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Why We Need Decolonial Feminism: Differentiation and Co-Constitutional Domination of Western Modernity

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Art and descolonization

Afterall and Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) are working together to explore new artistic and curatorial practices that explicitly question and critique colonial legacies in art, curation and critical art writing. The project Art and descolonization is building a critical forum for cultural theorists, curators and artists to raise questions and formulate proposals for the reinterpretation of exhibitions and museum collections in non-canonical ways by promoting workshops, seminars and publishing essays. It is intended that the events promoted by this collaboration will stimulate further discussion and research on decolonization, de-colonial and post-colonial studies.



CAROLINA CAYCEDO
My Brazilian Feminine Lineage of Struggle, from the series
Genealogy of Struggle, 2018-2019
India ink drawings on paper, 23 x 30,5 cm (each)
Courtesy of the artist, Instituto de Visión, Bogotá, Colômbia,
and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, United States

Why We Need Decolonial Feminism: Differentiation and Co-Constitutional Domination of Western Modernity¹

YUDERKYS ESPINOSA MIÑOSO

1. This is a revised, shortened version of an essay originally published as “De por qué es necesario un feminismo descolonial: diferenciación, dominación coconstitutiva de la modernidad occidental y el fin de la política de identidad.” *Revista Solar. Revista de Filosofía Iberoamericana*, Dossier Epistemologías feministas latinoamericanas, v. 12, n. 1, 2017, pp. 141–71.

This essay intends to make an explanatory synthesis of the epistemological turn that we—feminists with critical and counter-hegemonic trajectories and positions, geopolitically settled in Abya Yala—are currently experiencing. It is meant to explain what in our opinion constitutes a turning point, a fork in the path that we have been following, despite and beyond the powerful criticism that we have long been developing within known feminism.

This feminism, notwithstanding its many conflicting currents and positions—to the point where we prefer to speak of *feminisms*—has a shared story with a single origin, and certain fundamental convictions or principles that derive from that history. There are at least two convictions that can be identified in conversations between feminists of any kind. The first is the shared idea of a situation of subordination, oppression or domination of “women” as a gender (or as sex) in history, which some interpret in terms of “inequality,” and which is explained by the existence of a structural system of power that puts men in the forefront and in control of institutions. This involves a gendered construction of knowledge about the world order, and what is understood as “women’s reproductive capacity.” This system of power has been interpreted in terms of a universal patriarchy, and critical tendencies subjecting it to revision have led to its understanding as a gender system, thereby trying to evade, as they say, the universalist perspective that has fallen out of favor thanks to the arduous examination to which the Western scientific epistemology has been submitted by both contemporary social sciences and feminism.

2. AMORÓS, Celia. "El feminismo: Senda no transitada de la Ilustración." *Isegoría*, n. 1, 1990, p. 140, e-mujeres.net/wpcontent/uploads/2016/08/el_feminismo_senda_no_transitada_de_la_ilustracion.pdf (last accessed on 11 July 2019).

3. Amelia Valcárcel tells us that feminism "is a line of political thought that is typical of the Enlightenment: in the context of the development of modern political philosophy, feminism has emerged as the most important and profound correction to primitive democratism. It is not a discourse on the excellence of women, but rather one based on the notion of equality that informs the discussions which surround this school of political thought ... This does not mean, however, that the Enlightenment itself is feminist. It is more as if feminism is the unwanted child of the Enlightenment." See VALCÁRCEL, A., *La memoria colectiva y los retos del feminismo*. Mujer y Desarrollo Series. v. 31. Santiago: Cepal/Unidad Mujer y Desarrollo, 2001, p. 8, http://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/5877/S01030209_s.fjsessionid=EDICD1888D89A86A-48D84CCFF94B94A3?sequence=1 (last accessed on 18 October 2016).

As we will see below, this agenda of "overcoming" has been, of course, a great failure, since the other great conviction shared by feminists—rarely subjected to scrutiny—is the historical need for the emergence of feminism as a social movement that brings "women" (whatever our interpretation of this category) together, while seeking to reverse the specific order of domination they are subject to. This agreement implies an understanding of feminism as a universal movement, a "progressive phenomenon, produced as the Enlightenment developed and explained its own precepts."^{2 3} In short, feminism is also recognized as a political-cultural revolution produced by modernity and the "progress" of humankind; a movement produced, developed and led by women, whose first bursts occur in Europe, the imagined cradle of civilization, and which resurfaces with new vigor in the mid-twentieth century in the United States (the ultimate imperial power), before expanding into the non-Western world. This cultural revolution is understood as desired and necessary for the good of all "women." Given what is taken to be a universal system of domination, and given that there are still large regions of the world where feminist revolution has not yet begun, feminists—from or in contact with the most advanced regions of the developed world—are expected to work hard to expand it. Looking through the lens of what I propose to identify as "decolonial feminism," this trope, widely shared by almost all feminisms—at least those known and developed so far—creates significant problems in the interpretation and understanding of gender/sex-based domination and how to reverse it.

