

Decolonial Feminist *Movidas*: A *Caribeña* (Re)thinks “Privilege,” the Wages of Gender, and Building Complex Coalitions

(Forthcoming). In *Theories of the Flesh: Latinx and Latin American Feminisms, Transformation, and Resistance*. (Eds. José Medina, Mariana Ortega, Andrea J. Pitts). Studies in Feminist Philosophy Series, Oxford University Press. Cite as forthcoming if cited before published.

Xhercis Méndez (California State University Fullerton)

Abstract

This article examines the set of relational dynamics that produce what I refer to as the “wages of gender,” the economic, social, political and psychological “privileges”/“benefits” one gets from identifying with, aspiring to, and manifesting dominant racialized and heteronormative conceptions of sex/gender. Rather than frame the benefits reserved for heterosexual middle-class white females as “privileges” and emphasize women of color’s systematic exclusion from those “privileges,” this text instead hones in on the inextricable relational and intimate violence woven into those “privileges.” Building from the arguments made by women of color, indigenous and decolonial feminists who argue that gender was reconstituted and racialized in and through colonial/imperial practices, this text seeks to identify the particular sets of “wages” that undermine efforts to organize across difference by naming what is at politically at stake for differently situated bodies. It concludes by expanding the ingredients and orientations that contribute to decolonial feminist methodologies.

Decolonial Feminist *Movidas*: A *Caribeña* (Re)thinks “Privilege,” the Wages of Gender, and Building Complex Coalitions

Xhercis Méndez

I. A Brief Genealogy and Grounding

This essay is titled “A *Caribeña* (Re)thinks ‘Privilege,’ etc.” because I wanted to engage what it means to be a light-skinned Latina who wants to work against the erasure of my own Afro-descendency without claiming a history of oppression I did not live. I also wanted to mark my particular location as a queer-identified cisgender *Boricua*, whose identity has been forged and grounded in Afro-Latinx/Caribbean ways of being and knowing and in relation to Black folks (primarily African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans) in the US. My intention is to work against a pan-Latinidad that bypasses and/or obscures the question of race and the pervasiveness of anti-blackness in Latinx communities. Instead I want to be attentive to the assimilationist projects that offer benefits for disidentifying¹ with and from Black communities. Indeed, the color-coded arrangement of the US, where the ability to “pass” can significantly improve access to benefits, more often than not informs the degree to which Latinx communities identify with and/or even associate themselves with Black communities. Such assimilationist projects rely on the circulation of narratives that make distancing from and counter-identifying² with Black communities particularly attractive, thus working against Black and Brown coalitions.

¹ One of the differences between my usage and Jose Esteban Muñoz’ conception of *disidentification* in this example is the directionality of the disidentifications we are concerned with. I am concerned with the political consequences of “white” folks as well as communities of color distancing themselves from racialized, impoverished and marginalized communities in their moves to aspire to and mimic a white heterosexual upper middle-class ideal. Muñoz is focused on the political possibilities of “minoritarian” communities, i.e. communities of color, finding ways to dissociate themselves from that very ideal of white heterosexual normativity. When mobilized in this direction, *away from the ideal*, Muñoz argues and I agree, that this form of disidentification becomes a powerful resistant strategy. See Muñoz (1999).

² Counter-identifying here refers to a process that foregrounds difference in a way that is oppositional. See Medina (2003). Such counter-identifications can include not only an impulse to dissociate from a given group but also how perceived differences can be construed as mutually exclusive, thus motivating actions that can work to undermine and devalue the group from which one is counter-identifying with and from.

In my own community the disidentification with and counter-identification from “blackness” is deeply entangled with the efforts to distance themselves/ourselves from narratives that pathologize Black folks as “lazy,” “ignorant” and “inherently criminal” and which are then (re)deployed in relation to Puerto Rican communities both on the island and the mainland. These are not excuses for the ways in which anti-blackness appears within Latinx communities, but rather an effort to consider how disidentification and counter-identification from the narratives and practices tied to anti-black colonial logics create obstacles to our building complex coalitions, one of the primary motivations behind this essay.

In addition to being attentive to race and anti-blackness, my political/coalitional orientation has been deeply informed by my experiences as a cultural broker for my mother who does not speak English and needed these contributions in order to ensure our survival on the mainland. It has been informed by being an Ame/Rican “citizen” who became aware at an early age of our second class access to the resources tied to citizenship.³ My mother and family were often the subject and target of investigation by social service and welfare officials, while Child Protective Services operated like the boogie man, lurking in corners, always ready to tear our family apart. Police surveilled our community not in order to “protect and serve” but to criminalize. These are the experiences that have made me attentive to particular connections with and to other

³ “Citizenship” as a “liberatory” project is undermined by, for instance, the lack of federal assistance to Puerto Rico post Hurricane Maria and by the ways in which it is grounded in the settler colonial logic and organization of space, land, etc. Efforts to access the “benefits” tied to “citizenship” can unwittingly have us overlook the claims from Indigenous communities regarding the “constant state of land theft that is consistently disavowed” in the U.S. see Tuck and Yang (2012) and Tuck (2016).

marginalized communities of color,⁴ and that inform my particular brand of women of color⁵/decolonial feminism-in-the-making.

This essay is ambitious in that it seeks to articulate a decolonial feminist methodology that holds all of these complexities in the frame. It is ambitious because it seeks to mobilize gender as a political category of analysis that is inextricable from race, and which works to *identify*, *denounce*, and *transform* oppressive and (neo)colonial arrangements of bodies and power. Rather than reduce gender to a cross-cultural category of analysis that primarily focuses on the relationship between “Men” and “Women,” this essay explores how “gender” can work to entice a series of complicities from racialized folks to and with colonial logics as well as undermine our efforts to organize coalitionally across deep differences.

