oppression that poor mothers, married or single, underwent. This lack of awareness might have been because as a nun, and originally from a middle-class family, Gebara had not been exposed to the everyday grind of working-class women in her own life; or even though she may have been exposed to it, she was not yet aware of its oppressive nature.

Her encounters with marginalised women enabled Gebara to clearly articulate specific and located issues for women, and allowed her to realise her own imbrications within a power structure that naturalised male experiences. As a nun and therefore not in a marital relationship, nor being a mother, Gebara in some sense enjoyed a form of “male privilege”, rendering a layer of female experience invisible and apolitical. The moment when Gebara listened to the words of the homeowner’s wife was also a moment of recognition of her own enmeshment in a power structure that renders women invisible.

From that moment on, Gebara took women's invisibility as a theological and existential challenge. This in turn revealed Gebara's own ability to be receptive and inclusive: to allow herself to be existentially and intellectually transformed by the experiences of other women—and moreover, to recognise and act on the discursive aporia she had now perceived. The contradictions exposed by Gebara's diverse experiences illuminated other contexts where women might not be aware of their own oppressive reality or the reality of those around them. More importantly, it represented how these "in-between spaces" were beneficial in helping her to think critically and constructively about theology.

Gebara increasingly realised that the socio-economic analysis adopted by liberation theology was not enough to liberate the oppressed from the complex production of cultural injustice and despair (Gebara 2005: 131).⁹ Various forms of domination (gendered, racialised, religious) were deeply rooted in people's anthropological and cosmological understandings. Hence, during the 1980s, Gebara began seeking alternative ways of thinking that were not grounded in dualistic or hierarchical perspectives. She started participating in feminist groups in Recife, and reading national and international feminist scholars. Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (1973) and several works by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Dorothé Sölle, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza informed Gebara's evolving theological perspectives and helped her to make the connections between economic-material productions and symbolic-cultural reproductions, especially of gender, within theology (Gebara 2005: 132).

Gebara's dialogue with feminist theologians situated in the global north started a process of bridging the theological polarisation developed during the liberationist movements of the 1960s. Furthermore, perhaps largely due to her own resourcefulness, Gebara did not literally absorb these new feminist perspectives that she so much appreciated. Rather, she integrated new feminist knowledge and appropriated it to her own socio-cultural context. As a result of local and international feminist insights, as well as her own situated experience, she developed an alternative feminist liberation anthropology, and challenged liberation theologians to rethink their perspectives via both local and global cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue.

One of Gebara's main contributions to the liberationist discourse is that she demonstrated how to combine socio-economic and cultural analysis into liberation theology. This combined analysis is what Gebara has called "feminist liberation theology". In Latin America, Gebara's *As Incômodas Filhas de Eva na Igreja da América Latina* (*The Stubborn Daughters of Eve in the Latin American Church* [1989b]) became one of the first works written by a woman

theologian that discussed ontological issues through the lens of liberation theology. Through exploring women's domestic life, for example, Gebara rendered visible the overlooked realities of the hierarchical binary models of private and public spheres on which Latin American society is constructed. She charged liberation theologians with failing to deal sufficiently with the multiple forms of oppression that poor women undergo daily within the domestic sphere. Through her heightened attention to women's experiences, the androcentric epistemology in which liberation theology was grounded was exposed and the limits of liberation theology expanded to address liberation for all.

In *As Incômodas Filhas de Eva na Igreja da América Latina* (1989b) Gebara took on the debates pertaining to dualistic thinking. One of the main concerns of liberation theologians was to clarify the Christian responsibility of not only providing the poor with spiritual food (guidance), but also to find ways to help the population meet their physical needs. Gebara invited liberation theologians to re-adjust their views about dualism, pointing out that this split was replicated at every juncture of human relationships on Earth: between rich and poor, white and non-white, and male and female (1989b: 12-13).

Gebara (1991a) emphasised that dualistic thinking negatively influences Christians to accept the naturalisation of hierarchical gender social roles. In the same way that the inferiority of the poor was theologically contested within liberation theology, other forms of inferiority should be revoked and explained as not predetermined by God (1991b: 12, 16-17).

Gebara's analysis of inequality unearthed the multilayered forms of oppression *at the margins*, leading her to problematise the issue of "immediacy". By *immediacy*, Gebara means the culture of despair: a cultural dynamic that arises in the context of exacerbated poverty. Here actions, behaviours, and beliefs are determined by the population's immediate physical and material needs. Along with this culture of immediacy and people's widely held understandings of God's predeterminations, a reinforced sexist ideology and morality emerges, exacerbating poor women's domestic struggles and institutionalised caretaker roles.