Decolonial feminism, while recovering previous critical currents, such as Black feminism, feminism of color, post-colonial feminism and also French materialist feminism and post-structural feminism, advances by questioning the unity of "women" in a way, as I will try to demonstrate, so new and so radical that it is impossible to reconstitute it again. Moreover—and this is the point of no return—feminism in its complicity with the decolonial commitment undertakes the task of reinterpreting history with a critical look towards modernity, not only because of its androcentric and misogynist character, as classical feminist epistemology has showed, but due to its intrinsically racist and Eurocentric nature.

In line with the critical project that unveils coloniality as the dark side of modernity, decolonial feminism radically questions the understanding that the progress in conquering

women's rights', which is thought to have been attained in Europe, the US and some "advanced" countries of the so-called "Third world," should be the finish line to be reached by feminism, Marxism and other social movements. Such an understanding, decolonial feminism argues, reproduces the idea of Europe as the beginning and end of history, and of modernity as the great project of overcoming that every human group has to fulfil; this project was itself a fallacy only sustained by the shadows it cast on everything else that existed. Not only do we decolonial feminists oppose the salvationist claim of feminism in its classical form; we can also demonstrate how this colonial heritage is perverse.

As some feminists—especially those of African and indigenous descent—deepen the analysis of the historical conditions that give rise to a social organization that sustains hierarchical structures of oppression and domination that are not only explained by gender, we run into the thick walls of containment built by those who effectively enjoy the prerogatives of privilege within the feminist movement's fiction of inclusive universality. The ideal of "unity in oppression," sustained by the academy and broad sectors of the feminist and women's movement, continues to operate as a wildcard that legitimates all manner of enterprises and objectives under the illusion that they serve the common interest. This is evidenced historically by what we consider and celebrate as the "triumphs" of the feminist movement, which do nothing but deepen coloniality by ensuring welfare for some—women of white, bourgeois privilege—to the detriment of the large racialized majority.

This is why, today, we have reached the point of radical disenchantment. It is no longer enough for us to try to gain ground within the feminist community. Rather, we have to admit the failure of Sojourner Truth's call to feminists more than one hundred and fifty years ago— "Ain't I a woman?"—and ask ourselves why that call has failed. For the ultimate feminist conviction of gender as a unifying factor of women's difference (one that has proved hard to recognize, and which today is implicated in the commercialization of "feminisms" in the extra-state arbitration market of the global capitalist order), that celebrated and romanticized "diversity," continues to slip through our fingers, as it did for several generations of "women" and feminists from subaltern groups before us. The feminist project that aspires to overcome "gender inequality," or the domination and oppression of women or, even

4. COLLINS, Patricia Hill. "La política del pensamiento feminista negro." In: NAVARRO, Marysa; STIMPSON, Catharine R. (Ed.). *¿Qué son los estudios de mujeres?* Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999.

the dichotomous gender binary itself, while claiming not to neglect origin or condition—that same feminism, which has played an important part in the definition of the possible and the desirable, which has taught us what it ultimately means to break the chains that condemn us to ostracism according to the evolutionary imperatives of society as sustained by the Enlightenment's modernity project; the same feminism that promises, and thereby promotes, the idea that we will all become equally human (because "rights are not human if they do not include women," because we must all become human at last)—this feminism has become, to many of us, not only unsustainable but also an impediment to real transformation that would disrupt prevailing senses of social organization and disrupt the historical-political-economic order as a whole, reversing the division between the human and the non-human and the episteme of hierarchical differentiation between what we consider as one or "the other."

Such is the situation that invites us to explain the need for a feminism that feeds on the theoretical contributions of the analysis of coloniality and racism—a feminism no longer understood as a phenomenon but rather as an episteme intrinsic to modernity and its liberating projects. A feminism, then, that is complicit with and feeds on the movements of autonomous communities on the continents that are carrying out processes of decolonization and restitution of lost genealogies—movements that indicate the possibility of other meanings for communal life and rewrite the utopic horizons that are universally known and endorsed.