II. Decolonial Feminism: A Specific and Local/ized Political Project

This specific thread of decolonial feminism is invested in making more of the *contributions* made by women of color feminists.⁶ In particular, the powerful work on and efforts to build complex coalitions across multiple differences. It also seeks to engage the contributions made by *indigena*/indigenous and afro-latinx/diasporic feminists resisting (neo)colonial “developments” projects and eurocentric and heterosexist patriarchies within their own local and transnational contexts. Finally, it strategically builds on the politically productive concepts and orientations

⁴ These are some of the affinities I have with and to Latinx immigrant populations and their second generation children and to African American, Pacific Islander, and Chicano populations in the U.S. that have been subjected to parallel racialized circumstances.

⁵ Women of color does not simply refer to any and all racialized women. While in its mainstream usage it tends to refer to those females that have been racialized through colonial processes, as both non-“white” and non-“European,” I am using it as a reference to racialized females who also explicitly seek to build complex coalitions to and with one another. This includes a commitment to learning each other’s histories and contending with our differences both within and outside of the groups with whom we identify (Alexander 2005; Lorde 2007).

⁶ I am creatively building with multiple genealogies of decolonial feminist thought, methods, and politics.

within the decolonial school of thought primarily coming from Latin American and Caribbean philosophers/thinkers.⁷

For example, the concept of *coloniality* is politically productive for orienting us toward the intergenerational consequences and violences resulting from a history of colonialism. For our purposes, coloniality can be broadly understood as referring to the colonial arrangements of bodies and power, the logics and practices, ways of being and knowing, and racialized capitalism that were born out of formal colonialism and continue to persist long after formal colonialism has ended. In other words, the coloniality of power, gender, being, etc. outlives formal colonialism and persists in the structures and institutions that organize the nation states that emerge after “decolonization” regardless of which bodies actually operate those structures and institutions. To decolonize in this formulation refers to the active disrupting of coloniality in its many manifestations including the ways in which racialized capitalism, and ongoing settler colonialism in the US, continues to violently impact even the most intimate parts of our lives and relations.

In addition to the concept of coloniality, other orientations from this decolonial school of thought that are productive are the commitment to substantively engaging “non-western” ways of being and knowing, and an attentiveness to the eurocentric and universalizing assumptions that travel with many of the mainstream categories researchers and academics use to understand power, oppression, and by extension “liberation and decolonization” in local and transnational contexts. It is with this (re)orientation in mind, that the brand of decolonial feminism I am proposing is a self-consciously *local/ized* political project. I am thinking from and with a US context and about women of color in that context, with an eye to the *transnational*.

⁷ Noting this particular genealogy does not make my usage of the terminology associated with it mutually exclusive with how others have previously used the term “decolonial” and/or how others are working to build “decolonial/ized” futures.

My resistance to claiming a universal and/or universalizable approach comes from a recognition that the deployment of “gender” as a cross-cultural category of analysis has more often than not distorted and obscured alternative conceptions of being and local modalities of empowerment in transnational contexts (Oyěwùmí 1997; Mohanty 2003; Wekker 1999, 2006; Méndez 2014). This historical and contemporary tendency has led me to ask, in what ways do racialized folks have to shift how they understand gender in order to identify and activate a communally oriented liberatory politic that does not mimic Western (neo)colonial and settler colonial arrangements of bodies and power?

In response to these questions, I first engage what is useful, suggestive, and politically productive about Maria Lugones’ framing of the “coloniality of gender” and the “modern/colonial gender system” (2007). Second, I expand and further flesh out what I refer to as the *wages of gender*, a concept I developed in an effort to make explicit “gender’s” grounding in colonial relations of power and the impact that has on the racialized communities produced as the constitutive outside of gender. Finally, I conclude with five preliminary methodological ingredients⁸ and orientations⁹ that work to identify and disrupt the coloniality of gender and move us toward complex coalitions. The methodological approach I am proposing proceeds as follows:

⁸ I use the word “ingredients” here purposefully. Different from component, ingredient carries with it other layers of meaning that are important for this work. Ingredient conjures up the idea of cooking, an activity that is often correlated to female bodies and includes creatively bringing very different things together in order to create something new (a meal) that both contributes to life and is life-sustaining. The correlation to female bodies is historically produced and my bringing it to bear here is about refusing to ignore the labor and contributions that females make to social reproduction. Moreover, the ingredients of any recipe are open and creatively tweaked to suit different needs, i.e. allergies, or food restrictions, etc. I propose these steps as ingredients because they will be adjusted depending on the specificity of local and historical contexts. Finally, different from the word component, in-gredi-ent also carries with it the idea of “walking into” or “entering” something, perhaps a journey, together. The term functions as an invitation to create a new path and world together.

⁹ I am also using the word “orientation” here to explicitly conjure up another set of intentions. This methodology seeks to foreground relation, including how we position ourselves in relation to each other, the work, our communities and/or the folks with whom we want to think with. Orientation marks a position and location. It can also refer to the process of getting familiar with something new, for instance as in an introduction into a different way of approaching and deploying gender as a category of analysis.

1. Historicize gender, 2. Map out relational power dynamics, 3. Track the conditions produced by racialized capitalism that undergird and bolster complicities with the coloniality of gender, 4. Produce new social and decolonial visions and imaginaries, and 5. Develop and ritualize new lived and embodied practices.