Gebara (1992: 14) urged liberation theologians to pay increasing attention to the population's immediate material and physical needs. She argued that many children and adults were no longer attending educational programs because they had to find ways to support their families. Gebara's involvement in the CBCs in rural and underdeveloped areas of Brazil provided first-hand information about the evolving oppressive realities. *Fome* (hunger) became the main theme in the CBCs' meetings and educational programs. Discussions on social change or socially engaged ways to understand God and Jesus were replaced by people's stories about "how they had nothing to eat yet" or "how

their children were left hungry at home" (Gebara 1992: 10).¹⁰ "Hunger is the topic on everyone's lips. You barely arrive at Sra Maria, Sra Zefinha or others and the topic is always the same: 'Today I have not had a chance to light the stove yet'; 'my boys are starving'. And only then is it possible to start talking about other things, and later the conversation returns to hunger again, as if this is the central theme in life" (1992: 10).¹¹

Through Gebara's critique, the shortfalls of liberationist methods became more and more evident. Despite the efforts made by liberation theologians to empower the population in resistance to oppressive political systems, the new economic reality of the 1980s provoked actions and reactions dictated by a new challenge: the immediacy of survival. The emerging "culture of the immediate" led people to shift their focus away from the political struggle to immediate needs, such as food and ways to obtain it.

The reality of immediacy demonstrated the interconnected ways in which the capitalist economic system, by not respecting nature's ecosystems, cause inhumane living conditions for all — and more so, severely impact on women and children. Gebara emphasises that these new forms of economic oppression promote the resurgence of uncritical religious dualistic thinking within the population. For Gebara (2008), the refashioning of old rituals, symbols, and prayers, and the belief in a heaven free from suffering, bring comfort to the oppressed; but they also perpetuate a dualistic theology that limits liberation for all.

The embodied and embedded realities of poor women influenced Gebara's own life and work. She incorporated women's experiences into her feminist theology to fully integrate women's issues into the liberationist discourse. Gebara was inspired and encouraged to persist with her work, in part, by witnessing what she called "the awakening of women's historical consciousness in Latin America" (Gebara 1989c: 43).

This "awakening" did not only take place among women scholars, who increasingly integrated gender analysis into their work, but also among women who had previously accepted their naturalised motherly/domestic roles, "divid[ing] [the world] into those who give orders and those who take them, into what is specific to men and what is specific to women" (Gebara and Bingemer 1989: 12). In *Levanta-Te e Anda* (1989a) Gebara highlights stories of women at the grassroots level, within the CBCs, and in various women's groups and pastoral community projects who were becoming aware of their gendered, embodied realities. Gebara observes that while women seek to redefine their position and self-understanding in relation to God, they also become increasingly aware of the limited ways in which their personhoods are constructed: i.e. with disproportionate emphasis on female sexuality. In response to this challenge, Gebara developed a feminist theology that could

free men and women from the naturalised patriarchal standards of Catholic theology. For Gebara it became imperative to investigate Christian symbols from the context of women's real questions and experiences — particularly pertaining to the domestic sphere, where women's naturalised caregiver roles also extend to the realm of sexual interaction.

The Issue of Abortion: Theory in Action

Rethinking theology in relation to women's domestic lives led Gebara to think concretely about issues such as the decriminalisation and legalisation of abortion and birth control, and to challenge restricting discourses on women's sexual pleasure and dignity. This, in turn, led Gebara "to deconstruct and reconstruct thoughts about God and the traditional dogma of the Roman Catholic Church" (Gebara 1997: 3).

In 1995, Ivone Gebara earned international notoriety for being silenced by the Vatican and sent for two years of theological re-education in Belgium. Commenting on this event, the *National Catholic Reporter* (1995: 24) ran the heading: "Ivone Gebara Must Be Doing Something Right". According to this newspaper, one of the main reasons for the Vatican's decision to silence Gebara was a 1993 interview she had granted to the weekly Brazilian national magazine, *Veja* (*See*). In this interview Gebara expressed for the first time, publicly and nationally, her views on abortion. She was the first liberation theologian — and remains one of the few — to claim that abortion is not necessarily a sin. Recounting the reality of poor women throughout the Brazilian slums, Gebara argued that any woman not emotionally or psychologically prepared to bear a child should have the right to end her pregnancy (Nanne and Bergamo 1993: 7).

