

Not Your Papa's Wynter:

Women of Color Contributions Toward Decolonial Futures

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Abstract:

This chapter focuses on two important contentions in the work of/on Wynter: First, there is a productive engagement with her understandings of feminism, gender and patriarchy as it pertains to the overrepresentation of Man and in its relation to women of color and decolonial feminisms. Second, the authors examine her articulation of the studia humanitatis and by extension literature as a critical site for radical transformation and liberatory imagination. This text tracks how Wynter's critique of mainstream liberal feminism has provided a language for dismissing the concerns articulated by and work produced by women of color, while also highlighting the deep resonances between the substantive contributions of women of color and decolonial feminisms and Wynter's overall project. The chapter illustrates how within the heterogeneous body of activism, political thought and poetics produced by women of color and decolonial feminisms there has been a long history of taking back the "Word," in a way that seeks to create new value systems and build relations anew beyond those established through colonization and slavery and beyond those that serve to bolster "Man."

Keywords:

Women of color, decolonial feminism, racialized gender, patriarchy and masculinity, decolonial imaginary, relationality, Caribbean philosophy, feminist philosophy, decolonial poetics.

*These women poets have scrutinized their lives,
wrestled with their different inheritances of geography, of place;
with race, class, sexuality, body, nationality and belonging,
And molded it all into sources of insight and wisdom.
Among them they have lived three hundred and sixty-three years,
spanning continents, threading dreams, holding visions.*

M. Jacqui Alexander

“Remembering *This Bridge Called My Back*, Remembering Ourselves”¹

An Introduction

Sylvia Wynter’s decades long project on the creation of a new human and human sciences, which challenges and defeats the overrepresentation of Western Man as the human, is one that spans thousands of pages and has been the subject of study for Caribbean Philosophers, Postcolonial, Decolonial and feminist thinkers, to name a few. As an essayist, playwright, novelist, and critical theorist Wynter has crossed disciplinary boundaries and created new ways of mapping human and Man’s ontological narratives. We look to Wynter’s work for both its historical and transdisciplinary breadth and for the possibilities of articulating a decolonial politic grounded in the contributions of women of color feminists, activists, and writers toward the making of fully realized and complex human futures.

In this essay we aim to engage two important contentions in the work of/on Wynter: her understandings of feminism, gender and patriarchy as it pertains to the

¹ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005): 257.

overrepresentation of Man and in its relation to women of color and decolonial feminisms as well as her articulation of the *studia humanitatis* and by extension literature as a fundamental site for radical transformation and liberatory imagination. Given that we have seen firsthand how her critique of mainstream liberal feminism has provided a language to dismiss the concerns articulated and work produced by women of color, we thought it important to first detail what we find suggestive in Wynter's project. We highlight where we see resonances between the substantive contributions of women of color and decolonial feminisms and Wynter's overall project. For instance, not only have women of color feminists articulated similar and complementary critiques of mainstream liberal feminisms, but within this heterogeneous body of activism and political thought there has been a long history of taking back the "Word," specifically through a poetics and politics that seeks to create new value systems beyond those established through colonization and slavery and beyond those that serve to bolster "Man."

We argue that women of color and decolonial feminists, activists and writers have, over time, contributed greatly to the making of a communal² and decolonial politics that seeks to *bolster, strengthen, heal, and transform the relationships between those racialized* as opposed to primarily and or solely concentrating on our relationship to "Man." To that end we will underscore not only women of color and decolonial feminists' attentiveness to and political organizing around the systematic oppression of men of color but also their/our efforts to (re)value women of color's lives beyond a decontextualized "patriarchal discourse." Finally, we conclude with a reframing of

² We want to be clear here that we do not believe that all communal projects are necessarily decolonial or devoid of violent relations. We know that our communities are not perfect and that there are long standing practices that need to be revised and transformed if they are to ensure the well-being of all community members.

women of color and decolonial feminisms and practice as not only complementary to Wynter's project but more importantly necessary for, and indispensable to, the making of decolonial futures.

An Entry: On Wynter's Project

In her interview with David Allen Scott, we gain insight into the twofold nature of Wynter's decolonial humanist project. Scott summarizes the first part of this project as "the effort to track the 'codes' and 'genres through which understanding, and especially self-understanding, is constituted."³ According to Wynter each culture establishes their own Norm of what it means to be human which is then narratively described as well as mapped onto the various systems of symbolic representations. For Wynter these descriptive statements of what the human Norm is within each culture function as an a priori definition that gives rise to ways of knowing and modalities of adaptive cultural truths. As such, descriptive statements govern the social order and hierarchies within a culture, orient the behavior of individuals and groups, and form part of *the code* of symbolic life and death.⁴ In other words, these codes give us an insight into which bodies have power and which bodies should and do matter within a given culture. However, modernity/coloniality established one and only one definition of the human that was supposed to represent all of humanity, that is, modernity/coloniality created "Man" which overrepresents himself as the human and dysselects all other living beings (the non-

³ David Scott, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Small Axe* 8 (September 2000): 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 269-270, 328.

bourgeoisie, non-Western, racialized, non-heterosexual, etc.) from possible entrance into humanity.⁵

Since for Wynter colonizers were unable to conceive of the possibility that the human could be anything other than their conception of it, she argues that other ways of being human were fundamentally viewed as a lack.⁶ In her work she traces the Western colonial re-description of the human in its transition towards a pseudo-secularized and ultimately bioeconomic form, and tells us that these redefinitions gain legitimacy with the introduction of and in relation to physiognomically distinct Others, whose bodies were ideologically transformed into a departure, a deviation, and a degeneration away from the idealized human norm. Wynter's decolonial project and central problematic thus departs from what she defines as the overrepresentation of Western "Man" as the Human, and the havoc that this overrepresentation has wreaked onto the world. As a result, she argues that the overrepresentation of "Man" is *the problem* of our time. Moreover, all of our contemporary struggles, such as 'race', class, 'gender,' sexuality, the uneven distribution of wealth, global warming, etc., have their roots in/are differing aspects of, the struggle against the overrepresentation of 'Man' as the human.⁷

Not only are these categories part and parcel of the human/subhuman distinction that is essential to maintaining the overrepresentation's existence but all knowledge, power, and economic systems have been organized in a way that continues to represent

⁵ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 282. For instance, if being human meant *having reason*, then other modes of being human were viewed as *lacking reason*. Indeed, other modes of being human were also represented as lacking control over one's passions, lacking culture, order and civilization, lacking language and the list goes on.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

the existential interests of its benefactors, namely Europeans, Euroamericans and their descendants.⁸ Wynter explains that,

the discursive and institutional re-elaboration of the central overrepresentation [...] enables the interests, reality, and well-being of the empirical human world to continue to be imperatively subordinated to those of the now globally hegemonic ethnoclass world of “Man.”⁹

Her concern is that without a recognition and an unsettling of the ethno-racial and class specificity of this conception of the human, the bodies of those that fall outside of that description will continue to be sacrificed on its behalf.¹⁰ At the forefront of these sacrificial liminal bodies are those that have been racialized and dehumanized in the colonial encounter and its “post-colonial” legacies.