The tools of criticism developed by programmes of research into modernity and coloniality can help many of us achieve a more adequate understanding of the power matrix of overlapping oppressions already theorized by black feminism throughout the South American continent;⁴ this understanding would explain why feminism has failed to achieve its great *imagined community* of free women.

I therefore intend to explain what I understand by decolonial feminism and the importance of its powerful appearance in Latin America. To do so, I resort to an attempt at characterization, which starts by finding some of the sources on which decolonial feminism feeds and the place from which it speaks, concluding by pointing out the key elements that, as I see it, shape its critical program and its main theoretical-epistemic commitments—the elements that define decolonial feminism as an indispensable and decisive think-do

5. "Abya Yala" is used as a synonym for "America" among the peoples of the region. The word itself, however, comes from the language of the Kuna people, from the Sierra Nevada in northern Colombia.

6. See QUIJANO, Aníbal. "Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social." *Journal of World-Systems Research*, v. 6, n. 2, 2000a, pp. 342–86; QUIJANO, Aníbal. "Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina." In: LANDER, Edgardo. *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales: perspectivas latinoamericanas*. Caracas: Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Sociales (FACES-UCV)/ Instituto Internacional de la Unesco para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe (Ilesalc), 2000b, pp. 201–46.

7. LUGONES, María. "Colonialidad y Género." *Tabula Rasa*, n. 9, July–December 2008, pp. 73–101.

exercise for those of us who agree on the need to deepen feminist criticism by profiting from counter-hegemonic knowledge found in Abya Yala.⁵

WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT DECOLONIAL FEMINISM?

Decolonial feminism is a movement in full growth and maturation that proclaims itself revisionist of the Western, white and bourgeois theory and political proposal of the dominant feminism. The name was first proposed by María Lugones, a feminist of Argentine origin living in the US who, after participating for a few years in the feminist of color movement in that country, returned to Latin America, attracted by the communal policies that emerged with Zapatismo and the multiple indigenous uprisings occurring in the region from the 1990s, and interested in the revival of Latin American thinking that came with the decolonial turn. As she points out, the proposal of a decolonial feminism was enabled by the encounter between the perspective of intersectionality, which had been developing for decades, and the modernity/coloniality research project:

On the one hand, there is the important work on gender, race and colonization that constitutes the feminisms of women of color in the United States, feminisms of Third World women, and the feminist versions of jurisprudence schools, Lat Crit and Critical Race Theory ... The other framework is the one introduced by Aníbal Quijano and which is central to his analysis of the capitalist global power pattern. I refer to the concept of the coloniality of power,⁶ which is central to the work on coloniality of knowledge, of being, and decoloniality. Interlacing both strands of analysis allows me to reach what I am calling, provisionally, "the modern/colonial gender system."⁷

Decolonial feminism collects, reviews and enters into dialogue with the knowledge-production that female thinkers, intellectuals, activists and fighters, either feminist or not, of African or indigenous descent, *mestizas*, peasants, racialized migrants and also white academics committed to subalternity have been developing in Latin America and across the world.

ONGOING CONTRIBUTIONS TO DECOLONIAL FEMINISM

8. *Ibid.*

9. QUIJANO, A., 2010a and 2010b, *op. cit.*

10. LUGONES, María. "Subjetividad esclava, colonialidad de género, marginalidad y opresiones múltiples." In: *Pensando los feminismos en Bolivia*. Foro 2 Series. La Paz: Fondo Emancipaciones, 2012.

María Lugones,⁸ expanding on the analysis made by Aníbal Quijano,⁹ to whom race is a category of social classification developed within the colonization process, proposes that the colonizer produces and imposes on colonized peoples, at the same time and without dissociation, an epistemic regime of hierarchical dichotomous differentiation through what she calls the *modern/colonial gender system*. This regime initially and fundamentally distinguishes between the human and the non-human, and causes race-gender categories of social classification to emerge. According to Lugones, these categories are co-constitutive of the modern/colonial episteme and thus cannot be understood outside of it, nor as separate from each other.

