

FEMINISM IN TRANSLATION
SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Decolonial Feminism in Latin America: An Essential Anthology

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In memory of María Lugones: mentor, friend, and inspiring accomplice

More than a decade ago, decolonial feminism irrupted into the field of feminist theory and action in Abya Yala, and it arrived to stay. It began with the call of Argentine feminist philosopher María Lugones, who, in her now classic text “The Coloniality of Gender,” published simultaneously in English and Spanish (Lugones 2008a; 2008b), pointed out the need to decolonize feminism. In this work, as well as in an earlier, lesser known article published in English (Lugones 2007), Lugones managed to merge two schools of thought that until then had run in parallel: the contributions and the path of Black and women of color feminist theory in the US—to whose debates Lugones herself had contributed (Lugones 1998; 2003a; 2003b)—and the critical tradition of Latin American philosophy in its latest formulations encompassed under the name of *giro decolonial* (the decolonial turn) with which she entered into a fruitful dialogue.

It is worth mentioning that Lugones arrived in United States in the 1970s and, as she herself said in some of her interviews, she immediately joined the ranks of a movement that had just begun building itself: feminism of women of color and third-world women in the US. Being a philosophy graduate, Lugones was interested in and started being part of the building of this movement, and she got involved in the debates and concerns of Black and women of color in feminist theory, contributing to the analysis on the fused way in which domination operates. She published some of her most well-known texts in *Hypatia*, and almost all of her works were in dialogue with the US context.

During the 1990s, Lugones attended a series of meetings held at Binghamton University, where she used to teach, on the occasion of the annual visit of sociologist Anibal Quijano, a special guest of the philosopher Immanuel Wallerstein, another professor at Binghamton. From these meetings would come the project of critique of modernity/coloniality or the decolonial turn, of which Quijano would be a part from its very

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foundation. Although part of this group, Lugones had her own concerns about her place of origin, and she started a journey in her formulations. She would take up the concern again, and resume permanent contact with Latin America, but she would do so with a new perspective that would enable her to transcend the classic progressive formulations of the *blanco-mestiza* (white-mixed) intellectual elites of the subcontinent. The epistemological framework, the questions, and the criticism coming from Black feminism and women of color feminism in the US, along with their advanced formulations on and around intersectionality, as well as those coming from the critical modernity/coloniality group and from vernacular intellectuals committed to communal processes in Mexico, Bolivia, and the north of Argentina, would enable her to develop a critical research program on what she called “the coloniality of gender.” This was the key concept for a new emerging movement, which she eventually identified as *decolonial feminism*.

According to Nelson Maldonado-Torres,¹ some of Lugones’s early contributions appeared between 2006 and 2009, from which some of the first discussion groups in Binghamton, Berkeley, Bolivia, and Mexico emerged. The Berkeley group, which Maldonado-Torres was part of, wrote and published a “special dossier” of the journal *Qui Parle* with the title “Toward Planetary Decolonial Feminisms” (Qui Parle 2010). Likewise, in 2008, the *Red de Feminismos Descoloniales* (Decolonial Feminisms Network) was created in Mexico (Favela et al. 2008). A collective text by this network, written in the wake of Lugones’s death, recalls that it was created as a result of Sylvia Marcos’s call to some Mexican academics to join a series of virtual meetings during which these first discussions mentioned by Maldonado were held. Lugones participated in some of them. Rosalva Aida Hernández promoted the *Red de Feminismos Descoloniales* on her personal blog as “a space for reflection and political activism that starts from the self-criticism of the racism and colonialism which marks Latin American societies, including our feminist organizations” (Hernández 2014).

The thesis we propose in this special issue of *Hypatia* is that, although Lugones’s proposal was launched from the US and from academic spaces, it is within Latin American and Caribbean hybrid spaces—between academia and feminist activism that emerged a little after these first sprouts—where decolonial feminism would find its widest and most fruitful reception in the hands of racialized and *blanco-mestiza* (white-mixed) feminists strongly committed to the feminist and antiracist struggle on the continent. What these feminists had in common was the experience of migration, the immersion in or contact with Black feminism and women of color feminism in the US, postcolonial feminism, and the autonomous feminist movement of Latin America. They also had in common the new discourses enabled within the wave of Indigenous uprisings that, like Zapatismo, had traveled the subcontinent since the end of the twentieth century, and that resulted in the revitalization of Latin American philosophy within the new decolonial turn.

Two feminists from the Dominican Republic, in particular—I am one of them—who combined activism and theory production, and a Honduran academic residing in Los Angeles and concerned about Honduran, Central American, and Latin American politics in general, would occupy a central position in these beginnings by responding to philosophy’s call to shape a decolonial feminism with fervor and commitment. We would do so from a collective commitment, concerned with opening and expanding the debate from within the same regional feminist movement.²

This was not casual. Certain conditions made it possible. In fact, Ochy Curiel, Breny Mendoza, and I, with other *compañeras*, had been launching a critique of institutional feminism and the cooperation agenda in Latin America from autonomous feminism and from

antiracist positions, and in 2008 we gathered together with some other *compañeras* in a theoretical political project called Grupo Latinoamericano de Estudios, Formación y Acción Feminista (GLEFAS)³ from which we would promote feminist theorizing of our own based on the particular historical experience of Latin America, while committed to political action. Lugones's proposal was the seed for GLEFAS, finding in it the fertile soil that supported the emergence of decolonial feminism as the project that would enable finding and developing the voice of feminism in Latin America and the Caribbean.