Indeed, the severe global contraction of what it means to be human and the doing away with alternative models for and of humanity, leads Wynter to claim that

the struggle of the new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e. Western bourgeois)

⁸ Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" In *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole B. Davies and Elaine S. Fido. (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 363. Notably, white supremacists often deploy slogans that demand the securing of a “future for white children” (<https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/14-words>).

⁹ Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 262.

¹⁰ And here we would add the heterosexist, gendered, and ableist specificity of this conception of the human.

conception of the human...and that of securing the well-being of the human species itself/ourselves.¹¹

Thus, she calls for a new brand of Humanism, one that would aspire to the wellbeing of humanity writ large.

Suggestive for us is the large percentage of her phenomenal oeuvre spent tracking the colonial processes and epistemic maneuvers through which the codes used to determine the “human/non-human” distinction have been produced and instituted. Namely she highlights the relationship between the instituting of these codes and cognitive brain function by tracking the opiate release one affectively receives for realizing oneself within a positively marked code that then shapes how one gets to experience one’s reality.¹² As Scott points out, “it is not the body's materiality itself that interests her so much as the ideological hegemonies - race principal among them¹³ - that come to be imprinted on it in such a way that we live their inscriptions as the historically varying modes of our truth.”¹⁴ From this understanding of the ways in which the codes become imprinted on one’s body, and the power they have to alter one’s self-understanding including a sense of one’s value, she arrives at the more difficult,

¹¹ Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 260.

¹² What Wynter highlights for us is the power that these codes have in enticing our complicity with oppressive/ing regimes. Her work reorients us to consider the privileges/benefits we gain when we are in a position to align ourselves with these codes, and the psychological harm we experience when we cannot. This “opiate” release is tied to how we understand our worth in relation to fitting the code, striving to achieve success in the code’s terms, and or the pleasure gained from pointing out how others fail within the parameters of the code. Here we see the potential of the literary to undermine this power to entice complicity by rewriting or rather introducing alternative codes against and through which we can measure our worth.

¹³ We would add that the ideological hegemonies that do this work are not reducible to race alone. Many women of color and decolonial feminists contend that there are simultaneously operative and mutually constitutive hegemonies that work together to dysselect some from emerging as wholly human and that one is not more foundational than the other.

¹⁴ David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism,” 121.

transformative, and hopeful component of her decolonial project. The second prominent line of her thinking includes a taking back of the “Word” in order to make possible new codes, in particular to form a new definition of the human that centers ontological sovereignty and being human as praxis. We understand her call for a new humanism as a politics of possibility that deeply resonates with the work of decolonial and women of color feminists, in that it opens up all forms of being human to revision and re(vision)ing.

What is most suggestive about this second prong of her work, and significantly in line with the work of women of color feminists, activists and writers, is that the redefining of the Human requires a concomitant redefining of *all subsequent relations*. If taking back the “Word” is part of a “world-making” process, then her project includes the possibility of making a world where those relegated to the liminal get to (re)emerge as complexly whole and human. For us, one of the goals of decolonial feminist is to make a world that does not reproduce or aspire to the oppressive relation that “Man”¹⁵ has to others, but one that re-writes and re-imagines relations beyond Western Man and moves us away from the violences produced by and in relation to his overrepresentation. The draw for us, which is in line with the politics of women of color and decolonial feminists, activists, and writers, is the potential to think and create a new world that ultimately seeks to *thicken, strengthen, rebuild or build anew* all types of relations, including the *relationships between those racialized*,¹⁶ from “outside” the epistemic universe that has

¹⁵ This aspirational phenomenon is what Xhercis Méndez refers to as the “wages of gender.” See Xhercis Méndez, “Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminist Methodology: Revisiting the Race/Gender Matrix,” *Trans-Scripts* 5, (2015): 41-59 and *Theories of the Flesh: U.S. Latina and Latin American Feminisms of Resistance*, ed. Jose Medina, Mariana Ortega, and Andrea Pitts. (New York: Oxford University Press, Forthcoming).
https://www.academia.edu/35124483/Decolonial_Feminist_Movidas_A_Caribe%C3%B1a_Re_thinks_Privilege_the_Wages_of_Gender_and_Building_Complex_Coalitions_11_12_17_.

¹⁶ Notably racial justice work does not primarily center the relationship between those racialized, it is more oft than not focused on the oppressive forces and structures being enacted from outside of the

given Western “Man” its power, ontological weight and value.

Critiques of Feminism and the Persistence of Patriarchy

“Sylvia Wynter is my favorite kind of feminist.”

However, in the effort to think outside of or rather beyond the epistemic universe that makes “Man” possible, Wynter develops a critique of feminism that in many ways serves to undermine the positive contributions of women of color and decolonial feminists, activists and writers. Our concern is that her comments on feminism have provided a language for dismissing women of color feminisms and their poetics as potentially “Eurocentric” and/or “Western” and on the whole not worthy of serious engagement. For instance, the above is a quote from a well-established academic of color who made a point of sharing that Wynter was his favorite kind of feminist precisely because she has gone on record as saying she is not a feminist. And while we do not need Wynter to identify as a feminist, this is an example of how her work/words are used to articulate a dismissal of women of color and decolonial feminisms as a whole. As a result, it has become necessary to identify the imbrication and resonances between our political projects, as well as the places where we part ways. We want to argue that not only are these political projects far from mutually exclusive, but women of color have made substantive contributions towards making real her decolonial aspirations for a new kind of humanity.

“community.” We are clear that transformation demands that we attend to both types of relationships, not just one or the other.

What seems to have complicated Wynter's relationship to feminism is her own political desire to locate new models for the human informed by "native" standpoints.¹⁷ In other words, Wynter underscores models of humanity that exists outside of and beyond European and Euroamerican ontology and epistemology. For instance, in the afterword to *Out of the Kumbla* (1990), an edited collection of Caribbean women writers compiled in an effort to define and inaugurate a Caribbean *feminist* critical literary tradition,¹⁸ it is this political orientation that leads Wynter to argue for a shift away from feminism's "patriarchal discourse" towards a focus on the human/non-human distinction.

In the afterword, Wynter uses Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as a metaphor and symbolic representation to suggest that relations of subordination and domination are no longer "patriarchal," because Miranda has power over Caliban and not vice versa. She argues that they have instead been replaced by a secular racism and process of racialization that are monarchical (in that Miranda inherits power over Caliban through her proximity to her father/king Prospero and through her being canonized as the only rational object of desire for all males). Notably, this is one example where women of color and some decolonial feminists might part ways with Wynter, because while it is the case that Caliban's relationship to Miranda, specifically, is not one characterized by Patriarchy with a capital P, it is also true that this literary example does not help us better understand the relationship between Caliban and any racialized women. Women of color

¹⁷ Wynter uses the term "native" in ways that conjure up a notion of peoples who are understood as original to a land or space and include non-Western cultural practices, rituals and ways of being, as well as to peoples that have in their encounter with colonizers been labeled as such as a result. For a discussion that can productively complicate Wynter's usage of the category "native" see Joanne Barker's edited volume, *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Natasha Barnes, "Reluctant Matriarch: Sylvia Wynter and the Problematics of Caribbean Feminism," *Small Axe*, no. 5, (March 1999): 34-47.

are precisely the bodies that are absented from the play.¹⁹ If for women of color and decolonial feminists one key area of reflection and (re)visioning has been the complicated relationship *between* racialized men and women, and not only in heterosexist terms, then we cannot make sense of this relation using *The Tempest* as an example because women of color are completely invisible in Shakespeare's imaginary. As a result, we cannot know from here whether or not Caliban is capable of patriarchy with a lowercase "p", because *his relationship* to racialized women is never explored beyond filial memory.

