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Decolonial

María Lugones

“Decolonial” is a central term in the conversation among theorists who think from the place of the oppressed. Many women of color in the United States theorized racial and gender oppression from within in resistant relationality with people of color without necessarily using the term “decolonial.” The uses of the word considered here are interestingly connected, but importantly different in terms of where and why it is used. I will characterize these uses so that controversies around the decolonial, when they are about meaning, become clearer. In the case of Chela Sandoval (1991, 2000) and Emma Pérez (1999), as well as in my own work (Lugones 2007, 2010, 2012), liminality figures centrally as an in-between space where those who have been denied humanity and voice have a diminished agency—what I call “active subjectivity”—and exercise resistance. For us, the possibility of decoloniality is tied to those interstitial spaces, both unseen and hidden by coloniality. In each case there is a relation to colonization. In each case, “decolonial” marks or forms sites and methods of resistance to the colonization that dehumanized most of the people in the world. Aníbal Quijano (2000a, 2000b, 2007), Walter Mignolo (2007, 2011), and I share the idea that the dehumanization produced by the modern/colonial system of power is the from-within-which decoloniality is conceived and theorized.

Emma Pérez, who is Chicana, focuses on Chicanas within Aztlán—the territory from where the Mexica

moved to Tenochtitlan—rejecting the U.S.-Mexico border as a legitimate division of a people. Born in Argentina, and living in the U.S. since I was twenty, I have focused on Abya Yala, the name that the Puna of Panama have given to the territories that the colonizers called “America.” Chela Sandoval, who is Chicana, thinks of global colonization. The uses of “decolonial” by Aníbal Quijano (who is Peruvian) and Walter Mignolo (who is an Argentinian residing in the United States) are tied to the larger and longer global history, including the present of the coloniality of power.

Emma Pérez thinks of the “decolonial imaginary” in relation to third-world feminism as a genealogical tool “for recovering the hidden voices of Chicanas that have been relegated to silence, passivity” (1999, xvi). Within a Chicana feminist historical imagination, Pérez seeks and listens to the interstices and gaps where “the different, fragmented, imagined, non-linear, non-teleological” find their place in the stories we tell about Chicanas (1999, xiv)—that is, where agency is exercised and where the historian hears the unheard, the unthought, the shadows. The interstices constitute a third space that is nonlinear, heterogeneous, discontinuous, coterminous with and parallel to the eventual discourses of the seen. The interstices are where the decolonial imaginary is at work. As Pérez reviews Chicano historiography, she “sexes” the colonial imaginary looking for and finding women’s agency under colonization. She proposes “diasporic subjectivity” as “the oppositional and transformative identity that allowed these women to weave through the power of cultures, to infuse and be infused, to create and re-create newness” (1999, 81). For Pérez, “decolonial” is not a liberatory term but a term of transition between the colonial and the postcolonial. The decolonial imaginary is “a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history” (1999, 6). It is a way, a method, of doing history.

Chela Sandoval (2000) locates her creation of a decolonial theory and method in the mid-twentieth century's battles for self-determination of colonized and marginalized people in Africa, the United States, and elsewhere and their disavowal of Western rationality, seeing Western rationality as an "ethnophilosophy" rather than as a universal rationality. Sandoval seeks the forces and affinities within the undercurrent of oppositional consciousness in the twentieth century and articulates them methodologically, shaping a singular tool for "forging twenty-first century modes of decolonizing globalization" (2000, 2). She seeks the junction where the thinking of decolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Gloria Anzaldúa, Donna Haraway, Roland Barthes, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Cherríe Moraga, and many others aligns and links. She emphasizes the importance of seeing the work of poststructuralist theorists, "lesbian and gay theorists, the alienated, the marginalized, the disenfranchised" (2000, 11) as decolonial in nature. She creates a methodology of consciousness that gathers up means of opposition within liberation movements into a consciousness that is differential, one that links the strategies and central oppositional moves into one decolonial consciousness. U.S. third-world feminism is understood as having developed such a form of consciousness, one that is historical and can align social movements with each other toward decolonization and thus be coalitional.