Accepting the postulation that, in the colonial gaze, the populations of colonized lands, thought of as beasts more than humans, did not reproduce a rational order and rather were thought of as part of a natural order, Lugones reads the gender category as one that could not be applied to the natural or non-human world, for it had been produced for the world of the human (Europe and its people). According to this thesis, the order producing hierarchical differences did not attribute gender to bestialized people since ideas that constitute gender relationships (ideas of greater capacity for reason in men, and of the fragility of women) could not be applied to non-European people, who were all considered equally devoid of reason, sublime beauty and fragility. For Lugones, then, the type of differentiation that applies to colonized and enslaved peoples is male and female sexual dimorphism. As with any other beast, no gender reading applies to this dimorphism, which only accounts for reproductive capacity and animal sexuality.¹⁰

In line with various feminists' theses which do not separate the study of racism from the study of gender oppression, connecting the separate compartments of oppression drawn by previous analyses, it is possible to think not in terms of intersections or crisscrosses, but rather in terms of a single matrix—the racist modern/colonial gender matrix.

In my own research work I have been making progress on these issues. Recently, I have been committed to making a critical genealogy that allows for documentation of what I call the coloniality of feminist reason in Latin America and the Caribbean,¹¹ connecting the ontological commitments of feminist theory and practice with those of Western mo-

11. MIÑOSO, Yuderkys Espinosa. "El futuro ya fue: una crítica a la idea del progreso en las narrativas de liberación sexo-genéricas y queer identitarias en Abya Yala." In: FERRERA-BALANQUET, Raúl Moarquech (Ed.) *Andar erótico decolonial. El Desprendimiento* Collection. Buenos Aires: Ediciones el Signo, 2015, pp. 21-39.

12. MIÑOSO, Yuderkys Espinosa. "Una crítica decolonial a la epistemología feminista crítica." *Revista El Cotidiano*, v. 29, n. 184, March–April 2014, pp. 7-12.

13. MENDOZA, Breny. "La epistemología del sur, la colonialidad del género y el feminismo latinoamericano." In: MIÑOSO, Yuderkys Espinosa (Ed.) *Aproximaciones críticas a las prácticas teórico-políticas del feminismo latinoamericano*. v. 1. Buenos Aires: En la Frontera, 2010, pp. 19-36.

14. *Ibid.*

15. CURIEL, Ochy. "Crítica poscolonial desde las prácticas políticas del feminismo antirracista." *Nómaditas*, n. 26, April 2007, pp. 92-101.

16. CURIEL, Ochy. "Construyendo metodologías feministas desde el feminismo decolonial." In: AZKUE, Irantzu Mendia et al. (Eds.) *Otras formas de (re)conocer. Reflexiones, herramientas y aplicaciones desde la investigación feminista*. Donostia: Universidad del País Vasco/Hegoa, 2015, pp. 45-60.

dernity. In this effort, I critically approach different currents of feminism and feminist epistemologies in the region and observe how they reproduce modernist narratives, as well as how they have endeavored to make the category of gender and the analysis of patriarchy independent, as if these alone could legitimately explain the "oppression of women." I demonstrate how, even when they are able to characterize the problem, they continue to fail in their attempt to overcome the fragmentation of oppression.¹²

An academic who has made interesting contributions to the promotion of decolonial feminism is Breny Mendoza. Mendoza uses the contributions of decolonial, post-colonial and post-Western theory to interpret some of the urgencies of the Latin American political context. Her interpretative research proposes what she calls the *coloniality of democracy*,¹³ according to which the contemporary nation-states of the subcontinent do nothing but unsuccessfully try to emulate the liberal democracy endorsed by Europe and the US as the ultimate political system of government. In her analysis, Mendoza harshly criticizes the ideological dependence of Latin American feminisms on theories produced by academics of the North, stressing the need to invest in a Latin American feminist theory capable of reasoning from a Latin American point of view—one that is committed to thinking on its own, starting with a critical analysis of coloniality.¹⁴

Another key figure in this commitment to decolonize feminism is Ochy Curiel, who set out very early on to recover the voices of women and feminists who identified as black, indigenous and of color,¹⁵ showing how their contributions—developed since the 1970s—have been crucial to showing the connections between racism, sexism and contemporary forms of colonialism. In more recent works, the author has focused on elaborating a decolonial feminist methodology. In order to do so, she has reviewed ideas of intersectionality and feminist epistemology and taken up criticism of the anthropological method, on the grounds that it maintains the classic subject-object division according to which racialized and subaltern populations continue to constitute the things that must be known and explained.¹⁶

Another Latin American intellectual who has more recently accepted the call of decolonial feminism is the feminist anthropologist Rita Segato, who became widely known within feminism for her research on femicides in Ciudad Juárez. In her recent work, she proposes to investigate the connection

17. SEGATO, Rita.

"Colonialidad y patriarcado moderno: expansión del frente estatal, modernización, y la vida de las mujeres." In: MINOSO, Yuderkys Espinosa; CORREAL, Diana Gómez; MUÑOZ, Karina Ochoa (Eds.). *Tejiendo de otro modo: feminismo, epistemología y apuestas descoloniales en Abya Yala*. Popayán: Editorial Universidad del Cauca, 2014, pp. 75-91.