III. Why We Need to Historicize Gender

In her 2007 article entitled *Heterosexualism and the Modern/Colonial Gender System*, Lugones makes the claim that “gender” as we know it was and continues to be a colonial imposition. More intriguing than this particular claim, is the relational system of gender she describes. As I have argued elsewhere, Lugones’ relational approach to gender remains suggestive precisely because it draws our attention to the ways in which gender and “Women” were (re)defined in relation to enslaved physiognomically distinct laboring bodies, at least within the Americas and the Caribbean (Méndez 2015). As a result, Lugones’ effort to begin from a historicized sense of “gender” functions to emphasize the relational process through which gender becomes racialized and a marker of humanity for colonizers. In other words, what you get from Lugones’ effort to historicize gender is an attentiveness to the sets of colonial institutions and practices that produce a constitutive outside to gender. Without an understanding of how gender comes to be racialized through such colonial relationships of power we end up with a category of analysis that obscures as much as it claims to reveal.

In order to identify this relational process of racializing gender, Lugones introduces what she refers to as the “modern/colonial gender system” which is organized into “light” and “dark” sides. Within this framework the only bodies with gender are those on the light side. As a result, the gender categories of “Man” and “Woman” not only refer to specific body types, males vs.

females, but also to the hierarchical, incommensurate and mutually exclusive arrangement of bodies and power that white bourgeois heterosexual males and females idealized for themselves, as the self-selected representatives of “Humanity.” We can think of the cult of domesticity as a 19th century American manifestation of this logic at work (Welter 1966). Within this version of a light-side gender arrangement, “Women” exist as “Man’s” negation. Thus, if he is of the “mind,” she is of the “body”; if he is of the “public,” she is relegated to the “private;” if he represents authority, she is banned from having authority, and so on and so forth.

On the “dark side” are the laboring bodies of those enslaved, whose bodies are sexed but not gendered. The reason their bodies are not gendered is because they are legally produced as chattel and because the “sex” of their bodies only matters to the extent to which they serve breeding practices and the purposes of capital accumulation. These are the colonial designs on their bodies, which is what the modern/colonial gender system framework is attempting to track. This framework then highlights how gender is intimately tied to those who are *structurally produced* and recognized as human over and against those structurally produced as a degeneration of humanity, a subhumanity with various degrees of non-humanness. As a result, the characterizations of those on the dark side as “hypersexual” and “perverse” “animals” whose natures need to be transformed from the inside out should be understood as a racialized vision of the world that serves the purposes and practices of colonialism, settler colonialism, and (neo)colonialism.

In other words, Lugones’ modern/colonial gender system delineates a *colonial cosmovision*, in that it centers how colonial actors perceived those they enslaved and colonized. Her description of the modern/colonial gender system does not center what those enslaved and colonized thought of themselves because she is attempting to track the colonial logics being

produced. It is with this in mind that I would argue her description of this gender system as organized around a light and dark side should be understood as part of the critique. In my mind it is an indictment, and not a reifying, of a Western (provincial) cosmivision organized around an either/or mutually exclusive logic which violently sought to reorganize other cosmosenses and cosmologies along these same lines.

My usage of her framework is with an eye towards tracking some of the intergenerational consequences of gender being racialized through specific colonial institutions and practices and in relation to specific geopolitics. It is not my aim to name and describe a single unified modern/colonial gender system but rather to provide a method for tracking the racialized gender arrangements produced under colonial conditions in a given context.¹⁰ It is for this reason that I also do not understand Lugones as describing a system of gender that we want to identify with and/or be incorporated into. My goal is not to become or transform myself into someone that is recognized as a light-side “Woman” but rather to underscore the violence of that imposition.

In order to get a sense of why this matters for coalitional possibilities, it becomes necessary to highlight some of the colonial trappings of light-side gender and gender arrangements. Within the settler colonies that occupy the geographical space now known as the US, for instance, there was a relational reduction of white women’s worth, in that she mattered to the extent to which she participated in the imperial/colonial project through the contribution of her reproductive capacities. Depending on the location of the colony, anxieties about being outnumbered by racialized others was part of the heightened policing of sexuality and surveilling of white women’s wombs. Indeed,

¹⁰ For example, the Spanish modern/colonial gender system, in terms of who counts as “Man,” “Woman” and ultimately “Human,” may have differed from that of the Portuguese. Understanding that this is not a unified system makes evident that different colonial practices produce different types of relations. However, I would argue that whatever the modern/colonial gender system is in a given context, there are colonial arrangements of bodies and power that continue to negatively impact racialized males and females.

the imperial/colonial project demanded that white women's bodies be transformed into instrumental vehicles for the reproduction of "pure" white babies that would later serve to inherit the capital that was violently being accumulated through the extracted land and labor of physiognomically distinct others.

I am aware that her participation in the imperial/colonial project was not always a question of willingness. At times her contributions to the settler colonial project were partially extracted through, for example, the ever looming threat of impoverishment and/or being indefinitely confined to a lunatic asylum. And yet her profound reduction was also simultaneously ameliorated by the sets of "privileges/benefits"¹¹ (enticements) that came with being construed as desirable, feminine, passive and delicate by white bourgeois heterosexual men and relative to racialized females. These forces were simultaneously operative and resulted in these "Women" having contradictory desires, at times instrumentally motivated, but significantly acting as both oppressed and oppressor.