Importantly, Sandoval theorizes this alignment not only in its subordinated but in its oppositional form. That is, she is not overwhelmed by the power of power as she takes up active beings in resistance to it. One central form of activity lies in the resistance to Western culture's division of meaning into binaries as a powerful way of repressing those who do not fit. Those who live in the in-between have politicized the "shattering

of binaries." Third-world feminism's politicization of the in-between in the 1980s and 1990s incarnates this rejection of binaries, transforming the in-between into a third force. Importantly, the in-between incarnates a rejection of the sex-gender binary. It posits a tactical subjectivity, being "women without a line," an intimate face of struggle, which is coalitional.

Sandoval theorizes U.S. people of color having survived "in the in-between (silent) space" within domination; once the in-between is made visible within a non-dominant making of sense, "the nature of social affinity must change" (2000, 152). This "third space" is where a politicized oppositional consciousness arises. As oppositional consciousness moves tactically through different forms, it becomes a "differential" and coalitional consciousness. Thus, differential consciousness goes farther than oppositional consciousness. It is the consciousness that experiences "the meanings that lie at the zero degree of power" (2000, 147), relinquishing the hold of dominant consciousness. What constitutes it as differential is the listening to, taking up of, and being receptive to the technologies, strategies, and creations of those who resist domination and dominant sense, to third meanings, meanings that go beyond revealing the meaning structure of domination. It is coalitional because it is receptive to "obtuse third meaning," to meaning that has to be hidden, that cannot make dominant sense, to meanings created in the spaces of survival and struggle. Sandoval detects a new country people struggling for egalitarian social relations, "activists for a new decolonial global terrain" (2000, 184), welcoming others to a new homeland. What is decolonial in Sandoval's methodology is that it lives in the third space, comes from it; it is attentive to what takes place in it and what it can make possible.

Aníbal Quijano (2000a, 2000b, 2007) introduces the analytical concept of the "coloniality of power" and

understands decoloniality as tightly related to this concept. With the coloniality of power, Quijano theorizes the coming into being in colonial modernity of the idea of race, the classification of peoples into superior and inferior by nature, the very idea of society as articulated in a hierarchical order. Coloniality and modernity are two axes of what Quijano calls the “Modern Colonial Capitalist System of Power.” That is, the reduction of the colonized to nonhuman beings is inseparable from the denial of value to any of their practices, knowledges, and understandings of the universe. That denial, which gives meaning to the exclusion from humanity, constitutes and is constituted by an understanding of knowledge, knowledge production, and of the very nature of the human as a being of reason that creates a non-heterogeneous totality that is enclosed, without an outside, as uncovering and creating, universal truth. Dehumanization of the colonized and the enslaved Africans reconstituted capitalism as a racialized system of production. Racialization and Eurocentrism continue to constitute that “Modern Colonial Capitalist System of Power.”

Quijano also introduced the term “delinking” to think about decoloniality, to think about delinking from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality, from the distorted paradigms of knowledge produced by colonial power, from instrumental reason and its tie to power. He uses the concept of “heterogeneous totalities” to characterize all cultures other than the one that takes its own specific cosmic vision as universal rationality. “Outside the ‘West,’ virtually in all known cultures, every cosmic vision, every image, all systematic production of knowledge is associated with a perspective of totality. But in those cultures, the perspective of totality in knowledge includes the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of all reality” (2007, 177). The decolonial alternative is “the destruction of the

coloniality of world power” (2007, 177). Epistemological decolonization is needed for decoloniality “to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings as the basis of another rationality” (2007, 177).

Walter Mignolo’s proposal for decoloniality begins with Quijano’s understanding of “delinking.” He elaborates and enacts delinking as an epistemic shift from the logic and grammar of modernity, from the coloniality of knowledge, thus bringing to the “foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economies” (2007, 453), other knowledges from the exteriority of modern colonial epistemic domination, or from what was to be conquered, colonized, and dominated. This double shift is what Mignolo proposes as decoloniality, a shift from what he calls “theo-” and “ego-” politics of knowledge to “geo-” and “body-” politics of knowledge. The hegemony of Christian theology from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century tightly controlled knowledge and subjectivities in Europe and the Americas. The ego-politics of knowledge displaces the hegemony of the theological politics of knowledge as the sovereignty of the subject becomes central to the politics of knowledge production. The decolonial epistemic shift affirms what has been denied by the spatial organization of the modern world in the theological and ego-politics of knowledge, making possible “the re-emergence of the reason that has been denied as reason” (2007, 463), naming the historical location of the loci of enunciation of those who have been denied. Asking who, when, where—a shift from the enunciated to the act of enunciation—are central questions to the geopolitics of knowledge. The body politics of knowledge is the decolonial response to the marking of the body racially inferior. The body and geo-politics of knowledge create a fracture in the hegemony of colonial politics, opening the doors “to