But an older history explains the reasons behind the emergence of GLEFAS and the need to promote a program for political formation that supported constructing the region's own feminist voice.

Toward the beginning of the 1990s, there was a rupture in Latin American feminism, a feminism that had been built by a generation of women linked to the armed struggle against Latin American dictatorships, and who were shaped by the revolutionary leftist ideals of the time. Together, these women had gone through political persecution, living in hiding, and several of them had been political prisoners. Together, they had been through a double militancy (in political parties and in feminism). Confronting machismo within the left, they had also founded women's organizations both inside and outside of their movements.

However, at the end of the 1980s, this generation of Latin American feminists had to deal with the rise of a new stage within global capitalism, which was accompanied by a reconfiguration at the level of state politics and social movements. The fall of the ideals of real socialism involved a shift from a bipolar world threatened by the Cold War to a unipolar world dominated by the United States. The new scenario announced the failure of previous liberation projects and proposed a unique justice program centered on the ideal of democracy as a counterpart. While preparing state institutions of the global South for entrance into the new neoliberal market model, this new program of democracy and social justice also proclaimed the possibility of including in its agenda equality for women and for nonnormative sexualities. As part of this scheme, worldwide and regional feminism, the governments of the self-proclaimed "democratic countries," and the agenda of so-called development aid prepared to celebrate a new pact to refocus efforts toward women's equality in the world during the Fourth World Conference on Women celebrated in Beijing, China, in 2005.

Criticism came swiftly. On the path to preparing for this conference, a great rupture in feminism occurred when a handful of feminists from different countries of the region proclaimed their political autonomy and started to confront and challenge the new hegemonic feminist agenda, as well as the commitments and complicities that it concealed along with the global imperialist program. The new agreement between the feminist movement and current neoliberal governments was widely denounced when a large number of feminists decided to enter the new political game, where once again the formulas are launched and imposed from the global North, this time led by the United States. The autonomous feminist movement that emerged in that moment would be important for many of us in its ability to raise a countercurrent critique, and as an antecedent to what came to be known as decolonial feminism in Latin America.

Autonomous feminism of the last decade of the past century was a school for us to learn the criticism that would become the foundation of our political practice. Thanks to it, later on some of us could confront the limits of the radical feminism we were educated in. Over time, some of us, racialized women, were able to observe from the very margins—to which hegemonic feminism condemned us because of our audacity—that the problem was much deeper than we imagined. We were searching for the vocabulary and the appropriate reading keys to be able to account for a wound that would not stop

bleeding. It was in the midst of this that we came across the decolonial turn and Lugones's "coloniality of gender."

It is necessary to explain why, even though autonomous feminism was so important to us as an antecedent, by itself it was not enough. In my opinion, two things would be fundamental in showing the limits of autonomous feminism in Latin America. First, although autonomous feminism made a fundamental critique of the new transnational feminist agenda at the end of the last century, showing its complicity with the political guidelines that marked the horizon of the struggles for global justice within the new neoliberal capitalist stage, it is also true that it was unable to push that criticism toward the increasingly denigrated limits of the category of woman/women.

Second, although autonomous feminism in Latin America promotes the idea of "a thought of our own" instead of a new transnational agenda of women's rights within so-called "development aid," the United Nations system, and state institutions, the truth is that, in their analysis, they were still tied to the wave of Italian, French, and Spanish radical feminism of difference. Thus, our critique of the institutions and the imperialism of human rights agendas was centered on an analysis of universal patriarchy and the need to find our own voice as women who differentiated and distinguished ourselves from men and their civilizing model. In the end, the autonomous feminism project did not seek to get rid of a universalist analysis of the "problem of women." It was a dispute about meaning within the confines of the feminist interpretation centered on the advent of patriarchy as a global, civilizing model that organizes the world and affects all women. Class analysis and racism, if mentioned, would appear as dependent or as lesser variables to be added in order to think about the particular conditions of some women. This came to deepen the fundamental theses of feminist theorization reduced to the subordination of women by men. What is interesting about this practice, which, by the way, is still standing and very much alive at the present stage of advancement of antiracist and decolonial struggles, is that it reduces these categories to a particularity that is a substantive condition of the great majority of women.

However, since the second half of the 1990s, amid a decade of social revolts led by social actors who, until then, were put off by or tucked under the discourses of the Marxist left and proclaimed themselves as part of a political ethno-racial identity, the problem of internal colonialism and the critique of the nation-state were taken up and brought to the center of Latin American politics deemed as an aftertaste and a continuity of the civilizing model imposed by the colonizers. The Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples of Abya Yala who speak Spanish as an imposed national language entered the power game as well and supported the arrival of a "new left" or, failing that, they negotiated with nation-state governments over their organizational autonomies and communal governance within their ancestral territory. Several racialized autonomous feminists and/or people committed to these different kinds of autonomous and anticolonial movements and processes saw the need to actively engage with them in commitment to their people and to the peoples historically relegated from the design of national policies and who are forced to be subject to them. This great step in our policies meant casting doubt on the autonomous feminist maxim of "only between women."