As I will illustrate below, the sets of privileges/benefits bestowed upon these white heterosexual bourgeois "Women" are primarily considered privileges/benefits in relation to those on the dark side who by comparison are subjected to exponential degrees of violence and abuse. For instance, being considered "too delicate" to work in the field was a privilege, in that it constituted a *special right* and/or *advantage* afforded light-side women in relation to racialized females since it kept them "safe" and their bodies protected and intact from the hard labor of the fields. However, this skewed system functions in a way that makes accessing the benefits tied to light-side gender desirable, such as the protections only available to those deemed recognizably "delicate." It is this exchange rate that I would like to attend to when discussing privilege amongst

¹¹ Because I am troubling how we think privilege, for the remainder of the text the term privilege is to be considered bracketed.

differently racialized “women.” Indeed, it is this exchange rate, or rather the privileges/benefits that have as part of them colonial designs on our bodies, that I refer to as the *wages of gender* (Méndez 2015). As I will argue, identifying the colonial logics and concomitant practices of relation and arrangements of bodies and power contained in these “privileges” becomes necessary for opening our imaginations to more communally-oriented arrangements of bodies and power for women and communities of color.

IV. Identifying the Wages of Gender

The wages of gender tracks how gender is shaped by colonial relations of power and how it continues to operate as a (neo)colonizing force. Lugones’ conception of light-side gender and gender arrangements is useful here because it draws our attention to the relation of power specifically between white bourgeois heterosexual males and females. In other words, gender in her formulation does not claim to be about the relationship of power between all males and all females. Tracking how the wages of gender operates allows us to see how light-side gender and gender arrangements become the model of relation to which we are all expected to aspire, regardless of what we desire and whether or not we have the material conditions to “successfully” inhabit such gender and gender arrangements.

The *wages of gender* can be understood as the *economic, social, political, legal, psychological and affective privileges/benefits one gets for being systematically recognized as a individual who fits into light-side gender and gender arrangements*. It is important to reiterate here that light-side gender does not include all people, but rather emphasizes those who are structurally recognized as “Men” and/or “Women,” and for whom this acknowledgement includes a recognition of humanity and a systemically supported freedom. It is not just the privileges we

need to track but also *the processes through which one is given benefits for identifying with, aspiring to, and successfully manifesting light-side gender and gender arrangements, regardless of where you fall in the modern/colonial gender system.* For example, contemporary versions of light-side gender and gender arrangements encourage racialized folks to aspire to patriarchal arrangements of power in order to be recognized as proper “Men” and “Women,” which include a presumption of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, a nuclear family structure, and a policing of sexuality grounded in an anti-miscegenist logic. And yet, what constitutes the actual material wages of gender shifts dramatically according to one’s location in the modern/colonial gender system.

Indeed, there are differential exchange rates for complicity with light-side gender and gender arrangements. This becomes critical for identifying what is at stake for differently situated women. For instance, the wages of gender for women on the light side have included, but are not limited to, privileges such as patriarchal “protection” from work in the fields, and patriarchal “protection” from the wild dangers of the public sphere as well as a partial empowerment, an often violent exercise of power, over those enslaved/colonized both male and female (Glymph 2008). The wages of light-side gender have also been produced through anti-miscegenation laws. Anti-miscegenation laws are part of the structural conditions that made bourgeois heterosexual white “Women” become the “most” sought after and desirable females (sexually as well as for marriage partnerships) within the system, because they were the only females whose wombs were capable of reproducing legally recognized “Humans.” However, in order to access these privileges white bourgeois heterosexual “Women” had to become passive, submissive, and participate/be complicit with the colonial/imperial project as well as the conceptions of beauty and the feminine that kept

their bodies hostage to white bourgeois heterosexual “Men.” Notably, many of these arrangements continue to be produced as desirable.

By contrast the wages of gender for females on the dark side have included an altogether different exchange rate. For example, enslaved Black “women’s” insistence on being identified as “Woman” (Think: Sojourner Truth’s infamous speech) encompasses the hope of being recognized as Human and of being freed from the violence of slavery. Tied to being identified as “Woman” is the possibility of keeping and raising her own children and of being entitled to partial protection under the law, particularly as it relates to systematic sexual assault. These are fundamentally different stakes and wages tied to a colonial process of racializing gender.

Juxtaposing the wages of gender in this way makes explicit what is materially at stake when Black “women” have named and called out their exclusion from the category “Women” in the effort to access some of the privileges that white middle-class heterosexual females have been conditionally afforded. What also becomes clear is how the wages of gender have been racialized through colonial processes, in that white bourgeois heterosexual females have not had to worry about their children being sold or forcibly removed to boarding schools, as has been the case for Indigenous communities. It is not just that the stakes for racialized women are materially different but that their claims to “womanhood,” even when on light-side terms, are also bound up with their efforts to end profound degrees of violence and its intergenerational impact. However, I want to suggest that the critique that racialized females have been excluded from being recognized as “Women” is not necessarily an expression of a desire to enter into what it is yet another violent system of relations, namely light-side gender arrangements.

V. The Problem with Deploying Gender “As-Is”

We are now in a position to identify some of the conceptual problems with applying “gender” retroactively to racialized bodies in “post-colonial” spaces. The “gender” categories of “Men” and “Women,” as are most often deployed, tend to center a descriptive biology (the sexual difference) grounded in a western scientific dual-sexed notion of the body (Laqueur 1990; Fausto-Sterling 2000). This matters because within a western scientific dual sexed model of the human it is possible to conflate sex and gender as synonymous and/or interchangeable categories. However, as illustrated by the preceding historical examples, sex and gender were not structurally synonymous. Gender was a category reserved for those on the light side and the “gender” categories of “Men” and “Women” carried with them an acknowledgement of one’s humanity and a systemically supported freedom that was not historically available to those on the dark side - and which continues to be in many ways inaccessible to racialized communities contemporarily.¹² The problem with this approach to gender as a category of cross-cultural analysis is that it has a difficult time accounting for the intergenerational impact of this history. At least within “post-colonial” contexts, gender has to contend with the colonial history that produced alternatively sexed and racialized conceptions of the body.

