

# Maria Lugones

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Decolonial Feminism

- The certitude that the subaltern can speak is one distinguishing feature of decolonial theory;
- decolonial thinkers differ from postcolonial/subaltern theory and postcolonial feminism in several additional ways.

# Modernity / Coloniality Group

- The Modernity / Coloniality Group insist that capitalism is concomitant to colonialism; it is not an autonomous system imported to the Americas on its own.
- Taking issue with those who claim that capitalism existed in Europe prior to colonization, decolonial theorists argue that colonialism is what made capitalism possible. In marked contrast to those who claim that capitalism failed to develop in the colony due to conditions internal to indigeneity, the Modernity / Coloniality Group insist that capitalism requires the internal conditions of the colony to realize itself.

# The dark side of modernity

- Decolonial theorists conceptualize colonialism as the dark side of modernity. Contesting the association of modernity with emancipatory developments in Europe, such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution, the Modernity / Coloniality Group suggest more complicated causal relations between colonialism, the age of reason, and the age of revolutions.
- Just as Hegel suggested that the full realization of reason and freedom is inseparable from despotism, slavery and conquest, decolonial thinkers suggest that slavery, forced labor, and the rightslessness of colonized peoples exist in dialectical relation to liberal notions of liberty, equality, justice and free labor.

- The colony is both the condition of possibility and the proving ground of the Western nation-state, and rights-bearing citizenship tethered to men of property. In other words, the freedom of the European and the colonial settler depends on the unfreedom of the colonized.
- Precisely because the freedom of some presupposes the subordination of others, decolonization is always an unfinished project. Although colonialism has ended in most parts of the world, the “coloniality of power” continues to define relations between the West and the Rest



# Silvia Federici: Caliban and the Witch

- According to Federici (2004), the witch-hunts were predicated on the destruction of forms of knowledge and subjectivity that were incompatible with capitalism.
- The violence of Slavery, Colonialism, and the Witch-Hunt are central to the making of the modern European notions of “modernity” that are inseparable from these ongoing histories of violence

# “Other Modernities”

- What alternative modernities / alternative histories have been partly destroyed to produce "Western modernity"?
- At the same time, what other knowledge systems continue to persist and resist Eurocentric Western modernity?

# The coloniality of power

- Peruvian sociologist, Anibal Quijano, theorized the **coloniality of power** as a process of racialization integral to colonization (2010, 2008).
- Beginning in 1492 with the conquest of the Americas, European conquistadors proclaimed themselves the lords of the world, the “natural” rulers of all “inferior” peoples. Using conquest as proof of their superiority, the conquerors reclassified entire populations in accordance with finely honed hierarchies grounded in religious doctrines, physiognomies, myths about blood and divine mandates to spread the message and means of salvation. Those conquered through violence were condemned to a zone of non-Being, stripped of humanity, rights, and self-determination.

- According to Quijano, the idea of race imposed on the colonized originated in debates during the Spanish Inquisition and the Reconquista.
- The principle of the “purity of blood” was introduced to distinguish “real” Christians from converted Jews and Moors. By inventing a specious notion of unchanging biology that privileged Catholics, the Spanish Church afforded the monarchy grounds to expel the Moors and Jews from Spain. Although the principle of the purity of blood was invoked initially to legitimate a religious hierarchy, the precedent of tying notions of superiority to a biological base with profound cultural repercussions, proved particularly useful to the colonizing enterprises that followed conquest of the “New World.”

- Imported to America with colonization, the idea of a naturally superior race, identified through its beliefs and deeds, provided a useful tool to differentiate the colonizers from the Amerindians and the imported slaves from Africa.
- Once marked as inferiors, conquered and enslaved peoples were subjected not only to edicts issued by the Catholic monarchy of Spain, but to civilizing missions, “salvation” efforts, and brutal labor and sexual exploitation

- The idea of race implicit in debates surrounding “the purity of blood” gave rise to hierarchies that restructured the social organization as well as public and private institutions and practices in the “New World.”
- Linking notions of biological and cultural inferiority, race provided a versatile substratum for the coloniality of power, justifying a hierarchical social system that accorded control over human and material resources to the colonizers.

