

A Decolonial Critique of Feminist Epistemology Critique¹

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Abstract: *This essay makes explicit the theoretical production of anti-racist and decolonial feminism as part of the bets to advance in a counter-hegemonic epistemology attentive to Eurocentrism, racism, and coloniality, not only in the production of knowledge in the social and human sciences in general, but concretely within feminist theorizing. The analysis starts by recognizing the previous contributions that nourish the production of theory of decolonial feminism, showing how it radicalizes and doubles the bet in its critique of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that support the most accepted and popularized truths as the “women’s point of view”. By means of concrete examples, the contribution shows the type of errors incurred, the operations through which the categories, methodology, and points of view previously criticized are taken up again, without any intention of abandoning them or looking for alternatives to solve the problem.*

In this intervention I intend, from my concrete experience as a decolonial anti-racist feminist theorist, in active opposition to the *modern colonial gender system* (Lugones 2008) and heterosexuality as a political regime (Wittig 2006 [1980]), to advance the stakes of decolonial feminism and its epistemological contributions.

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2 Translated from Spanish by Julia Roth.

First of all, I must say that for me, decolonial feminism is first and foremost an epistemic challenge. It is a movement in full growth and maturation “that proclaims itself revisionist of the theory and political proposal of feminism given what it considers its Western, White and bourgeois bias” (Espinosa 2013a). From here, a critique is made of previous feminist epistemologies observing the premises sustaining the great truths that would explain the reason for oppression based on the gender system. Decolonial feminists retrieve the criticisms that have been made of classical feminist thought from the thought produced by marginal and subaltern voices of women and feminism. We begin by recognizing that this classical feminist thought has been produced by a specific group of women, those who have enjoyed epistemic privilege thanks to their class and racial origins. Decolonial feminism elaborates a genealogy of the thinking produced from the margins by feminists, women, lesbians, and racialized people in general; and dialogues with the knowledge generated by intellectuals and activists committed to dismantling the matrix of multiple oppression by assuming a non-Eurocentric point of view.

In agreement with Aníbal Quijano's affirmation that we have reached the moment of an epistemic revolution, I am convinced that this double bet made by decolonial feminism to 1) revise the theoretical-conceptual scaffolding produced by White bourgeois Western feminism, while 2) advancing in the production of new interpretations that explain the performance of power from positions that assume a subaltern point of view, constitutes a fundamental contribution to the production of new epistemologies and conceptual theoretical frameworks that confront the scaffolding of hegemonic truth production imposed by Europe, and later by the United States, by force from the very moment of the conquest and colonization of America. If we agree that oppression is grounded in a system of knowledge and production of the lifeworld, a system of social classification, within which the dominant categories of oppression (gender, race, class) have emerged, a system instituted through the colonizing enterprise, and with imperial reason at its service, the time has come for a broad epistemic disobedience that breaks down the framework of compression of the world as it has been produced and imposed by Western modernity. To discover and abandon *autoethnography* (Pratt 1997) and move, once and for all, to produce and make visible in a broad way our own interpretation of the world, as a priority task for the processes of decolonization. It is a task that must be accompanied by processes of recovery of the traditions of knowledge that have resisted the onslaught of coloniality in Abya Yala, as well as those

that from other geographies and from critical positions have contributed to the production of epistemological fractures.

A good example of what I am talking about is how the production of knowledge of decolonial feminism itself embraces the recognition of the knowledge produced by previous counter-hegemonic feminist epistemologies and helps perpetuate their legacy. Decolonial feminist thought recognizes that it is related to the theoretical tradition initiated by Black feminism, feminism of color, and Third World feminism in the United States, and how it helped us think in terms of interweaving forms of oppression (of class, race, gender, sexuality). At the same time, it proposes to recover the critical legacy of afrodescendant and indigenous women and feminists from Latin America who have raised the problem of their own invisibility within their movements and within feminism itself. This prompted an effort to revise their role and importance in the realization and resistance of their communities.

The group also draws on the critical revision of feminism's subject-essentialism and identity politics that began to emerge from lesbian activist writers who stem from color feminism that continues today in an alternative movement to the widespread postulates of post-structuralist feminism and White queer theory. In the same vein, it recovers the legacy of key authors of post-colonial feminism with its critique of epistemic violence, the possibility of a *strategic essentialism* (Spivak 1998 [1988]), the call for a North-South feminist solidarity and the critique of the colonialism of knowledge production of feminist academia based in the North (Mohanty 2008b [2003]). It also includes several of the criticisms of the Latin American autonomous feminist current, of which several of us have been part, incorporating a denunciation of the ideological and economic dependence introduced by developmentalist policies in Third World countries, as well as the process of institutionalization and technocratization of social movements that imposes a global agenda of rights that serves neocolonial interests.