Another way in which gender as the sexual difference becomes problematic is that it does the work of obscuring non-western conceptions of the body, such as sacred (re)arrangements of the social (Voeks 1997; Strongman 2002; Wekker 1999, 2006). For instance, a secularized conception of gender built upon a dual sexed notion of the body makes it difficult to contemplate

¹² See Alexander’s (2010) *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Her book illustrates in detail how racial discrimination in the American legal system is allowed to operate openly and freely as long as race neutral language is used to bypass accountability. The Black Lives Matter movement and projects like “Say Her Name” are also organized efforts to illustrate the extent to which black communities in the US continue to be targeted for demise with impunity. Other examples include the pattern of criminalizing Latinx communities through immigration and gang policies and Muslim communities through the War on Terror.

the sacred part of two-spirit folks without unwittingly (mis)translating them into and subsuming them under a *secularized* queer and/or trans categorization (Driskill 2010). This is not to dismiss the power of identifying same-sex loving people across different spaces and times and/or the political significance of forging identities that resist mainstream and normative gender arrangements. However, these categories carry with them a history and sets of assumptions about bodies that politically matter. The problem for racialized folks is that mainstream approaches to gender obscure coeval logics with potentially greater or different liberatory possibilities.¹³

I do not want to do away with the category of gender altogether, but instead want to use it differently. Rather than using it as a way to primarily read sexual difference (think Men vs. Women; queer vs. heterosexual), the goal here is to use it as a category that works to *identify, denounce, and transform* light-side gender and gender arrangements that have been violently universalized through colonial institutions and practices, such as slavery, forced migration, and the “re-education”/cultural assaults through boarding schools (Lomawaima 1993). Retroactive inclusions into gender only obscure the violence of these histories and their intergenerational consequences. Here the *decolonial feminist movida*¹⁴ would be to instead recognize how the gender terms “Men” and “Women” have been used to primarily refer to those males and females structurally recognized as of value to the settler state, those whose bodies and lives are protected by laws and whole armies are mobilized in their defense. The decolonial feminist movida I am

¹³ For other accounts of non-western arrangements of the social see also Wekker (1999, 2006).

¹⁴ The term *movida* has multiple valences in Spanish that I want to bring to bear. It can refer to movement, not just in terms of a specified action (moves) but also in terms of a movement that can be organized (a protest, series of protests) that has larger social cultural implications. Thinking ahead we can ask what would a decolonial feminist movement look like? What constitutes its politics? *Movida* can also carry with it the idea of “*un revolu*,” a Puerto Rican term used to refer to a situation that can be confusing and difficult to resolve, in the sense that there is a messy situation that we must deal with. The coalitions I am interested in are messy in that sense. On a more creative and productive note, it can also refer to spaces where things are “happening,” and where potentially intimate shifts can happen, as in the space of nightlife. I am specifically thinking about the kinds of happenings that take place in queer nightlife, in that it is both happening (as in “this is the place to be”) and happening as in, there are cultural/political shifts and openings that take place through participation in and with these spaces.

suggesting is to use gender, particularly in “post-colonial” contexts, to track the multiplicity of oppressive relations that light-side gender and gender arrangements have produced and to attend to the sets of bodies (the enslaved, or unfree, the globally impoverished) that continue to be sacrificed on its behalf.

For communities of color this means (re)considering how we talk about the light-side gender and the gender arrangements that have been violently universalized so that we do not unwittingly make access and inclusion - particularly to the skewed modern/colonial system of “benefits” (wages of gender) it produces - desirable or even aspirational. It also means exploring the extent to which ahistorical in(corp)orations into light-side gender and gender arrangements have moved us toward oppositional sexual politics (vs. coalitional) and other oppressive manifestations of light-side gender [think: politics of respectability]. These are political concerns because of the ways in which light-side gender and gender arrangements get framed as the only legitimate and legible way of relating and communities of color get pressured *to desire, aspire to, and mimic* those arrangements in order to actualize or give meaning to our struggles, sense of selves, bodies, sexualities, and freedom. This is the coloniality of gender in action.

For example, consider the modern/colonial narratives that claim racialized males have been denied their rightful place as heads and patriarchs of families by slavery and “emasculating” and/or “castrating” women of color. These narratives often result in racialized males calling for a “manning up” over and against their racialized female counterparts as part of a “liberatory,” “anti-colonial,” and “decolonial” agenda. Or the modern/colonial narratives framing racialized communities as “hypersexual” and as manifesting deviant sexualities.¹⁵ These have often had the

¹⁵ See Terry and Urla (1995), Findlay (1999), Briggs (2003), and Hill Collins (2004).

effect of producing a politics of respectability that seeks to prove the untruthfulness of the narratives. What I am suggesting is that the counter-identification and strategic distancing from these narratives then forecloses the more liberatory possibility of decentering the colonial gaze and celebrating the sexual diversity that exists in all of our communities and strengthens our collective potential.

The question for me is, how can women of color and decolonial feminists, then begin to develop narratives and methods that actively denounce, disrupt, and transform the coloniality of gender in its many manifestations? In what ways have we constrained our liberatory possibilities by disidentifying with and counter-identifying from the survival rich capacities of those relegated to the dark side because they have been framed as pathological in relation to the light side?