And while we understand the liberatory impulse behind her effort to rethink patriarchy from a complicated history of colonization, we would argue that there are several reasons why completely excluding an analysis of patriarchy by women of color or taking "patriarchal discourse" off the table as an operative system that negatively impacts the lives of women of color and our communities does not (yet) make political sense. First and foremost, Europe did not corner the market on patriarchy. On the one hand, there have been non-western cultural systems that have systematically devalued anatomical females, as well as non-normative sexualities, outside of a Western epistemic cultural frame. While patriarchy is not reducible to these particular aspects they do give us insight into the larger point.

For example, we see evidence of this in the work of lesbian Aymara feminist Julieta Paredes who describes the *entronque patriarchal* as the historical convergence and interlocking of western and indigenous patriarchies that have negatively impacted the

¹⁹ For more on the absence of women of color in *The Tempest* see, Abena Busia's "Silencing Sycorax: on African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female" *Cultural Critique* 14 (Winter 1989-1990): 81-104 and Irene Lara's "Beyond Caliban's Curses: The Decolonial Feminist Literacy of Sycorax." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 9/1 (2007): 80-98.

lives of her communities' grandmothers and great grandmothers.²⁰ For Paredes, decolonizing gender means recognizing the extent to which unjust relationships between community members existed long before colonization and not all of it is simply an inheritance of the colonial encounter. Paredes' claim is important because it challenges the implicit assumption that all "traditional" or "non-western" models for being human, are necessarily resistant or decolonial. It also challenges the assumption that any and all demands to revise practices that structurally, culturally, and systemically devalue some members of the community merely for existing, such as females, "queer" and gender non-conforming community members, is somehow necessarily Eurocentric.

The position that all "feminism" is Western or Eurocentric, is a position that on the one hand refuses to acknowledge and take accountability for the harmful relations of power that pre-existed colonization, and on the other hand refuses to recognize the violent modes and understandings of gender that were universalized through colonial relations.²¹ So even if you are of the mind that gender is colonial imposition, as Lugones has argued, then we still cannot take "patriarchal discourse" off the table because that is exactly what racialized communities have imbibed through the colonality of gender, power, knowledge and being. In other words, we have to contend with the consequences

²⁰ See Julieta Paredes, *Hilando Fino: Desde el feminismo comunitario*. (La Paz: Comunidad Mujeres Creando Comunidad, 2010).

²¹ We see this tension in Wynter's account of female circumcision. While we can appreciate the significance of tracking some of the more troubling assumptions embedded in Alice Walker's critique of the practice, we are also of the mind that not all critiques of the practice stem from a colonial re-reading of them. We believe there should be some room left for those whose lives are directly impacted by practices, "traditional" or otherwise, to critique them. This follows from the recognition that are our communities and practices are not perfect and that there are in fact precolonial practices that can be and have also been harmful. Sylvia Wynter, "Genital Mutilation or Symbolic Birth--Female Circumcision, Lost Origins, and the Aculturalism of Feminist/Western Thought," *Case W. Res. L. Rev.* 47 (1996): 501.

of those legacies and the negative impact they have had on our communities and relations.

Second, if the argument for shifting the focus away from “patriarchal discourse” or a critique of patriarchy is based on the idea that men of color have been systematically denied access to it through violent historical processes that effectively “feminized” them, such as enslavement and colonialism, then we would like to take a moment to think through this claim from a decolonial feminist perspective. For the purposes of brevity, we will focus on the particular articulation of this trope by Nelson Maldonado-Torres. Notably, he is not by any means the only one to frame colonization/coloniality as a process that “feminized” men of color, but rather the product of a long history and network of scholarship that has produced and naturalized this claim. In fact, one of the authors here recalls listening to a well-established historian who during the question and answer period of a panel at the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD) stated that, “it has been proven that men of color were feminized during slavery and colonization.” Taking a cue from Michel Rolph-Trouillot, and his brilliant text on the making of “history,” it is not clear to us what would constitute such a proof. In fact, he tells us that what comes to be understood as “official history,” or in this case what has been “proven,” more often than not requires that a history of conflicts over such narratives/claims be obscured.²²

Before returning to some of the ways in which coloniality/colonization is understood as a process that “feminizes” men of color, we want to point out that we are engaging Nelson Maldonado-Torres’ work here for two reasons. First, we admire him,

²² See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

his work, and his deep commitment to decolonial transformation. We are aware that there is a politics to who one cites. Rather than keep those without a commitment to decolonial transformation in circulation, we believe it important to cite those for whom you want others to read. Second, he is an exception in that he is by far one of the more interpersonally committed to incorporating the thinking done by women of color feminists and engaging that work in thoughtful and meaningful ways. It is for these reasons that we think it important to name the potentially harmful readings of this trope in his work. We are particularly attuned to how such readings pose challenges to and for practices and approaches that would allow us to disrupt the coloniality in its many manifestations and move towards Wynter's hope of a new humanism.

In his article entitled, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," Maldonado Torres writes that coloniality,

can be understood as a radicalization of the non-ethics of war. This non-ethics included the practices of eliminating and slaving certain subjects e.g., indigenous and black as part of the enterprise of colonization. [...] War includes a particular treatment of sexuality and of femininity: rape. *Coloniality is an order of things that put people of color under the murderous and rapist sight of a vigilant ego. And the primary targets of rape are women. But men of color are also seen through these lenses. Men of color are feminized and become for the ego conquiro [a] fundamentally penetrable subject.*²³

²³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 247-8.

Here we draw your attention to the link between “feminization,” penetration, and a violent process of dehumanization within the description of the colonality at work. Feminization, and thus dehumanization, in this instance is coded as penetrability.²⁴ As a result, dehumanization here is (over)coded as the “humiliating” possibility of being penetrated, a condition that has been “naturalized” as permanently attached to anatomically female bodies. Indeed, it is the “naturalized” penetrability of the female that makes our bodies more susceptible to rape.