Gebara's position became a landmark within the evolving liberation theologies. The debate on abortion opened up new discourses on women's sexuality within feminist liberation theology in ways that challenged traditional Catholic views of what constitutes the sacred. Furthermore, Gebara pointed out the Catholic contradictions in viewing abortion as a transgression against God in the context of Brazil's poverty-stricken urban centres, where births often worsen life conditions for mothers and children, increase strain on natural resources due to population pressures, and decrease access to potable water. Gebara raises pertinent issues that can be read through the following questions: How can abortion not be legal in a country that offers little means for poor women to avoid pregnancy? And, how can women deal with newborn children when they themselves are malnourished and often without the prospect of income? (Nanne and Bergamo 1993: 7-10). Gebara also highlighted the lack of education, information,

and health facilities as disadvantaging poor women. Furthermore, she critically addressed the patriarchal foundations of the Catholic tradition and its current androcentrism, emphasising the patriarchs proclivity for deciding on matters regarding women's bodies without listening to women's opinions, experiences, and desires. In the interview (*ibid.*), Gebara made a national issue of her insistence that the "option for the poor" advocated by liberation theology should now also include women's right to make choices regarding their own bodies. Because her views directly contradicted the official position of the Roman Catholic Church, Gebara was accused of having a naïve (read: dangerous) theological perspective. For this reason she was silenced and sent into exile.¹²

Gebara's exile and theological re-education likely had the opposite effect of that intended by the Vatican. The Vatican's actions did not silence the issues Gebara had brought to the forefront; rather, numerous feminist theologians across the globe took notice of her affront to the church's authority. Her work became influential among a variety of Latin American feminist theologians. It served as new ground for scholars seeking an alternative theological framework, such as Mexican feminist theologian María Pilar Aquino (see 2002), Mexican biblical Elsa Tamez (1995; 1996a and b), Brazilian ecofeminist Sandra Duarte (1999), and Brazilian queer theologian Mario Ribas (2009). Gebara's theological views also inspired feminists in both the global south and north (see Ruether 1996 and 1998; Eaton 2001; and Biggadike 2010), a markedly interesting shift relative to the power relations of knowledge production (which, due to space constraints, unfortunately falls outside the scope of this paper).

Following her period of theological re-education, Gebara returned to Brazil and continued her critique of the androcentric basis of the Christian tradition, seemingly undeterred by the actions taken against her by the Vatican. She became active in writing and speaking on the reinterpretation of key elements of the Christian tradition, now also incorporating an ecofeminist perspective (1999; 2003). Gebara was one of the main founders of the largest ecofeminist magazine and network in the global south, *Conspirando*, based in Santiago, Chile.¹³ In "The Con-Spirando Women's Collective: Globalization from Below?" founding member and ecofeminist theologian Mary Judith Ress describes how Gebara's insights and rationale encouraged, inspired, and motivated this network during its early years (2003: 159). The *Conspirando* collective has made a great contribution in promoting cross-cultural exchange among women situated in the global south, as well as fostering dialogue between these women and feminist liberation theologians situated in the global north. Northern ecofeminists such as Heather Eaton (2001; 2005) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (1998; 2005) have identified Gebara as

the leading scholar in developing a Latin American ecofeminist perspective. However, I argue, the uniqueness of Gebara's ecofeminist proposal rests on her non-rejection of Christianity — the opposite view from that adopted by many feminists and spiritual ecofeminists from the global north.

It has been Gebara's choice to remain a sister of Our Lady, Canonesses of St. Augustine. Standing up to Christian theological authoritarianism, she has infused her vocational career with the theological perspective that God has called on the whole human race to seek justice and freedom for all. In this light, Gebara's liberationist praxis enables a transforming theology, which destabilises pre-established notions about God and humanity, and responds to contemporary experiences of oppression. For Gebara, any real attempt to reconstruct theology must always be grounded in what is experienced in the present, locally and globally. Her own location in a region of violent economic contrasts, shaped by colonialism and reshaped by neo-colonialism, have led her to reflect on the daily experiences of those who were excluded from processes of religious construction.

I contend that the transitions evident in Gebara's scholarly works reveal her ways of knowing and being in relation to others as grounded in an epistemological humility and generosity. This generosity and humility, as a mode of relationship, reflects her on-the-move theology, including the central themes of social justice and ecological ethics. In my reading of Gebara, a liberation feminist epistemological praxis takes place through embodying a dynamic state of openness characterised by the aforementioned humility and generosity. This epistemological praxis sets in motion its practitioner's own liberationist process. Gebara's theological trajectory asserts an active historical subject who can offer insights for women's continued emancipation and liberation.