all forms and principles of knowledge that have been colonized, silenced, repressed, and denigrated by the totalitarian march of the genocidal dimension of modernity” (2007, 494). Mignolo understands this fracture as a move from universality to pluri-versality, a “universal project of a world in which many worlds can co-exist” (2007, 499). The local epistemological shifts meet through “border thinking,” a decolonial method that is the spatial connector between local knowledges with a history of colonial subjection. The border “lies where . . . Western knowledge and subjectivity, control of land and labor, of authority, and ways of living gender and sexuality have been ‘contacting’ other languages, memories, principles of knowledge and belief, forms of government and economic organization since 1500” (2007, 497). The decolonial shift of border thinking enacts intercultural dialogue. Mignolo understands decoloniality, enacted through the geo and body politics of knowledge, as placing all lives, including human lives, first.

I have asked myself the question: Why do many men of color, colonized, and/or enslaved men treat women of color as subordinated and/or with violence? I want to understand the indifference that men who have been racialized as inferior “exhibit to the systematic violences inflicted upon women of color. I want to understand the construction of this indifference so as to make it unavoidably recognizable by those claiming to be involved in liberatory struggles” (Lugones 2010, 369). I came to understand that they are loyal to the symbiosis of modernity and coloniality, its logic, its conflation of humanity with whiteness. That question led me to what I call the “coloniality of gender” (Lugones 2010). The spatio-temporality of the coloniality of gender and decoloniality places me in relations among the dehumanized by Eurocentered modernity, moving from their reduction to animality and thus the impossibility of being

gendered, to seeking decolonial possibilities. Gender, in my understanding, is both a mark of the modern conception of the human and a colonial imposition. Gender marks what the colonized are not. This negation requires a rejection of the very understanding of the human, an understanding that created a man, a gendered being who hid his own gender away from reason under the bloomers of the semi-human European woman and violently asserted it over the bodies of Indigenous and African peoples of Abya Yala in the sixteenth century. Assimilation to the Eurocentered ideal of masculinity and the aspiration to reach it become a form of my answer to my initial question, though I think it is important to investigate the conditions under which Indigenous people and Africans affirmed, internalized, and accepted the subordination of non-white women, even when they themselves remained powerless in the coloniality of power. The denial of gender does not lead me to affirm the use of the gender category to analyze relations among the contemporary peoples of Abya Yala, precisely because of its tie to the modern understanding of the human, an oppressive concept charged with the values, norms, and ideology of modernity/coloniality, including heterosexuality. To struggle against “coloniality,” the dehumanization of most of the people in the world through a racialized system of production of goods, knowledge, and politics, is to engage in a double struggle. One aspect of the struggle engages the inseparability between the dehumanized people of the world and the coloniality of gender. In the second moment we reject the disappearance of Indigenous and Afro women through a reduction to labor and sexual organs, enacting a decolonial feminism that seeks to transform and rethink their embodied sensual, spirited, sexual, intelligent, *acorazonada* relations in continuity with their universes of sense active during their history of resistance to dehumanization. A decolonial reconception

Keywords for Latina/o Studies

Edited by

Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and
Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS New York

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York

www.nyupress.org

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References to Internet websites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing.

Neither the author nor New York University Press is responsible for URLs that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vargas, Deborah R., editor. | Mirabal, Nancy Raquel, 1966– editor. | La Fountain-Stokes, Lawrence M. (Lawrence Martin), 1968– editor.

Title: Keywords for Latina/o studies / edited by Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes.

Description: New York: New York University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017012907 | ISBN 9781479866045 (cl: alk. paper) | ISBN 9781479883301 (pb: alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Hispanic Americans—Study and teaching.

Classification: LCC E184.S75 K48 2017 | DDC 973/.0468—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017012907>

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper, and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability. We strive to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the greatest extent possible in publishing our books.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10987654321

Also available as an ebook

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