More importantly, implicit here is the notion that real “Men,” or rather human men should be impenetrable. The meanings of “Man” hinge on it, since “feminization” as symbolic “penetrability” signals the historical dehumanization of colonized males. As such “feminization” as penetrability implicitly marks a condition that racialized males must not succumb to, a condition that racialized males must reject at all costs. The rejection of “feminization,” and by extension all things “feminine,” can be coded as a resistant (perhaps even decolonial) move that at its worst serves and has served to justify all kinds of harm against women, femmes, and queer and gender nonconforming folks within our communities.²⁵

²⁴ While this is not the only way in which men of color have been cast as historically feminized, this is one modern day conception of it. Other narratives have included, 1. “Feminization” as a reduction to a permanent childlike status, a condition which was also attached to white women. 2. Within the context of the United States, the feminization of men of color has also been a reference to temperament, in the sense that African-American men have been viewed as having a predisposition for emotion rather than reason, and a particular affinity to culture, hence the reference by sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess in 1921 to “Negroes” as the “Lady Among the Races.” See Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 58. A parallel and interrelated claim is the assertion that racism “emasculates” men of color. However, that assertion entails a more thorough discussion. In the interest of being ethically engaged we will not address that assertion within the context of this chapter.

²⁵ To complicate this point further, the rejection of “feminization” can also include justifying violence against women, femmes, queer, and gender non-conforming from other communities as well. For instance, Caliban in *The Tempest*, articulates a patriarchal logic that includes sexual violence when he suggests physically overpowering Miranda in order to “people the island with little Calibans.” Our concern here is

To be fair and clear, Maldonado-Torres is attempting to illustrate the role that the “feminization of enemies” played in the symbolic codes of conquest. However, centering the symbolic codes of those colonizing can also function to negatively impact the making of a new humanity and what we subsequently name as essential projects and ingredients for de-coloniality. It is important to make a distinction between what colonizers projected onto the bodies of those they sought to colonize and what those under that gaze may have thought of themselves. Even if many of these projections have become internalized to different degrees over time, conflating the two unwittingly presupposes that there were no alternative frames of reference available to or operative among those enslaved to challenge these Eurocentric formulations of their Other-ness.

In his efforts to indict the logics of the coloniality of being, and the *longue durée* of its impact, Maldonado-Torres writes that “*lacking real authority, colonized men are permanently feminized.*”²⁶ While that may be true from the standpoint of the colonizer, where “Men” (think: White Bourgeois Heterosexual males) are the only ones empowered to occupy a position of “real authority,” we cannot know that “lacking” authority was synonymous with “being feminized” for all those enslaved or that “masculinity” was predicated on or contingent upon “having authority.” Beyond a question of intentionality, and in the case of Maldonado-Torres we do not assume this to be his intention, “feminization” in this instance assumes authority to be the “exclusive right” of males. However, this assertion can only hold true if we assume and represent “men” to be ahistorical, trans-historical, biological, and/or supracultural beings.²⁷

the tendency and seductiveness of framing a retributive violence that includes sexual assault as a form of anticolonial resistance.

²⁶ Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (March/May, 2007): 255.

²⁷ Tonya Haynes notes this in her terrific article, “Sylvia Wynter's Theory of the Human and the Crisis

More importantly, this conceptualization of what it means to be “feminized” lays the ground, again beyond a question of intentionality, for a competition between White Bourgeois Heterosexual “Men” (those who have authority) and males of color (those whose authority was “stolen”), from within the terms and perspectives of those colonizing. This framing unwittingly paves the way for a desiring of the *wages of gender*,²⁸ in this instance *patriarchy* (the effort to achieve the status of authority granted to “Man”) that then gets enacted within communities of color. In other words, this framing of men of color as “permanently feminized” functions to center the competition between White Bourgeois Heterosexual Males (“Men”) and colonized/formerly colonized males (those constituted as not “Men”), in a way that *sacrifices the relationship between racialized males and females* to the achievement of equality between “Men” and those aspiring to be recognized as “(hu)men.”

Far from deconstructing the code, and thus moving beyond the Doctrine of Man, the trope actually functions to reinstate a version of patriarchy within communities of color, while also functioning to obscure alternative co-eval non-Western and non-Eurocentric formations of power. Indeed, what we don't see, what we can't see in these accounts is whether or not those colonized males understood themselves as “feminized” or if they had alternative frames of reference from which to evaluate themselves, relations, bodies and relative worth. Notably, it is here where women of color and decolonial feminists have substantively contributed to expanding our understanding of alternatives modes of being human, in particular by expanding the scholarship on more egalitarian modes of relating and determining value.

School of Caribbean Heteromascularity Studies,” *Small Axe* 20, no. 1 49 (2016): 103.

²⁸ See Xhercis Méndez, “Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminist Methodology: Revisiting the Race/Gender Matrix.” *Trans-Scripts* 5, (2015): 41-59.

For example, by the time of Wynter's interview with David Scott (2000), where she states that "the difference between [feminists and herself] is that they would continue to see *gender* as a supracultural phenomenon, and therefore as a universal whose terms could be the same for all human groups,"²⁹ women of color had already begun the work of documenting alternative modes of being human that included more egalitarian arrangements of the social and positive valuations of racialized women and "non-normative"³⁰ sexualities and ways of being. At least fourteen years prior, Paula Gunn Allen had given us an account of the expansive role "women" played in communal governance, the sacred role two-spirit people held, and the deep value for "mothers" (a term for creators and not necessarily women who had reproduced offspring) within Indigenous communities in her book, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986).³¹

Another example is Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's book *The Invention of Women: Making An African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997), where she argues that in Yorubaland the social was primarily organized around seniority and not gender. Far from reducing gender, and by extension patriarchy, to a supracultural phenomenon Oyěwùmí tracks some of the power distortions that are enabled by this assumption. She goes on to suggest that the assumption that gender is a supracultural phenomenon has done the work of creating sexual hierarchies where there were none before.³²

²⁹ Scott, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism," 185.

³⁰ It is important to note that non-normative here is referring to what is non-normative in a western/ized universe, and not necessarily to whether these modes of being would have been considered non-normative within their own cosmologies.

³¹ See Sylvia Marcos, *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions*. Vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006).

³² Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

In addition to Oyèwùmí, the examination of alternative modes of being human has been followed up by Sylvia Marcos who examined the more fluid and egalitarian conceptions of gender, the body and the cosmos at play in the healing and ritual practices of *curanderas* in Mesoamerica (2006). Gloria Wekker's book, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese diaspora* (2006), echoes Wynter's critique of gender, and explores alternative sexual arrangements made possible through an engagement with Winti, an Afro-diasporic religion and set of ritual practices in Suriname.³³ In her article, "Transcending Dimorphism: Afro-Cuban Ritual Praxis and the Rematerialization of the Body," author Méndez troubles the way gender is deployed as cross-cultural category of analysis and explores how racialized women, as well as "queer" and gender nonconforming folks of color come to be valued and humanized through the more fluid and egalitarian arrangements of bodies and power available in Ocha (more popularly known as Afro-Cuban Santería).³⁴

For instance, Méndez tracks how spiritual seniority in Ocha constitutes an alternative mode of empowerment and valuation wherein power is determined by a combination of one's time within the practice, accumulation of specialized ritual knowledge, and the degree to which one expands the spiritual lineage.³⁵ Those who do the work to attain specialized ritual knowledge, expand the spiritual lineage, and are recognized by the community as knowledgeable are understood to be elders and given deference regardless of body-type, sexual preferences, or actual age. These ritual

³³ Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

³⁴ Xhercis Méndez, "Transcending Dimorphism: Afro-Cuban Ritual Praxis and the Rematerialization of the Body," *Power* 3, no. 3 (2003): 47-69.