- According to Quijano, race reordered all aspects of indigenous life, including sex, labor, collective authority, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity.
- Race designated who would become a slave, an indentured laborer, or a free wage laborer. Race determined political status during the colonial era, and subsequently dictated who would have access to full citizenship in the nation-state.
- As the foundation of Eurocentrism, race defined what counted as history and knowledge, and condemned the colonized to live as peoples without history, without the rights of man, and without human rights

- As European knowledge production was accredited as the only valid knowledge, indigenous epistemologies were relegated to the status of primitive superstition or destroyed. Eurocentrism locked intersubjective relations between the European and the non-European in a temporal frame that always positioned the European as more advanced. Whether the opposition pitted the civilized against the barbarians, wage workers against slaves, the modern against the premodern, or the developed against the underdeveloped, the superiority of the European was never questioned (Quijano 2008).
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# Coloniality and Colonialism

- Following Quijano, decolonial thinkers have developed a range of concepts that take the coloniality of power as their point of departure.
- Like Quijano, decolonial theorists emphasize that **coloniality** is different from **colonialism**.
- In contrast to the historically specific acts of colonialism through which one nation imposes its sovereignty on another, coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerge in the context of colonialism, which redefine culture, labor, intersubjective relations, aspirations of the self, common sense, and knowledge production in ways that accredit the superiority of the colonizer. Surviving long after colonialism has been overthrown, coloniality permeates consciousness and social relations in contemporary life

- María Lugones, a leading decolonial theorist and member of the decoloniality group, adjusts Quijano's formulation of the coloniality of power through a deeper consideration of gender and its entwined relationship with race. She argues that Quijano's understanding of sex / gender as defined by patriarchal and heterosexual contestations over "sexual access" is a paradoxically Eurocentered understanding of gender. She therefore sees Quijano's framework as a further means through which the subjection and disempowerment of colonised women can be obscured.



# The Coloniality of Gender

- In her 2007 essay, Lugones combines intersectionality and Quijano's coloniality of power to further develop her own conception of the **coloniality of gender**.
- She critiques Quijano's conception of gender on multiple grounds:
- it is still trapped in biological determinism;
- it presupposes sexual dimorphism where none existed;
- it naturalizes heteronormativity in cultures that did not deem homosexuality either a sexual or a social transgression;
- it presumes a patriarchal distribution of power in societies where more egalitarian social relations between men and women were prevalent.
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- In Lugones's view, Quijano's understanding of gender is still Eurocentric. Drawing insights from Native feminist scholarship and Oyewumi's work on the Yoruba to correct Quijano's misconceived notion of gender, Lugones argues that indigenous societies did not have "gender" before European intrusion.
- **Gender did not exist as an organizing principle of power** in indigenous societies before the process of colonization.

- Lugones explains how coloniality permeates all aspects of social existence and gives rise to new social and geo-cultural identities, thereby creating gendered identities, as well as racial identities.
- From a coloniality of gender perspective, colonisation altered the indigenous sense of self and identity, as well as understandings of cosmology, and of gender relations. In so doing, modernity / coloniality implemented European understandings of gender and sex, erasing the various conceptualisations of sex and gender that pre-existed European modern / colonial gender systems.

- Other principles, such as seniority, provided a basis for power and authority, but they were quite distinct from the social construction of gender. Rather than considering gender a perennial feature of social organization, Lugones argues that gender should be understood as a colonial construct, just as race was a European imposition.
- In the process of colonization, women and men in the colony were both racialized and sexualized as gender was deployed as a powerful tool to destroy the social relations of the colonized by dividing men and women from each other and creating antagonisms between them.

- European constructions of gender introduced internal hierarchies that broke down the solidarity between men and women destroying previous ties based on complementarity and reciprocity.
- In place of harmonious collaboration, European colonizers positioned men and women as antagonists. Through sexual violence, exploitation, and systems of concubinage, the colonizers used gender to break the will of indigenous men and women, imposing new hierarchies that were institutionalized with colonialism.

- The bodies of women became the terrain on which indigenous men negotiated survival under new colonial conditions.
- Sacrificing indigenous women to the lust of the conquerors, perversely, became the only means of cultural survival.
- Lugones labels this **systemic sexual violence the dark side of modern/colonial gender system.**

# Criticism

- Julieta Paredes (2008) advances a critique of Maria Lugones's concept of the coloniality of gender, suggesting that Lugones's analysis misses the centrality of gender to patriarchal indigenous societies prior to European colonization.

# Toward a Decolonial Feminism

- Lugones carries her analysis a step further in her 2010 essay, “Toward Decolonial Feminism,” claiming that the gender system imposed by European colonizers on the colonized differed significantly from the gender system the conquistadors imposed on European women living in the colony.
- The multifaceted gender system imposed in the colony subordinated European women but dehumanized indigenous, African slave, and poor mestizo men and women. Accepting the central tenet of coloniality—that the separation of the human from the nonhuman was concomitant to colonization - Lugones suggests that the racialization of nonEuropeans as beasts of burden had critical consequences for the development of complex sex and gender systems.

