On Wednesday, March 1, the DePaul Philosophy department hosted Maria Acosta, Fanny Söderbäck, María Acosta and Amelia Hruby for a discussion of “Women in Philosophy” (to a thankfully very packed house!) The purpose of this night was to allow these fantastic women to share their story whilst facilitate a discussion around the relatively low number of women in philosophy. From this night, I took away a few lessons but also had a few new questions worth exploring in some detail.

They each began by sharing their journey thus far. The most intriguing part of this part of the evening was just how varied their backgrounds were before going to DePaul. The theme throughout the night was “many sideroads.” Professor Acosta and Söderbäck are both from abroad, and English was not a primary language for either of them. Maria told a particularly harrowing tale about how she was the first woman to graduate with a doctorate degree in social sciences at the national university in Colombia. She claims she never had a female professor, and rarely read female authors. She was often told her work was not good enough, and that it was precisely “not philosophy.”

I don’t have good data on this, but I do suspect that “I didn’t intend to study philosophy” is a theme for both male and female studies alike, but it was even more convoluted for them. It’s a place you end up because you’re lost, or confused, or by accident: but being both female and ESL makes it seem even more unlikely that you’d end up in an institution designed for the intellectually lost and curious.

I was particularly interested in the ESL struggle. I imagine that if it’s hard enough for English-as-first-language students to find philosophy texts written by females and through a feminist lens, it must be nearly impossible to find them in a language other than English. Without access to these kinds of texts as a high-schooler, I imagine it’s very easy to get a picture of philosophy as a male-dominated or even male-exclusive philosophy. But when I brought this question up, the panel added another level of complexity to it: not only would it be hard to find these texts, but doing the work of philosophy is doing the work of translating. Even with a solid grasp on English (or whatever language the text originates in), doing philosophy is doing the work of translating: that work is even harder for them, because they are always forced to translate masculine philosophy into feminist terms (or, at the very least, ask the question: “what does it mean to do a feminist philosophy, if anything at all.”)

Another interesting point Maria brought up that: in the United States, she says, “everything is labeled.” Everything works in dualities in Western cultures, she said, which was a culture shock to her. She’s not a philosopher, she’s a female philosopher. She touched on deep and incredibly poignant lines of division that are at play in the United States, if not across the Western World. This, she said, is oppressive, but it also gives here the opportunity to play with a lot of interesting concepts — for instance, the subject of Latin America as a philosophical concept.

This plays into another point that was introduced that I resonated with deeply: the distinction between continental and analytic philosophy. I certainly identify primarily as a continental philosopher, but it wasn’t until I came to DePaul very late in my undergrad career that I learned there was even a distinction. Professor Acosta said she hadn’t learned about that, either, until she came to the United States. Perhaps, she suggested, the reason she was told her papers were “not philosophy” as a graduate student was simply that she, indeed, was doing a kind of philosophy — continental philosophy.

The continental tradition welcomes the inclusion of voices and perspectives from philosophers as their identities: to speak about Latin America philosophical as someone from Latin America. But to do that effectively: to do a philosophy that includes these identities and experiences as part of the work — that requires effectively including as many identities as possible.

Unfortunately, the data show that is not happening. About 30% of philosophy students are female — quite a bit higher than the 1950’s — but that number is leveling and may even start to decline out while other fields grow. The question is: why? According to the panelists, the largest drop in the pipeline was the drop from “taking an introductory class as an undergrad” to “declaring a major.” Why?

Many reasons were posited. Perhaps it was because introductory courses fail to include feminist philosophy or even philosophy written by females. Perhaps it is how philosophy is sold (the panelists pointed out the prevalence of photos of males on undergrad college webpages.)

I have my own theory on this, though, one that requires serious personal introspective. I’m often the loudest kid in the class — I’m constantly raising my hand; constantly challenging the professor or the thinkers we’re reading. Sometimes I even accidentally blurt out in class. I do this for many reasons: a genuine curiosity, a desire to evade boredom, an aggressive rebellious streak. More than that, though, I do this because this is how I was taught to be a good student. I know that doing this not only makes me more engaged in the material, but it also wins sly favors with the professor by showing them that I am not a slacker and am genuinely engaged. This is not a farce: I am not merely pretending to be engaged; I approach my classes with earnest. But I do understand the effects of that genuine engagement on the professor’s assessment of me.

This boisterousness, however, can often work to drown out female voices. I know I will not be ostracized because I try to speak up. The females in the room during this conversation felt differently: for them, they feel vulnerable when they ask questions — to them, they feel as if they were taught to sit back, follow the men, and keep quiet.

I have no doubt there are a host of other problems with the relatively low inclusion rate of women in philosophy, but this one seems pretty critical: how can we create an environment in a philosophy classroom where all students feel free to speak up, to question, to debate, when it seems very reasonable to assume that the female students were taught very different values about how to behave in a classroom (indeed, all the television and movie examples of an ostracized “class pet” character I have in my head are female.) Perhaps classroom environments and reward systems even need to change to value different kinds of people.

The good news of the night, however, is that DePaul does not have this problem – low inclusion of women in undergrad philosophy programs – nearly as extensively as the discipline. The female/male inclusion rate in the undergrad program is currently at 45% female to 55% male, which is close to equal. I’d personally be curious to investigate more into why this is the case. It seems as if DePaul is an incredibly friendly place for students with the kind of varied backgrounds necessary to succeed in philosophy: it welcomes transfer students and adult students with open arms, for instance. Philosophy is a field that one often “stumbles” into, so this openness surely helps with the ratio. Furthermore, professors at DePaul seems to genuinely care about inclusion here. They work extremely hard to include female voices in their introductory coursework, though, as Fanny notes, this becomes difficult because the male students often react poorly, which is reflected on evaluations, and becomes a roadblock to advancing academically. This is one of the reason women have a hard time advancing, even at DePaul: for whatever systematic reason, the female professors often are simply rated more poorly, especially by male students. I highly doubt it’s due to their overall teaching efficacy.

Making grounds on the problem of women in philosophy is key to helping philosophy make headway as a vehicle for exploring all kinds of new problems. I very much appreciated the opportunity to hear Professor Acosta, Söderbäck, and Hruby share their story.