Finally, it has been key for this group to come across the prolific production of the Latin Americanist critical current that is today revisited, and with new vigor, through what has been called the *de(s)colonial turn*, from where an analysis of Western modernity as a product of the process of conquest and colonization of America and its implications for the people of the colonized communities [pueblos colonizados] is carried out.

To continue, I would like to advance some aspects of the issues that anti-racist and decolonial feminist theory contributes to the development of *another epistemology* in Abya Yala.

A first effect of developed thinking by decolonial and anti-racist feminists is to radicalize the critique of universalism in the production of theory. Anti-racist decolonial feminists, continuing the legacy begun by Black feminists, feminists of color, and afrodescendant feminists in Latin America, show with their critique of classical theory how these theories do not serve to interpret the reality and oppression of racialized women with origins in colonized territories. While feminist epistemology, with authors such as Evelyn Fox Keller, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, just to name a few, has been concerned with analyzing the pretense of objectivity and universality, as well as the androcentrism in the sciences that ended up excluding and hiding the “point of view of women” in the process of knowledge production, the truth is that this critique has shown its limits in its inability to effectively articulate a program of decolonization and disuniversalization of the women subject of feminism. Their contributions to a critique of the scientific method focused almost exclusively on analyzing how the androcentric system of the sciences contributed to silencing the “women” subject – thus thinking universally –, removing it from the production of scientific knowledge.

Although several feminist epistemologists incorporate connections to the debates opened up by Black feminists and feminists of color, this has not led to the dismantling of the basic premises of hegemonic feminist theorizing of gender-based oppression as the dominant category fundamental to explaining women's subordination. While in some analyses, feminist epistemologists acknowledge the effects of racism and colonization on the lives of non-White women, and while several come to recognize the need for an intertwined analysis of race/class/gender/(hetero)sexuality, their overarching theory remains intact.

The classical feminist episteme produced by *White bourgeois* women settled in central countries failed to recognize how its practice reproduced the very problems it criticized about the sciences' way of producing knowledge. While criticizing androcentric universalism, it produced the category of gender and applied it universally to every society and every culture, without even accounting for the way in which the gender system is a construct to explain the oppression of women in modern Western societies and would, therefore, be substantive to this context. White feminist theories and critiques end up producing concepts and explanations oblivious to the historical performance of racism and coloniality as important factors in the oppression of most women while at the same time acknowledging their importance. This problem can be seen in formulations such as the following:

The scientist [male or female] is a subject traversed by determinations from which it is not possible to detach oneself, which must be recognized, and which are linked to a broader social system. Among these determinations, feminists will say, is 'gender' (i.e., the interpretation that each social group makes of sexual differences, the social roles attributed on the basis of this gender, and the relationships culturally established between them). And the challenge is to demonstrate how in the product of the work of this community, a product that has passed the inter-subjective controls that would ensure its neutrality, sexism is installed as a very strong bias. (Maffia 2007:13)³

While I would agree with the author's analysis of how the subject producer of scientific knowledge would be "traversed by determinations from which it is not possible to detach oneself" – which would explain why scientific knowledge is not objective –, she then goes on to point out how "feminists" would show that "gender" is one of these determinations. From an anti-racist and decolonial feminist point of view, we can observe and expose the following issue: On the one hand, gender, as pointed out before, would seem to operate as an independent category inherent to women's issues and, therefore, proper to feminist analysis: The feminist critique of epistemology has focused on how belonging to a particular gender affects the production of knowledge and how sexism constitutes a bias. But, if we have already been alerted for some decades to the way in which gender never operates separately. Moreover, if we are attentive to proposals such as that of María Lugones⁴ that this category would not adequately explain the way in which the "women" of non-European peoples

3 Translator's note: All quotes from Maffia 2007; Lugones 2012, Espinosa 2012, 2013b and Stimpson 1998 were originally in Spanish. All the translations from Spanish into English are my own.