VI. Developing a Decolonial Feminist Critique of Gender

To respond to these political concerns, I consider the following ingredients/orientations to be productive for denouncing and transforming the coloniality of gender and for our efforts to *decolonize* our social relationships and coalitional possibilities. Given my account, identifying the coloniality of gender in action demands that we first historicize “gender” from within multiple local histories and bodies. This theoretical shift can keep us from reducing gender to a descriptive biology (i.e. the sexual difference) that obscures the violence of the colonial project and the ways in which those legacies continue to bind us.

Historicizing gender can also open us up to identifying and recognizing coeval and coexisting arrangements of bodies and power that are simultaneously operative in “post-colonial” spaces. For example, in her book entitled *The Invention of Women: Making and African Sense of Western Gender Discourse* (1997), Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí argues that seniority played a significant

role in the (re)arranging of bodies and power from within a Yoruban cosmosense in Nigeria. Seniority as a coexisting and simultaneously operative arrangement of the social becomes difficult to contemplate, let alone recognize, under a conception of gender that foregrounds sexual difference. However, historicizing gender can help us identify and mobilize to greater effect some of the more egalitarian social arrangements that have historically existed and that continue to exist within the cosmosenses and cosmologies of those relegated to the dark side.

Second, as demonstrated through the wages of gender, I propose a practice of mapping out relational power dynamics. Mapping out relational power dynamics can trouble facile accounts of power organized around reductive understandings of sexual difference. In so doing, we are able to acknowledge and denounce the oppressive relationship white bourgeois heterosexual “Men” had and continue to have in relation to white bourgeois heterosexual “Women,” while also exploring how those oppressive modes of relating were undergirded by the material conditions of those enslaved and colonized. This methodological shift nuances how we approach the feminist goal of undoing “Patriarchy,” by calling us to attend to all of the bodies that were sacrificed in order to make the oppressive set of relations on the light side seem relatively more attractive and even “liberatory” by comparison.

One critical result of this decolonial feminist movida is that we can use these relational power mappings to get beyond the Oppression Olympics¹⁶ that continue to undermine our efforts to build complex coalitions across our differences. By mapping out the relational power dynamics we are able to see that white bourgeois heterosexual women’s complicity and participation in

¹⁶ Oppression Olympics refers to the practice of determining who is the “most oppressed” by creating hierarchies of disadvantages between and amongst differently marginalized communities, thus making it difficult to collectively organize. My approach explores some of the complicated ways in which we are simultaneously oppressed and oppressing. See Martinez (1993).

oppressing those on the dark side is what partially sustains the oppressive relationship between those on the light side. What I am suggesting here is that, *“Women” who dis-identify, counter-identify with and/or distance themselves from those on the dark side in exchange for the wages of gender are paradoxically in some sense collaborating in maintaining their own oppression.* Thus, a myopic focus on individual access to the wages of gender afforded white heterosexual bourgeois “Men,” can indeed work to undermine larger goals such as undoing institutionally supported heterosexist racialized patriarchy and decolonizing all of our relationships, including those to the sacred world and to the land.

Third, particularly for communities of color, it becomes necessary to track the conditions produced by racialized capitalism that undergird and bolster complicities with the coloniality of gender. A useful example of this is the 1965 Moynihan Report which encouraged Black males to be complicit in the oppression of Black females in exchange for the promise of employment and integration into the mainstream economy. Concerned with the social movements of the time demanding civil rights and racial equality and the anticolonial movements taking place globally, Daniel P. Moynihan, the political scientist and senator, argued that the solution to racial unrest lay in providing Black men with the material conditions to return to their “rightful place” as breadwinners, patriarchs, and heads of nuclear families. Moynihan’s “assessment” of the Black family argued that racial unrest could only be mitigated by providing Black men with much needed employment, in this case by enlisting them in the army, in order to help them correct the “dysfunctional matriarchy” that had taken hold of the black community and had constrained the community’s successful assimilation into American society. Moynihan claimed that as long as

Black women were “doing better” than their male counterparts, racial equality would never be achieved.¹⁷

Moynihan’s pathological framing of the Black community was grounded in light-side gender and gender arrangements. His reading of the Black community foregrounded an oppositional sexual politics (the “women” are ‘doing better’ than the “men”) by arguing that the key to racial equality was mimicking light-side gender and familial arrangements. Moynihan in many ways derailed the conversation on substantive racial equality by sparking debates around Black women’s “pathological tendency” to undermine Black men by refusing to succumb to a patriarchal order and outperforming them in school and employment. In so doing, Moynihan framed Black women, and not racialized capitalism, as both the “perpetrator” of harm and the subsequent target.

Rather than move towards an oppositional sexual politics, the decolonial feminist movida here would be to seek out economic solutions that foreground the well-being of all those impacted by the conditions of racialized capitalism. How does this oppositional sexual politic actually bolster capitalist exploitation at the expense of the Black community? It does so by getting racialized males to focus on *outdoing* women of color (earning more money, getting more jobs, and even actively working to undermine their economic well-being) rather than identifying economic solutions and/or alternatives in which all community member’s material needs are met. Ensuring that community members have what they need, and not doubling down on the recuperation of masculinity through a wage battle with and against your racialized female counterpart, is key for any version of collective racial justice. A decolonial feminist approach to

¹⁷ A rehashing of this argument can be found in Obama (2014). See Crenshaw (2014).

“gender” provides a space for us to examine how such economic enticements and complicities both serve capitalist exploitation and undermine collective liberation.