³⁵ This alternative arrangement of bodies and power is further fleshed out in Xhercis Méndez, *Decolonizing Feminist Methodologies from the Dark Side*, manuscript in progress.

practices illustrate some of the ways in which power and “authority” was not the “exclusive right” of cis-men.

Thus, if we center Ocha's alternative grid of intelligibility, valuation, and power vis-à-vis spiritual seniority then we can productively challenge the feminization narrative and raise the following questions: First, if we think of dehumanization as a process that for all intents and purposes “feminized” males of color, then to what extent are we internalizing and re-inscribing the colonial gaze and logic? Second, in what ways does this kind of narrative justify a contemporary urgency to “man up” and to reclaim “Man”-hood on colonial terms? Finally, to what extent do these tropes reframe and center the relationship/competition between White Men and males of color as the collective political project of undoing Race – and now the collective political project of undoing the coloniality – while simultaneously obscuring the violence of the light side gender dynamics they (re)produce as a result?

These questions reveal how a resignation to the realm of “Man” enables an equally violent reclamation of “gender” in its most colonizing form. Beyond a question of historicizing of the world of “Man”, engaging in this trope serves to undermine Wynter’s call for a new humanism, particularly one that urges the well-being of the collective. Important for our discussion are the ways in which women of color and decolonial feminists have done and continue to do the work of nuancing under what conditions it makes sense for us to use the category of gender and an understanding of patriarchy, particularly as it pertains to racialized bodies.

Finally, the uses of “patriarchal discourse” and critiques of patriarchy by women of color and decolonial feminists have not and are not articulated in the abstract but

instead firmly grounded in our very real lived experiences with it, both from outside as well as within our communities. If the concern is the use of this particular terminology, then we are open to the idea of seeking another term for it as long as we do not lose the possibility of naming and transforming behavior, logics and modes of being that become destructive to our lives and our communities, whether chosen or inherited. We would argue that whatever concept/terminology emerges next needs to be able to account for the simultaneously operative forms of violence in our lives, such as the state-sanctioned institutions and racist structures that have Black and Brown women being imprisoned at record rates and disappeared at borders, and Indigenous women being raped and murdered with impunity, as well as the sexism, homophobia, misogyny, and assaults we face at the hands of our own communities. This sentiment is poignantly captured by the Combahee River Collective (1977), a group of Black feminist activists and scholars who wrote that,

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. *Our situation as black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race*, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. *We struggle together with black men against racism, while we also struggle with black men about sexism.*³⁶

³⁶ Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” *Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (1977), 235, (emphasis added).

Indeed, it is the need to find a way to name and talk about this double-edged sword and existence that we hear reflected in their words.

And yet, to dismiss the critique of patriarchy out of hand as “Western,” means leaving women of color bereft of tools for talking about and dealing with their very real lived experiences with patriarchy coming from both “Man” and men of color. Any version of decoloniality or decolonization should not demand that we prioritize the embattled relationship to “Man” if it means we have to bypass the work of becoming accountable and responsible to and for each other. For those of us invested in healing, strengthening, and thickening the relationships between racialized folks this means sitting in the complexity of this nuance and finding ways to do better for the next generation. That is the work we have done and continue to do as women of color and decolonial feminists.

For example, Wendy Rose’s (Miwok/Hopi) 1993 poetry collection, *Going to War With All My Relations*, is a text that mourns the ongoing violence of settler colonialism while simultaneously offering ways of resisting the normalization of violence.³⁷ Throughout the text Rose maintains a sustained critique of the forms of intimate and sexual violence enacted by her beloved brothers. In her poem, “men talking in the donut shop,” Rose recounts overhearing three men excitedly discussing the brutal murder of a woman over a meal of coffee and donut holes, “an army of them/against the native earth of her.”³⁸ This poem, a reflection of an actual conversation Rose overheard in passing, marks the quotidian nature of a conversation on the shooting death of a woman by her husband. In documenting this as a poem, she offers the possibility to continually hold

³⁷ Wendy Rose, *Going to War with All my Relations: New and Selected Poems* (Marquette: Northland Pub, 1993).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 40-4.

space for the forms of violence wielded against Indigenous women's bodies. Rose's collection calls for a new mode of relating by refusing to allow the kinds of foundational violence that targeted and continually targets Indigenous communities for demise to serve as a justification for the sexual degradation and violence against her sisters. For Rose, as for many women of color feminist thinkers, activists, and writers, the only way to wage a battle against these oppressions is to foreground our responsibility to and for each other and to challenge all of one's relations to resist being complicit in perpetuating future harm. This is part of a poetic and political practice fueled by love and fury.

Moreover, as so many women of color have already argued, the naming of harmful behavior as enacted by racialized men over and against women of color, our lives and our communities is not about undermining or being destructive to men of color for the sake of it. On the contrary, it is about finding ways to name the harmful behaviors that negatively impact our chosen and inherited communities in order to lay the ground for transformation. It is important to note that the naming of harm as enacted by men of color does not presume that women of color are incapable of violence and harm. Nor does it assume that the battle for racial justice will necessarily address or heal the broken relationships and harmful modes of relating between us. It also does not presume that violence and harm comprise the totality of our relationships. As Kristie Dotson reminds us, these are part of the ongoing distortions and recalcitrant manifestations of ignorance to which Black feminist thought particularly, and women of color feminist thought more generally, are consistently subjected.³⁹

Even in the midst of these distortions and manifestations of ignorance as well as the various forms of harm we experience at the hands of our communities, women of color do

³⁹ Kristie Dotson, "Between Rocks and Hard Places," *The Black Scholar* 46, vol. 2 (2016): 46-56.

not make the mistake of naturalizing patriarchal behavior as a function of some type of essential maleness. Indeed, within this heterogeneous body of activism, theorizing, and poetics one will more often than not encounter the efforts to develop nuanced understandings of racialized masculinity, complex analyses of the intersections between race, gender, sexuality, and class, and calls to alter the value systems that produce *all members* of our communities, albeit differently, as less worthy of a full humanity. And yet there has been an insistence that women of color primarily center our own individual lives at the expense of the collective.

For instance, in her interview with David Scott, Wynter distances herself from feminism writ large by suggesting that its vision is too myopic (in that it is primarily and or solely concerned with the plight of particular women), and therefore not sufficiently attentive to the concerns of the larger collective. She states that, “where I think there is a great distance between today's feminists and myself is that then we knew *that it was as a population* - men, women and children - that we had thought we could not do anything.”⁴⁰ We respond to this by reminding folks, yet again, that women of color and decolonial feminists have never advocated for leaving the community or whole of the population behind in the name of some intangible individual freedom.