4 María Lugones proposes that "the category of gender corresponds only to the human, that is, to beings of reason whose origin is White European [...] The idea of strength and greater capacity for male reason and the fragility of women could not be applied to non-European peoples, since these people were all equally devoid of reasoning, sublime beauty, and fragility" (Espinosa 2012: 10). "Necessarily, Indians and Blacks could not be men and women, but beings without gender. As beasts they were conceived as sexually dimorphic or ambiguous, sexually aberrant and uncontrolled, capable of any task and suffering, without knowledge, on the side of evil in the dichotomy of good and evil, ridden by the devil. As beasts, they were treated as totally sexually accessible by man and sexually dangerous to woman. 'Woman' then points to bourgeois Europeans, reproducers of race and capital" (Lugones 2012: 130).

have been subjected, we should be willing to accept the inadequacy of a universalist use of the category of gender (the dichotomous division of the world into “women” and “men”) or at least always (and not on certain occasions) stick to using it in a way that is unstable and interdependent on other categories such as race, class, and geopolitical location: How does this make the analysis so complex that formulations such as Maffia would no longer be possible?

On the other hand, I am interested in showing aspects of the operation that sustains analytical formulations, such as those illustrated in this paragraph, and that is so common in the analyses to which we are accustomed by epistemologists and Eurocentric feminist theorists. I refer to the way in which feminist researchers and theorists, while criticizing modern scientific thought for hiding its sexist bias, hide their own privileged place of ascription given their class and racial ancestry. Even widely recognized epistemologists, such as Sandra Harding, point out:

The best feminist analysis [...] insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of research. That is, the class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint (1987: 25).

However, we continue to encounter an epistemological practice that conveniently insists on erasing the privileged place of enunciation of the producers of knowledge about women.

Thus, in the quoted paragraph, Maffia begins by saying that “[...] The scientist (male or female) is a subject traversed by determinations from which it is not possible to detach oneself”. The truth is that neither she nor the vast majority of the most eminent feminist epistemologists apply to themselves the critique that they so aptly make of men in the sciences. If they had done so, they would most likely have had to admit their particular and self-interested point of view. The problem has been that they, after admitting that there are important differences between women, immediately return to reassert this much-needed unity of gender, which such differences would deny.

Given that the bias they intend to show is that of “gender” (a category thought of, in addition to being dominant and independent, as binary and dichotomous), their critique ends up producing the very thing they criticized before: According to this analysis, the scientific or knowledge-producing com-

munity is separated into two internally homogeneous blocks: that of men and that of women. Each would be producing a particular point of view from the gender position they embody. Since for White-bourgeois feminist theorists, the superior and relevant category is that of gender, they end up assuming that their point of view is the one that represents “women” as a whole. In doing so, they believe themselves exempt from applying to themselves the criticism they have already made of those who, from their point of view, represent a position of power. Relying solely on the analysis of gender as an analytical category that would allow them to explain the subordination of (all) women, feminist theorists have failed to observe and be critical of their own privilege within the group of women and of the race and class bias of the theory they construct. This would be a good example of what I have called *gender racism* [racismo del género]:

An impossibility of feminist theory to recognize its privileged place of enunciation within the modern colonial gender matrix, an impossibility that stems from its refusal to question and abandon this place at the cost of “sacrificing”, diligently invisibilizing, the point of view of “women” on a lower scale of privilege, that is, the racialized impoverished within a heterosexual order (Espinosa 2013b).

The effects of this treatment have been productive of a universalist feminism that claims to establish general knowledge for all women, justifying itself on behalf of all of them; despite simultaneously proclaiming the need for a new epistemology that legitimizes a situated knowledge based on concrete experience. In her work “Nossos feminismos revisatados” [Our Feminisms Revisited], Luiza Bairros explains how the concept of experience, as proposed by feminist epistemology, which was meant to oppose the classical scientific method based on the pretension of objectivity, ended up opening the door to “generalization”, that is, to another form of construction of universalisms, given that privileges of race and class allow greater access to the field of ideas to a certain group of women whose experiences and voices end up becoming the parameter of the rest (1995: 459). For Bairros, the point of view of “women” can never be thought of or treated from the presumption of “a unique identity, since the experience of being a woman is socially and historically determined” (1995: 461). The interesting thing is that the more this truth has been declared, the more we come up against the impossibility of feminist theory to overcome this problem.

Thus, the important debate opened by White feminist epistemologists, in spite of their unquestionable contributions, has not been able to solve the problems evidenced by Black, lesbian, and colored feminists, who understood early on the profound interconnection between structures of domination, in particular the relationship between the androcentric gaze, racism, modernity, and coloniality. This misunderstanding prevented and still does not allow feminism, in problematizing the production of knowledge and the criteria to which this production is subjected, to account for the coloniality that permeates all its (own) work.