- The hierarchical dichotomies that distinguished the civilized human from the natural primitive and culture from nature structured not only the relations between colonizer and colonized, it also legitimated a hierarchy that elevated European men over European women. The human itself was bifurcated: as creatures closer to nature, emotional rather than rational, bound to the animal function of reproduction, European women were lower than men in the great Chain of Being, yet they were still human, marked by culture.

**Great Chain of Being**, also called **Chain of Being**, conception of the nature of the universe that had a pervasive influence on Western thought, particularly through the ancient Greek Neoplatonists and derivative philosophies during the European Renaissance and the 17th and early 18th centuries.

Outside of chain: Nothingness/chaos



## God

Cherubs

Archangels, Angels

Star controllers of  
Destiny

Moon

King

Church

Princes

Nobles

Man

Lion

Other Animals

Oak and Rose

Other Plants

Gold

Other Minerals

- Civilized gender involved a hierarchy that subordinated European women to European men, but still marked a gulf between colonizers and colonized.
- As savages, the colonized manifested biological difference (sex), but they lacked a gender system. Egalitarian relations between indigenous men and women were taken by the Europeans as evidence of barbarity.

- According to Lugones, then, gender hierarchy marks the civilized status of European women and men; its absence defines the nonhuman, racialized, naturalized non-Europeans, who are sexed but genderless.
- Whether cast as hypersexualized animals or beasts of burden, indigenous peoples and enslaved peoples were imagined to be a threat to the European gender order. As subhuman beings, the colonized were fit for breeding, brutal labor, exploitation, and / or massacre (Lugones 2010, 206).

- The coloniality of gender makes clear that gender grants civilized status only to those men and women who inhabit the domain of the human; those who lack gender are subject to gross exploitation or outright genocide.
- Thus Lugones's theorization of the coloniality of gender as dehumanizing practice that survives colonization helps make sense of contemporary issues such as feminicide, trafficking, and increased violence against non-European women.

# Reception

- In Latin America and the Caribbean, Lugones's analysis of the colonality of gender has had a mixed reception.
- Her work has opened the feminist archive to decolonial thinking and produced a respectable group of followers.
- Yet, her specific claims about the colonality of gender are controversial among mainstream feminists, indigenous feminists, and feminist scholars working on colonization and decolonization within other theoretical frameworks (Mendoza 2014).

- Some critiques question the validity of the ethnographic work that Lugones uses to support her arguments. Argentinean anthropologist Rita Laura Segato (2001), for example, draws upon her own research on the Yoruba in Latin America to question Oyewumi's claim that gender was non-existent among the Yoruba.
- Although she acknowledges that the gender system of the Yoruba is complex and different from European gender and that their form of patriarchy was in many ways less intensive than the European version, Segato provides ample evidence that gender existed as an oppressive status differentiation among the Yoruba.

- Segato suggests that low intensity patriarchies became more hierarchical when subjected to the logic of gender imposed under colonization—with devastating consequences for Indigenous women.
- As public and private spheres were separated and gendered, Indigenous women were domesticated and privatized, losing the power they once held in the community.
- Although Indigenous men retained some communal authority, they were humiliated and symbolically emasculated by the depredations of colonization. Forced to engage the European logic of gender, indigenous men returned to their communities supplementing the old lexicon of power with new hierarchical codes (Segato 2011).

- [Raewyn Connell](#) explains that that the pre-colonial conceptions of gender are complex and structured differently from European conceptions. However, gendered violence played a formative role in the shaping of colonial societies, and subsequently flourished post-colonisation through the coloniality of gender.

- In her own words:
- “Colonization itself was a gendered act, carried out by imperial workforces, overwhelmingly men, drawn from masculinized occupations such as soldiering and long-distance trade. The rape of women of colonized societies was a normal part of conquest. The colonial state was built as a power structure operated by men, based on continuing force. Brutality was built in to colonial societies”
- (Connell, 2014).

- From the brutality of colonisation to the gendered and racial identities of Native and Indigenous women in contemporary post-colonial societies, María Lugones leads the call for decolonial feminism, and argues for a review of modernity / coloniality from a consciousness of race, gender, and sexuality.
- Decolonial feminism, like postcolonial feminism, forms part of the third wave of feminism and provides a structure for understanding and constructing identity for non-Western women, particularly Indigenous and other women of colour.
- Decolonial feminism deconstructs Western gender concepts that have become normalised, and seeks to recover indigenous worldviews of gender and incorporate them into feminist discourse. Feminists working within this frame are a community of mainly Native and indigenous women scholars constructing a new feminist geopolitics of knowledge.