VII. (Re)imagining Decolonial Feminist Futures

Fourth, decolonial feminist futures are not possible for communities of color unless we seek out alternative systems and practices for (re)evaluating our worth. This decolonial feminist turn toward the “future” includes developing new social imaginaries and visions. Aspiring to and mimicking light-side gender and gender arrangements, will not get us there. This is not a decolonial move, even when it is framed as such. Instead a decolonial feminist asks what other liberatory possibilities and alternative modes of being and relating are available to us from within the communities relegated to the dark side? And perhaps these too will require creative transformations. Rather than primarily critiquing the world we don’t want to live, the (re)orientation I am suggesting includes allocating more time and energy towards imagining and activating the world we do want to live in.

In my own research on Afro-Cuban Santería, this has meant exploring how ritual enactments introduce explicitly non-western formulations of the body that include *non-gendered/non-racialized* logics, culturally-specific modalities of empowerment, and an alternative system of valuation for what it means to be human (Méndez “Transcending Dimorphism”).¹⁸ Afro-Cuban Santería *in practice* introduces its own formation and brand of power through alternative categories, such as spiritual seniority. Spiritual seniority demands that those who have invested

¹⁸ This is not the only site from which decolonial possibilities can be imagined. Science fiction and Afro-futurism are other sites where decolonial imaginaries have been and continue to be made possible. Octavia Butler’s (2015) *Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* is an example of how activists are using Octavia Butler’s work to think about social movements and developing liberatory imaginations. Others who have been productively inspired by the move to take up a feminist Afrofuturism are <https://nolawildseeds.org/manifesta/> and <http://octaviabutlerlegacy.com/>

more time in the religion, have accumulated greater degrees of spiritual knowledge, and have been recognized as knowledgeable spiritual advisors, be given deference as sacred elders. These elders are to be given deference *regardless of body-type, sexual preferences, and/or actual age*. Notably, spiritual seniority as a co-existing organizing logic has provided significant avenues for Afro-Cuban women and “queer”-identified folks in the Caribbean to become well-respected and valued leaders both within and beyond spiritual and communal networks.

Methodologically, the sustained engagement with Afro-Cuban Santería has provided me with powerful examples of why we need to be attentive to the assumptions that travel with the categories of analysis we deploy in our feminist research. It has also provided me with tools to decenter the colonial representations and narratives repeatedly mapped onto racialized communities and identify an alternative ground from which to produce possibly decolonial readings of the past in ways that move us towards transformative visions for the future.

Practices such as these can be powerfully suggestive in terms of reimagining systemically devalued beings and bodies, beyond the colonality of gender. For instance, if we were to reimagine Sojourner Truth through a ritual practice like Santería, a practice that presupposes the full humanity of all its practitioners, what we are empowered to see is that her being included or incorporated into the category “Woman” requires that we (mis)translate her body and experience into the terms of the light side. This incorporation not only distorts the historical violence of gender but it can function in ways that are (neo)colonizing. An Afro-diasporic/Latinx conception of the human is suggestive in that Truth’s liberatory possibilities are more likely to be found in understandings of humanity and gender that do not depart from or require her relative dehumanization in order to exist.

Finally, transforming the coloniality of gender and decolonizing gender and feminism requires more than critique. Rather, it calls us to create and “ritualize” new everyday lived practices. The engagement with Santería is my effort to engage the very practices that have sustained those who have been systematically targeted for demise. Even though I do not believe that Santería is decolonial or resistant unto itself, it does have something to tell us about alternative systems of valuation that are not reducible to merely surviving in the face of extreme violence. Beyond survival, there are lessons within these practices that remind us that being the target of violence is not synonymous with successfully being transformed into a lesser human being. These ritual practices often include a process of “rebirth,” and tend to focus on making bodies sacred and cultivating a sense of one’s value, even in the face of systemic violence and violent histories. As a result, Afro-Cuban Santería can habituate the body to refuse a dehumanized conception of self.

If we agree that “*el camino se hace al andar*,”¹⁹ then decolonizing gender calls us to develop practices that habituate and reorient us towards “moving differently” in the world and in so doing transform what we even think is possible. For those of us who find ourselves suffocated by light-side gender and gender arrangements, producing more critical analysis is not enough. We must also seek to develop practices that actively engage our bodies in the decolonizing process. The call to develop and “ritualize” new everyday lived practices that can rehearse, embody, and habituate us to new forms of socializing, being and relating acknowledges the extent to which we can be transformed by our embodied experiences of freedom (Abod 2017). Indeed, how can we take back our bodies, and what can and do embodied experiences of freedom look like?

¹⁹ This saying, commonly heard in Hispanophone contexts, literally translates into “the path is made by walking.” The refrain serves as a reminder that the path towards something different will not be “ready-made” or even clear. It instead suggests that the path becomes a path because we choose to move in a direction. Moreover, it is a reminder that there will be emergent conditions and concerns that arise as we “walk,” conditions and concerns that we cannot know at the outset. It useful for thinking about how a decolonial feminist politics will have to be open to creatively adjusting and responding to emergent conditions and concerns as they arise and as we move towards something new.

VIII. Conclusion: A Call for Theory/Practice That Centers Collective Well-Beings

This approach to gender is about doing theory that is attached to practice and about rethinking gender towards transformative ends. I have argued that colonialism and processes of racialization tied to capitalist accumulation are inextricably linked to how we contemporarily understand gender, sexed bodies, and sexuality. Given how I understand the gender categories to be tied to colonial relations of power and logics, this particular brand and localized version of decolonial feminism-in-the-making is not invested in women of color being retroactively included in the category “Woman” nor being assessed through light gender or gender arrangements. If we understand gender in this way, then accessing light-side wages of gender means simultaneously being integrated into an arrangement of bodies and power that is equally oppressive and which has little to no decolonial liberatory potential for women of color. Indeed, how we understand gender makes a difference not only for how we frame our contemporary relations, but also for what we will consider to be the necessary ingredients for re-imagining our various socials in liberatory ways.