18. CUMES, Aura.

"Cosmovisión maya y patriarcado: una aproximación en clave crítica." *Interdisciplinario de Estudios de Género de la Universidad de Chile*, Santiago, 6 November 2014.

19. MORENO, Celenis

Rodríguez. "Mujer y desarrollo: un discurso colonial." *El Cotidiano*, n. 184, March–April 2014, pp. 31-37.

20. MORENO, Celenis

Rodríguez. "Las políticas públicas de mujer y género: tecnologías de género moderno colonial." *Coloquio Internacional de Saberes Múltiples y Ciencias Sociales y Políticas*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 21 October 2010.

21. MORALES, Iris

Hernández. *Aportes, problemáticas y desafíos que la noción de "ciudadanía" movilizadora por el movimiento de Diversidad Sexual y sus fragmentos LGBTI y lesbofeminista antirracista decolonial significan a la radicalización del pluralismo*. PhD Thesis, Universidad de Chile, Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades, Escuela de Postgrado, Centro de Estudios Culturales Latinoamericanos, 2016.

between patriarchy and coloniality, and the relationship between communal societies and state to think about the complicity between the femicidal state, racism and law. In her proposal, she discusses with María Lugones and Oyeronke Oyewumi about the absence of patriarchy and or a gender system in the period prior to conquest and colonization.¹⁷

Embracing this debate, Aura Cumes, an intellectual of Mayan origin, proposes a study of *Popol Wuj* that looks for traces of the *low-intensity patriarchy* proposed by Rita Segato. Cumes observes that in *Popol Wuj* there predominates the notion of "*winaq*," which in Spanish would translate as a person or people without gender assignment. She also notes that in the myth of Mayan origin there is an idea of interrelated pairs, feminine and masculine deities, both with the capacity for action and with equal relevance in the creation of the universe and of flesh and blood beings. "These social dynamics," she writes, "were abruptly interrupted by the colonization process,"¹⁸ which established a regime of women's subordination, achieved through law, the use of violence and evangelization.

I do not want to finish this limited review of some of the most promising contributions and debates of decolonial feminism without referring to the work of two feminist lesbian activist thinkers. The political scientist Celenis Rodríguez embarks on an analysis of the discourse of public policies for gender equality in Colombia to reveal their commitment to modernity and processes of westernization. Her research is based on an analysis of discourses of women and development as sites where conjugation between the ideals of social "progress" and the ideals of women's welfare are clearly expressed.¹⁹ These discourses, yesterday as today, originate from the former metropolis and, giving continuity to the colonial enterprise, are directed to the countries of the "Third World" through the apparatus of development aid. Rodríguez then shows the relationship between these discourses and public gender policies instituted at the national level, and depicts the latter as instruments—namely, as *colonial gender technologies*—that allow for the operationalization of guidelines emanating from the development apparatus.²⁰

As for Iris Hernández,²¹ her project analyses the notion of citizenship claimed by the movements of sexual diversity, LGBTI and feminist lesbians in Chile, in order to observe how these movements' mechanisms of readjustment and normalization are productive for coloniality, composing a racist and liberal agenda which addresses the interests of the few.

As we can see in this brief review, the paths of research and critical analysis opened by the encounter between decoloniality, anti-racism and feminism in Latin America are wide and increasingly varied. The field is so fertile that the list of ongoing investigations and threads of reflexive thought and analysis grow on a daily basis, rendering the field of incumbency increasingly extensive, while also making possible the task of de-Eurocentring feminism.

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CAROLINA CAYCEDO (Reino Unido, 1978) is a London-born Colombian artist, living in Los Angeles. She participates in movements of territorial resistance, solidarity economies, and housing as a human right. Carolina's artistic practice has a collective dimension to it in which performances, drawings, photographs and videos are not just an end result, but rather part of the artist's process of research and acting. She has held residencies at The Huntington Gardens, Libraries and Art Collections in San Marino, California DAAD artists-in-Berlin program, amongst others. Recent solo museum shows include *Care Report* at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź; *Wanaawna, Rio Hondo and Other Spirits* in Orange County Museum of Art, and upcoming at ICA Boston and MCA Chicago.

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