The suggestion that women of color are solely concerned with our own lives, at the expense of the communal, can only exist in a vacuum. In order to stand, this claim has to completely overlook the extent to which even in their critical confrontation with racialized men over the violences being enacted by them, women of color have rarely articulated a liberation model that would completely absent out or leave men of color behind. Nor have women of color been indifferent to the matrices of power in which men of color find

⁴⁰ Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism,” 138.

themselves and the network of oppressive forces that negatively impact their lives, even when the same could not be said in reverse.⁴¹ One explicit example of this, which was already in circulation at the time of her interview can again be found in the Combahee River Collective Statement. They write,

as we have already stated, we reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. *It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly black men, women, and children.* We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men *have been socialized* to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But *we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness*, per se i.e., their biological maleness-*that makes them what they are.* As black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic.⁴²

Rather than buy into an oversimplified conceptualization of patriarchy as synonymous with maleness, a move they describe as “dangerous and reactionary,” they exercise the same kind of skepticism that Wynter later expresses by rejecting facile notions of manhood and womanhood. This willingness to think through the complexities of racialized masculinity in an effort to push for a liberation model that will not leave “too many people behind” is an example of what it means to enact complex coalitions towards

⁴¹ Women of color organizing around prisons and police brutality is one great example of that. This is also visible in the women of color and queer, trans,* and gender non-conforming organizing around transformative justice.

⁴² Combahee, (1977), 235-6 (emphasis added).

decolonizing oppressed and systematically dehumanized communities.⁴³

Moreover, other women of color have echoed this call to think beyond the individual and build coalition in complex ways. For instance, when Gloria Anzaldúa argues that in order for us to transform the world we have to develop a “tolerance for ambiguity” and open ourselves to the lessons proffered by the *atravesados*, she is arguing for the making of complex coalition between those who have been systematically dehumanized.⁴⁴ This is not an individualized feminist politic but one that reaches for the “squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead, in short, those who cross over, pass over or go through the confines of the “normal.”⁴⁵

This coalitional orientation is also echoed by the literary works of women of color feminist writers who refuse to imagine liberation struggles in separatist terms. This includes writers like Maxine Hong Kingston, Audre Lorde, Leanne Simpson, Mayra Santos Febres, and Helena Viramontes to name a few.⁴⁶ Their work, spanning decades,

⁴³ A contemporary example of feminist organizing that refuses to leave “too many people behind” is the Black Lives Matter movement created by three queer women of color: Opal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza. Even as it emerged in response to black male death (Trayvon Martin), it articulated a corrective to previous liberation models that centered black male leadership while leaving women of color, queer, gender-nonconforming, trans* and other bodies outside of the vision and collective hope for the Black community. We include their words as a reminder to all those who continue to misappropriate and distort their more expansive decolonial vision for a future that includes the heterogeneity of Black life and lives. As they tell us, Black Lives Matter, “goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.” (<http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>).

⁴⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: la frontera*. Vol. 3. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987). This “tolerance for ambiguity” includes contending with all of the ways in which none of us neatly fit into the categories and roles that have been laid out for us, even as we try to.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁶ Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Vintage, 1980); Leanne Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love: Stories & Songs* (Winnipeg: Arp Books, 2015); Helena María Viramontes, *Their Dogs Came with Them: A Novel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007); Mayra Santos-Febres, *Sirena: A Novel*

imagines and reimagines what it means to work at a crossroads of relationality. For instance, taking seriously the plight of women, men, and children who suffer injustices under the heel of coloniality, Aurora Levins Morales in *Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity*, argues that solidarity comes from the intolerance of collaborating in the oppression of others. She writes, “like it or not, our liberation is bound up with that of every other being on the planet,” anything else, “is unaffordable.”⁴⁷ Indeed, both women of color feminist politics and decolonial feminisms are deeply imbued with and inseparable from this radical relational paradigm.

Taking Back the “Word”

In her formative essay, “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” Wynter argues that the development of a science of humanities in the 15th century was the methodology through which a new world was made. According to Wynter, the shift away from the religiosity that ruled “Man 1,” an older and differently repressed form of humanity, toward the reasoning bio-ontological Man (“Man 2”), that now represents what it means to be human, was achieved and instituted through a word making process. It was this process, which she later refers to as “taking the Word,” that produced,

[A]n utterly new way of feeling, of imagining Self and World, and a mode of imagination that would no longer find its referential figurative auctoritas in the

(Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), and *Sobre piel y papel* (San Juan: Ediciones Callejon Incorporated, 2000); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 2002).

⁴⁷ Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity* (New York: South End Press, 1998).

great religious schemas and symbols, but rather in a new referential figurative auctoritas, that of the fictional poetic/dramatic schemas of the phenomena we call “literature.” Literature in its new role/ordering function, and the Studia were, therefore, to be twin forms of each other, forms through whose internal meditation, the human, who had hitherto imagined its mode of being through mythic/theological figurative schemas, would now come to imagine itself – and to act upon the world in the mode of that imagination – through the great poetic schemas which refigured and configured the first form of the secularly charted human being: the world of its order of things.⁴⁸

Notably Wynter proclaims the literary humanities as a critical site through which we take back the “Word” and make possible a new human system of sciences, and ultimately a new humanity. She notes that,

“[...] far from “literature having no function,” as it is assumed, it is we who are the function. It is as specific modes of imagining subjects of the aesthetic orders which literature’s figuration-Word weaves in great feats of rhetorical engineering that we come to imagine/experience ourselves, our modes of being.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Sylvia Wynter “The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism,” *Boundary 2* (1984): 33, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

For Wynter, that heretical practice of the Late Middle Ages, of bringing poetic schemas into existence that reimagined the world, can and must be matched by a new form of heretical practice, “which takes the human rather than any one of its variations as Subject.”⁵⁰ Wynter argues that it is, “the literary humanities which should be the umbrella site for the trans-disciplinary realization of a science of human systems.”⁵¹ Thus, we, the bodies made liminal to Western Man, are tasked with creating a new literary humanities that allows us to imagine decolonial human futures. Wynter not only contributes to this future through her transdisciplinary historicism and critical texts, but also through her own poetic/dramatic productions, which punctuate the last five and a half decades of her work.⁵²

Similar to Wynter, women of color and decolonial feminists’ theoretical projects, activism, and creative productions are a reflection of our human experiences, concerns, and aspirations in and beyond the liminal space to which we’ve been relegated in the Word/world of “Man.”⁵³ It is here where Wynter’s work and women of color and decolonial feminist most closely and politically align. We see this political alignment reflected in the words of Combahee River Collective when they write that,

our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that black women are inherently valuable, that *our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy*. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. *Our*

⁵⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁵¹ Ibid., 45.

⁵² Her first play “Shh...It’s a Wedding” was written/shown in 1961.

⁵³ Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism,” 187.

*politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community, which allows us to continue our struggle and work. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.*⁵⁴

This declaration of self-worth does not seek to displace the struggle against racism nor does it seek to undermine men of color. On the contrary, in this reclamation of worth we see the effort to take back the “Word” in order to challenge the deep and systemic/systematic devaluation of Black women’s lives and bodies. Is this not a refusal of the genre of Man? Is this not the heresy of which Wynter speaks?

Women of color and decolonial feminists have substantively contributed to Wynter’s political goal of moving beyond the genre of “Man,” even when their/our access to an alternative epistemic universe was limited. Even without a clear “outside,” women of color have crafted pluriverses through poetry, creative fiction, and through activism and relations that made room for an expansive sense of our own and our communities’ value. They have enacted a being human as praxis through the (re)building of relations that needed to be healed and transformed in order to emerge stronger.