In order to address these political concerns, I have proposed these ingredients (a decolonial feminist research practice/approach) as a way to perform different gender analyses and make it more difficult to bypass the concerns of women of color and/or produce these concerns as something additive. At stake in the troubling of privilege, is the impact the battle to access the wages of (light-side) gender has on foreclosing our liberatory imaginations, visions, and coalitional goals. It is for these reasons that it becomes important to historicize gender and map out the relational power dynamics; to identify the colonial value system that undergirds capitalist expansion, extraction, imperialism and exploitation and naturalizes a multiplicity of oppressive relations; to produce new decolonial social imaginaries and visions while also creating and

ritualizing new everyday lived practices. I offer these methodological ingredients as a way to disrupt the weight and space eurocentric frames of reference have occupied in shaping how we come to understand ourselves, our bodies and the worlds around us. My hope is to carve out a space from which to radically (re)imagine and embody decolonial modes of being, knowing, and relating that center our collective and communal well-beings.

Note

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to the following people whose critical questions and engaged dialogue made these reflections possible: Ganessa James, Mia Mingus, Kristie Dotson, Nikolay Karkov, Mariana Ortega, José Medina, and Andrea Pitts.

References

- Abod, Jennifer. 2016. "The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen." Documentary Film, *Women Make Movies*.
- Alexander, M. Jacqui. 2005. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press.
- Allen, Paula Gunn. 1986. *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Briggs, Laura. 2003. *Reproducing empire: Race, sex, science, and US imperialism in Puerto Rico*. Vol. 11. University of California Press.
- Brown, Elsa Barkley. 1992. "‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics." *Feminist Studies* 18, no.2: 295-312.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2004. *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle Williams. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6: 1241-1299.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle Williams. 2014. "The Girls Obama Forgot: My Brother’s Keeper Ignores Young Black Women." *New York Times* 29.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, Andrea J. Ritchie, Rachel Anspach, Rachel Gilmer, and Luke

- Harris. 2015. *Say her name: Resisting police brutality against black women*.
- Driskill, Qwo-Li. 2010. "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2: 69-92.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 2000. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. 1st edition. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Findlay, Eileen. 1999. *Imposing decency: The politics of sexuality and race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Garza, Alicia. 2014. "A herstory of the #blacklivesmatter movement." *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014. <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>
- Glymph, Thavolia. 2008. *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Laqueur, Thomas Walter. 1990. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Lomawaima, K. Tsianina. 1993. "Domesticity in the federal Indian schools: The power of authority over mind and body," *American Ethnologist* 20, no.2: 227-240.
- Lorde, Audre. 2007. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press.
- Lugones, María. 2007. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no.1: 186-209.
- Magubane, Zine. 2001. "Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the 'Hottentot Venus,'" *Gender and Society* 15, no.6 (December): 816-834.
- McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge.
- Medina, José. 2003. "Identity trouble: Disidentification and the problem of difference," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 29, no. 6: 655-680.
- Méndez, Xhercis. 2015. "Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminist Methodology: The Race/Gender Matrix Revisited." *Trans-Scripts*, 5 (2015): 41-59.
- Méndez, Xhercis. 2014. "Transcending Dimorphism: Afro-Cuban Ritual Praxis and the Rematerialization of the Body," *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 13, no.1 (Winter): 101-121.
- Méndez, Xhercis. 2014. *An Other Humanity: (Re)constituting Gender, Bodies, and the Social from within Afro-Cuban Santería*. PhD Diss, Binghamton University.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Moynihan, Daniel P. 1965. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." *United States Department of Labor*. March 1965. Web. April 12, 2015. <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*. Vol. 2. U of Minnesota Press.
- Oyèwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ́. 1997. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Paredes, Julieta. 2008. *Hilando Fino: Desde El Feminismo Comunitario*. Bolivia: n.p.
- Quijano, Anibal. 2000. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no.3: 533-580.
- Rowley, Michelle V. 2010. "Whose Time Is It?: Gender and Humanism in Contemporary Caribbean Feminist Advocacy." *Small Axe* 14, no.1: 1-15.

- Santiago-Valles, Kelvin A. 2003. "'Race,' Labor, 'Women's Proper Place,' and the Birth of Nations: Notes on Historicizing the Coloniality of Power." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no.3: 47-69.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. 1986. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91, no.5: 1053-1075.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. 2010. "Gender: Still A Useful Category of Analysis?" *Diogenes* 57, no.1: 7-14.
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. 1988. *Inessential woman: Problems of exclusion in feminist thought*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17: 64-81.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 275-313. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 1995. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Terry, Jennifer, and Jacqueline L. Urla, eds. 1995. *Deviant bodies: Critical perspectives on difference in science and popular culture*. Indiana University Press.
- Tong, Rosemarie. 2009. *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*. 3rd ed. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Tuck, Eve. 2016. "Urban Education and Indigenous Social Thought." Presentation, Michigan State University.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society* 1, no. 1.
- Wekker, Gloria. 1999. "'What's Identity got to do with it?': Rethinking Identity in Light of the Mati Work in Suriname." In *Female Desires: Same-sex Relations and Transgender Practices Across Cultures*, edited by Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa, 119-138. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wekker, Gloria. 2006. *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Welter, Barbara. 1966. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18, no.2 (Summer): 151-174.
- White, Deborah Grey. 1985. *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Wynter, Sylvia. 1990. "Afterword: Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" In *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, edited by Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, 355-73. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. "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: 257-337.