Detached from the above, there is another particularly important issue that decolonial feminism contributes, among several others: It is about evidencing how lightly and dishonestly hegemonic feminist theorizing treats “differences” among women so that they can always ultimately reconstitute the universality of the premises of a common fundamental oppression and, thus, the idea of women’s unity as a particular group beyond the so-named differences. To the extent that afrodescendant, indigenous and non-White feminists in general

we have been deepening 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; to the extent that we have been approaching a radicalization of our malaise by becoming aware of the way in which these hierarchies are perpetuated even through the movements that have been presented and we have assumed as liberating such as feminism (Espinosa 2012).

We are coming up against fierce resistance on the part of hegemonic feminism against dismantling the mental structures and partialized explanations of this analytical framework that effectively conceals the way in which the web of power operate, thanks to a parallel and homogeneous performance of what are considered dominant categories, but also thanks to the way in which each category is traversed by and depends indistinctly on the others so that relations of power and domination are equally sustained within each of the groups that are considered to be specifically and homogeneously suffering equally from a given oppression – for example, the group of women or racialized people –, or within each group that is considered homogeneously in a position of privilege – for example that of males, or that of White people. When this line of inquiry ends up uncovering the hidden locus of privilege, maintained by a group of women at the expense of the classical interpretation of a sex-gender system,

among them many producers of such theories, we can understand that great representatives of feminist theory make great efforts to ignore, minimize and, even more, give a specific treatment to the analyses and contributions of Black, indigenous and feminism of color. With the latter, while making a proclamation of good intentions, it manages to neutralize its effects on the whole of the classical feminist conceptual framework.

Let me illustrate this point with another quotation. This time, my example is Catharine Stimpson's treatment of the question of differences among women in her classic text “¿Qué estoy haciendo cuando hago estudios de mujeres en los noventa?” [What Am I Doing When I Do Women's Studies in the 1990s?] Once she has already expressed that at least six groups of problems have entered women's and gender studies, and in the number six (!!!) she recognized the problem of “deep differences between women themselves”, which feminist theory will have to answer, she will express:

However, I believe that we can also inhabit the problem of studying differences among women in such a way that our experiences of social thought and practice can serve to study differences among all people. In fact, I have called the use of women's studies as a means of *apprehending and living* with human differences “herterogeneity” (ellaterogeneidad) Recognizing diversity and *abhorring the error that erases* it are necessities in and of themselves (Stimpson 1998: 138; italics mine).

The paragraph illustrates the problem we are facing. Much of the feminist theorizing that has made the effort to listen to the critiques of racialized feminists, in addition to the errors we have discussed above, fall into another major trap: diminish the relevance of these differences between women once they have been admitted. This lessened importance consists, on the one hand, in giving a lesser status of conflictivity and relevance to what they consider “other” categories of women's oppression. The problem is twofold, for they continue to think in a compartmentalized way and independently of the oppressions of gender, race, and class, as if race and class were of a different order and acted in parallel, affecting a group of women only in a specific and summative way. In her view, “women” continue to constitute a unity of meaning, beyond the multiplicity of oppression that differentiates them. From their reflexion, we can see how the relevant oppression for feminist studies continues to be that of “oppressing women for being women”, a primary oppression that does not allow for any discussion, that makes race and class appear as minor secondary

oppressions without any effect on the way we think of the primary oppression. Given this, it is possible to incorporate the study of these variables of difference within the study of women, as particular categories to be taken into account, but they do not define or have general implications for feminist theory as a whole. The treatment of race and class as minor differences among women, that is, among a specific group, tends to naturalize these categories as if they were not produced by structural systems of domination that have ended up defining and organizing the world and social life within which women find themselves. That is why the challenge is not to achieve an idyllic world of recognition and incorporation of difference, since they express systems of domination and exploitation that place women in antagonistic spaces of social life, making their interests irreconcilable.

The epistemological shift, in full transition, that feminists coming from critical and counter-hegemonic trajectories and positions in Abya Yala are experiencing, places us before the challenge of contributing to the development of an analysis of coloniality and racism – no longer as a phenomenon but as an episteme intrinsic to modernity and its liberating projects – and its relationship with the coloniality of gender. The challenge is to abandon and actively question this pretense of unity in oppression among women. To this end, we are willing to feed, articulate, and commit ourselves to the autonomous movements that in the continent carry out processes of decolonization and restitution of lost genealogies that point to the possibility of other significations of interpretation of life and collective life.

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