Women of color and decolonial feminists have produced visions for human futures that operate from palimpsestic notions of time, which includes what has happened before, the here and now, and the not yet here.⁵⁵ They are consistently creating worlds where more community members (chosen and inherited) are valued and of value, while also recognizing that there is still so much more left to do.

⁵⁴ Combahee River Collective, 234, emphasis added.

⁵⁵ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

For instance, Rose's *Going to War With All My Relations*, is an example of how that world-making happens in the battle against colonization and coloniality and across temporal and spatial locales.⁵⁶ In the preface of the collection she notes that while the book is a reflection of her experiences in the Indigenous Fourth World Movement, the titular "war" that she refers to is "everyone's war" and the "relations" indicates a relation to one another.⁵⁷ Throughout the book Rose makes connections to indigenous peoples in what is now the U.S., Canada, and the Caribbean, to the long legacies of slavery, settler colonialism, global warfare, and intimate and domestic violence. These gestures toward a relation to and with peoples in other temporal or spatial contexts, even when not materially accessible to Rose, are her attempt to bridge multiple struggles in order to create a more expansive sense of what constitutes a resisting community.

Instead of ascribing to the categorical fracturing purported by the world of Man, Rose's poetics represents a reclaiming of the Word and world-making process that sees the need for building bridges to each other's histories as a means for liberation. To this end, Rose opens the collection with a poem titled "Auction," which brings us to an auction block where bodies are sold "with the grace of death."⁵⁸ The poem is ambiguous about whether the bodies being sold are Indigenous or Black. Instead the reader is tasked with meditating on the institution of chattel slavery and how the histories of Indigenous and Black enslavement and dispossession are so deeply entangled that they cannot be extricated.

⁵⁶ Gratitude to Beth Piatote for introducing Figueroa to the work of Wendy Rose in 2008.

⁵⁷ Wendy Rose, *Going to War with all my Relations: New and Selected Poems* (Marquette: Northland Pub, 1993), vii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

In “Song for the Warriors Taken Away,” written in remembrance of the Anishinabec Occupation of 1975, she asks the warriors to “let [her] tongue lick/your bones back together.”⁵⁹ Through her grief, she gives herself to her “Brothers Sisters,” telling them how her heart hears the “man-dust [...] woman-dust” of their falling and that she “borrows for her battles/the copper of [you]”.⁶⁰ Here Rose reads these warriors’ struggles against the grain of powers that would render them successfully defeated or dead. Instead she recognizes that through her song and remembrance she can conjure their spirits, which were “never in danger” of being completely annihilated.⁶¹

In addition to conjuring bridges to each other histories and narrating resistant histories, women of color have enacted a being human as praxis through their persistent commitment to becoming faithful witnesses to others’ trauma, including that of men of color.⁶² For instance in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), a novel acclaimed one of the most significant contributions to American literature in the twentieth century, Morrison uses the story of Margaret Garner as a point of departure, to discuss the intergenerational and hauntological effects of chattel slavery.⁶³ In the novel, Morrison’s expands what we know about the emotional lives of the enslaved through an exploration of the unsaid and the extended relations of the protagonist Sethe. Even as the novel seemingly centers Sethe and her daughters Denver and Beloved, Morrison refuses to be indifferent to the unspeakable pain of Paul D and the traumas that he piled into the “tobacco tin lodged in

⁵⁹ Ibid, 30-31.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² For more on decolonial and faithful witnessing see Lugones 2003 and Yomaira Figueroa, “Reparation as Transformation: Radical Literary (Re) Imaginings of Futurities through Decolonial Love,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 4, no. 1 (2015): 41-58.

⁶³ Margaret “Peggy” Garner was an enslaved woman who in 1856 escaped with her family to freedom in Ohio. Upon the threat of capture, Garner killed her infant daughter rather than see her returned to slavery.

his chest.”⁶⁴ Morrison brings to life Paul D’s experience and affectively takes us into to the dehumanizing labor of the chain gang, as well as the humiliation and the smiting of lives at the hands of the overseers. Through her fictional accounting we are made witness to the rape, terror, and humiliation to which Paul D and the forty-six men of the chain gang were subjected. She writes,

Chain-up completed, they knelt down. [...] Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of the guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none – or all. [...] Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot to his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus.⁶⁵

By centering Paul D’s trauma alongside Sethe’s, Morrison magnifies what we understand and feel about the pain of racialized men under the conditions of slavery. Indeed, her commitment to showing what is rarely documented: the rape and sexual degradation of black men reaches beyond the limits of material history and adds to an archive of the unseen. Morrison narrates Paul D’s pain alongside Sethe’s and many others. As a result, *Beloved* engages in the creation of an archive within the literary that presents the pain of men of color alongside that of Sethe’s.

Rather than write Paul D as a character that has been “feminized” and who needs to recuperate a sense of masculinity over and against Sethe’s trauma, Morrison’s poetic universe does not center the world in which sexual violence would reduce them to non-

⁶⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987), 113.

⁶⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 107-108.

human status. Neither does Morrison make of them characters that reveal their physical and psychological wounds as an effort to create a hierarchy of their traumas. Instead, she offers us a glimpse into a new mode of being human, one in which the mutual recognition of these acts against them allows Sethe and Paul D to radically reimagine what it means to love each other and be responsible to and for each other in the face of intense violence. For example, one of the fundamental metaphors for the lasting and haunting legacy of slavery is the “chokecherry tree” whipped onto Sethe’s back. Paul D’s reaction to Sethe’s scars is one of the most affecting moments in the narrative, one that lingers in our imaginations long after.

Behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. Raising his fingers to the hooks of her dress, he knew without seeing them or hearing any sigh that the tears were coming fast. And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, “Aw, Lord, girl.” *And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth*, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years.⁶⁶

In this passage Morrison shows us the tangible remnants of slavery but she also does the work of reconfiguring these wounds from ugly scars to a tree that is lovingly tended to by

⁶⁶ Morrison, *Beloved*, 17-18.

Paul D, who has also suffered the lash. Though Sethe cannot feel Paul D's tracing of the scars with his mouth, she is moved to tears, by the possibility of having the weight of her pain, "in somebody else's hands."⁶⁷ Morrison's literary imagination maps new relations or reveals the kinds of potential for healing between racialized and often dehumanized subjects. Morrison takes this instance of the destruction of the body, keloid growths over scars inflicted as a way to annihilate resistance and desirability, to offer us one way to (re)imagine their humanity and a collective liberation that must include healing from trauma.

This moment is not made less powerful by the fact of its ephemerality or seeming intangibility. We can read this moment as a way through which peoples subjected to unspeakable violence are able to bear witness to each other's pain without erasing their own experiences. In other words, it is not a zero-sum game. Morrison gives us a glimpse of one way we could hold each other and each other's pain. This moment between Sethe and Paul D reimagines their humanity through a lens of mutual (re)valuation and a desire to be tender with the most pained and "ugly" parts of ourselves and one another. As they relate to one another's pain they attempt to make meaning out of the senseless violence to which they have been subjected. In crafting moments such as these, Morrison weaves for us a world where decolonial love becomes necessary for our moving towards a collective healing.⁶⁸

A Decolonial Feminist Politic

⁶⁷ Ibid, 18.