Conclusion

Gebara's life and work demonstrate how a self-reflective and fluid exchange of intellectual, cultural, and empirical knowledge can inspire liberationist theological reconceptualisation. Gebara's work is reflective of her capacity to be open to continued and varied ways of learning, and her ability to encourage and motivate numerous feminist theologians who seek to envision religion differently. Gebara's feminist and ecofeminist views arise directly out of her on-the-move liberationist methodology. From the conflicting spaces of her journey, she has developed ways to transform and re-imagine theology according to new challenges.

Through her scholarship Gebara has demonstrated the nature of her vocation. In other words, Gebara's scholarship is her religious career, and

vice versa. Her scholarship and religious vocation together represent Gebara's unrelenting response to what she perceives as God's calling to seek justice for all living beings. Her life has been an intersection between various forms of resistance, as exemplified by her fight for women's right to make decisions over their own bodies and her arguments against naturalised forms of hierarchical domination. Perhaps, without her calling, Gebara would not have developed her feminist liberation theology. From her conscious relationship with the Divine, Gebara has inspired individuals to continue their search for a more purposeful and vital religious ethics that welcomes the marginalised and excluded.

Entering into the religious life allowed Gebara to continue learning and achieving the freedom she sought. Initially, however, she was probably unaware of the patriarchal theology informing Catholic institutions. She had not yet realised that the price for her freedom would be to challenge the rigid boundaries of Catholic Christianity. Nonetheless, even when she was silenced she was still speaking. Gebara spoke through all the women who advocated her views, both locally and globally. The Vatican closed several doors on her journey, but she never left the Church.

Carbajal asked Gebara why she had continued to remain in the Church. Her answer was:

To leave the Church would also be to leave marginalised women, those who suffer the most; they are all Christians. I believe that feminists have not yet performed enough investigations of the domination of religion within the popular sphere. Religion has in certain forms provided comfort, and at the same time it has oppressed women. I cannot be a feminist and ignore the religious worldview of marginalised women. (Carbajal 2012)¹⁴

Independently of women's religious orientation, Gebara believes that religion(s) continue to instigate various forms of domination over women's bodies. In Latin America, the church wields significant power over people's lives and the shaping of culture. For this reason, Gebara believes that social and religious change are intrinsically connected. To leave the Church would thus contradict her theological position. Consequently, her decision to remain within the Church has coherently followed her liberationist feminist thinking, and can be illustrated through her period of theological re-education.

Ivone Gebara's biography and work, I argue, constitute an embodied history of resistance — a glimpse of Latin America's history. Gebara has

resisted traditional social morals and patriarchal theological concepts, which have regulated and limited women's right to control their own lives. In resisting, Gebara forged a nonconventional religious career that enabled her to continue her search for freedom in both the public and private spheres of life.

Notes

- 1 My own translation from the original Portuguese.
- 2 My own translation from the original Portuguese.
- 3 Gebara continues to live in Camaragibe up until today.
- 4 *Machismo* is not very different from European patriarchy, but rather an accentuation of it. *Machismo* is manifested in the underlying cultural understanding of the construction and reproduction of intra-familial relationships. Over the centuries, Latin American women have been perceived as the ones who naturally maintain intergenerational reproduction, whereas men are expected to dedicate only part of their time to the household due to their primary role in social production. Historically, women's marginalisation from public life has generated a twofold form of oppression. According to Ana María Bidegain de Urán (1984), the emphasis on women's natural vocation as either virgins or mothers positioned virgins under the tutelage of male guardianship. Once these women were married and mothers, a form of contradictory sublimation of this prime domestic role would portray the outside world's activities as beneath wives' and mothers' dignity (de Urán 1984: 55–56).
- 5 My own translation from the original Portuguese.
- 6 My own translation from the original Portuguese.
- 7 My own translation from the original Portuguese.
- 8 My own translation from the original Portuguese.
- 9 For more information about this stage in Gebara's theological trajectory, see Gebara 1992.
- 10 My own translation from the original Portuguese.
- 11 My own translation from the original Portuguese.
- 12 Before Gebara was silenced by the Vatican, numerous meetings with the president of the Conference of Bishops of Brazil culminated in a demand that Gebara make a public retraction. She promptly rejected the demand (Gebara 2005: 151). The bishop from Recife then forwarded the case to the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine and Faith, triggering an extensive review of Gebara's theological writings, interviews, and courses.
- 13 For more information see <http://www.conspirando.cl>.
- 14 My own translation from the original Portuguese.

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