⁶⁸ For more on decolonial love see Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love*; Figueroa, "Reparation as Transformation."

“There is no decoloniality without a decoloniality of gender!”

– Maria Lugones

When Wynter asks us to consider “how can we come to know social reality outside the terms of the *sociogenic* code of symbolic life and death?,”⁶⁹ she is asking us to do the work of reimagining/reimagining ourselves and our communities. This proposition is about getting us to begin to identify, even in the midst of violence, the “who” and “what” we want to become. It is here where we see women of color and decolonial feminist projects and creative productions as gender/genre *denunciations* that move us toward a set of intimate and exponentially complicated questions and that resonate with Wynter’s larger project, namely that of locating ingredients for the “who” and “what” we want to become.⁷⁰

While we recognize the epistemological and ontological limits of concepts like patriarchy and gender when deployed in decontextualized universalist terms, this does not mean that women of color who continue to use these concepts and categories have necessarily been duped by a Eurocentric liberal feminist politics. On the contrary, the dismissal of patriarchy and gender as useless categories for a decolonial turn has come all too facile. The reason for this contention is that although we are invested in moving towards a world beyond “Man,” *we are not yet there!* So while one could argue that patriarchy and even gender are concepts that continue to respond to the epistemic

⁶⁹ Wynter, “Human Being as Noun? Or Being as Praxis? Toward the Autopoietic Turn/Overtturn: A Manifesto.” (2007): 17-18 at <http://readingfanon.blogspot.be/2014/10/sylvia-wynter-human-being-as-noun-or.html>.

⁷⁰ In her text, *Hilando Fino*, Julieta Paredes argues that class and gender are useful concepts only to the extent to which they serve to *denounce* and ultimately *transform* oppressive (neo)colonial relations of power. I am applying this concept to Wynter’s understanding of gender as a genre of the human to echo Paredes’ claim that these categories are useful only to the extent to which they assist us in denouncing and transforming the oppressive relations that impact our lives.

universe and gender arrangements of “Man” and are therefore not worthy of our attention, women of color and decolonial feminists continue to do the work of clarifying when and under what conditions the concepts remain useful.

As it were, we are concerned with how the dismissal of women of color and decolonial feminisms, in all of their iterations, derail us from the possibility of developing new/alternative understandings of humanity (more complex, multiplicitous, and pluralistic conceptualizations). For us this includes developing modes of being that do not require women of color and queer and gender non-conforming folks of color to put our/their concerns to the side. Freedom cannot be understood solely as that which disrupts the violence between the *damnés* and the systems that oppress us in the service of “Man;”⁷¹ it must also work to develop strategies for dis-identifying with the very opiate nuggets which make that mode of being human attractive, so attractive as to make the *damné* aspire to it even when it harms their racialized counterparts.⁷²

We are clear that Wynter’s decolonial humanism is a project, of justice and liberation for those embodied by the “liminal,” that is invested in redefining freedom, truth and being beyond mainstream paradigms. Furthermore, it is clear that Wynter’s position on feminism does not propose nor uphold a decolonization project that would have racialized females sacrifice their bodies and reproductive labor so that men of color can emerge as (hu)“Men.” Given that freedom for Wynter is, as Neil Roberts points out, a *practice* and not an ideal, then how can we call any project decolonial if *in practice* it

⁷¹ The term *damné* comes from Fanon’s 1963 *The Wretched of the Earth* and refers to those peoples condemned to liminality by “Man.” See Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 2007.

⁷² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

requires that at least half of its population be sacrificed for the well-being of the rest?⁷³

What decolonial project would seek to attenuate the ontological autonomy of a large percentage of its people, in the name of freedom? We propose that women of color and decolonial feminists are offering some of the ingredients that are necessary for human freedom rather than attending or aspiring to, the freedom of “Man.”

More importantly, we are invested in tending to and developing the tools already available to us for moving towards a collective and communal liberation. As Wynter proposed, the practice of taking the word is one such tool that allows us to reimagine and write ourselves alternatives to the epistemic universe of Man. As we have illustrated thus far, the work produced by women of color feminists, activists and writers has centered relationality and complex coalition building by expanding the sets of bodies and histories to be included in the project of liberation. These are critical aspects of a decolonial feminist politics of liberation. This political gesture refuses to imagine liberation as an individual or particularistic freedom but rather recognizes the inseparable links between oppressions. Far from situating the experiences of women as the primary or singular foundational violence, this feminist politic has practiced bearing witness to other’s trauma and has more oft than not organized in favor of a larger collective well-being, without losing sight of what we also need to be well. It is a both/and approach that we would like to see more broadly and frequently reciprocated on behalf of women of color.

The writing and activism of women of color and decolonial feminists reminds us that, in addition to nuanced analyses, decoloniality demands that we continue to develop not just concepts but *actual practices* (new ways of moving and being) that address

⁷³ Neil Roberts, "Sylvia Wynter's Hedgehogs: The Challenge for Intellectuals to Create New 'Forms of Life' in Pursuit of Freedom," *After Man, Towards the Human; Critical Essays on Sylvia Wynter*, ed. Anthony Bogues (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2006): 157-89.

sexual assault, domestic violence, homophobia, transphobia, and other interpersonal violences, within our communities of color. In other words, we cannot just think decoloniality, especially a decoloniality that does not demand that we live or act any differently than we do now. Decoloniality for us must contend with the violences and harms being enacted on our communities as well as within our communities. We must address the impact of contemporary harm as well as the intergenerational impact of violences, such as slavery, colonialism, and settler colonialism.⁷⁴ Because we have not yet arrived at a world beyond “Man,” a world that has been thoroughly organized by gender, even if as a genre of the human, we are left to echo Lugones’ claim that “there is no decoloniality without a decoloniality of gender!” And for those self-identified “decolonial” thinkers that continue to dismiss the indispensable contributions made by women of color, we continue to take back the “Word” through critical creative and political practices. In addition to responding the larger structural forces that harm our communities, women of color and decolonial feminist politics have consistently and substantively contributed to the efforts to *strengthen, heal, transform, and/or build anew the relationships between those racialized*. In so doing they/we have practiced a form of “loving big” that includes developing some of the very methods, approaches, and tools we deem necessary for decolonization, decoloniality, and the making of “other than this and better than this”⁷⁵ human futures.

⁷⁴ See Mia Mingus and the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective’s (BATJC) work on transformative justice and the need to develop new strategies for addressing the multi-generational and intergenerational impact of violence, particularly as it relates to child sexual abuse.

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2/>.

⁷⁵ This particular usage of “other than this and better than this” emerges from the conversations author Méndez has had with Kristie Dotson in the writing of their/our decolonial feminist manifesto to talk about a future that is not predicated on the notion of a linear progression. We are clear that things don’t always or necessarily get better over time, so we use this phrasing to name our aspiration for a world that is not organized in these colonial ways (“other than this”) and can hold down more of us (“better than this”).