Armed with this new awareness, we were part of the rebirth of a broad consciousness among the wretched peoples of the world. We went out in search of new explanations that would enable us to account for the experience of inhabiting a body branded by multiple and deep wounds that exceed the experience of imposed binary gender. The search led us, on the one hand, to the analytical framework that Black feminism had already begun to shape, and on the other, to those feminists of multiple origins in

the US articulated within so-called feminism of color and third world feminism. The shift in consciousness also led us to contributions from postcolonial feminists of India, and to the commitment to build our own genealogy of racialized women of different trajectories and leaderships, whose voices were and continue to be unintelligible and dismissed within hegemonic feminisms at an international and local level. We were immersed in these studies when we came across decolonial analysis. The fascination and appreciation were mutual and immediate.

GLEFAS avidly took on the project of decolonizing feminism as its *raison d'être* and adjusted its action platform so that it would serve to develop, deepen, and expand that proposal. Since its foundation, the group has sought to bring together and become a vehicle for the dissemination of promising voices in the development and maturation of a critique of the conceptual and argumentative framework of hegemonic feminism. In this task, it helped to produce new bases for understanding and for situated analysis. In order to do this, we convene spaces for debate, but we also intervene in spaces convened by the different currents of feminism throughout the region. We are especially concerned about the need for theoretical-political formation of different activist generations, showing the connection between practice, ideals of emancipation, and theory. Thus, we design and organize everything from virtual courses to face-to-face formation, colloquiums, workshops, and roundtables in which academics, intellectuals, activists, and members of organized and struggling communities converge. We convened to listen or to expose our critique. This critique relates to the interests of women and peoples “from below,” from the communities and peoples we came from or those who taught us other paths and unknown rationalities that were not put into play within the field of urban social movements such as feminism.

In this period of extensive growth, we have conversed, interacted, and learned from women from very diverse territories, communities, and experiences. We traveled the subcontinent, the US, and Europe, talking with both women and men from different origins and movements. As we grew in number, the proposal for a decolonial feminism matured while we positioned it in different forums of feminist encounter and debate.

Over time, we managed to create a nucleus of voices that have been fundamental referents for decolonial feminism internationally, including that of Lugones, who was part of the group. Soon, the decolonial feminism that we cradled and fed gained international recognition and legitimacy in Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and some spaces of the US, through the voices of racialized women from territories that are generally erased from the map of knowledge-production. We could say that for the first time in the history of feminism, the voices of racialized, Spanish-speaking, third-world women became central referents in a feminist political proposal.

This special issue of *Hypatia* seeks to celebrate, collect, and make these precursor voices known through the compilation and translation of key texts that have been propelling and shaping decolonial feminism as it emerged very early in Latin America, from the beginning of the second decade of the new century until now. This publication seeks to offer the English-speaking public in the US a series of academic texts that have been fundamental in the history of the rise and the development of the decolonial proposal within Latin American and Caribbean feminism. These texts approach recurring topics of feminist theorization and political proposals in an original way, using the analysis and conceptual contributions of decolonial feminism while expanding it.

Although it is true that *Hypatia* has had many special issues dedicated to decolonial critique, these have been compilations from voices within US. In this case, the

compilation gathers texts written by Spanish-speaking precursors and/or of known trajectory among decolonial feminists in Abya Yala. Thanks to the impact of the contributions they developed, as well as the originality and the importance of the theses they propose for the development of a critique, this issue attempts to dismantle the Eurocentric basis of the most disseminated feminist theorization.

This is not a minor detail. When we started on the path that led us to decolonial feminism, we were already aware that one of the problems that we would face as thinkers interested in the production of feminist thought in regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean was the geopolitics of knowledge whose flow always goes in one direction: from North to South. The problem is not only about imperialist knowledge policies that disseminate and impose knowledge developed in the US and Europe in the countries of the global South, but that it is part of the epistemic racism that invalidates the plurality of knowledges and condemns the knowledge developed outside the centers of world power. In this imbalance, even when we adjust to the models of knowledge-production imposed by the international norm formulated by northern countries, the knowledge produced in the global South is never granted enough validity nor is it disseminated or received in other parts of the world. Additionally, there is a strongly rooted productive ignorance regarding the tendencies and concerns of the most critical and autonomous movements of thought in the global South. This replicates itself in the same way within feminism. The most critical and independent productions within feminism that resist academic dependence on theory produced in the US and Europe are never recognized due to the lack of dissemination and access to sources of translation and reception in central countries. Because of that, in an era of greater awareness of epistemic racism and the coloniality of knowledge, it is necessary to increase the reverse translation from Spanish to English and the flow of knowledge from South to North, in order to make known the fundamental contributions made by racialized feminists and their allies in less privileged conditions in the global South. To make known the early contributions of decolonial feminism in Latin America is to contribute to recognizing in the US this barely known part of the history of decolonial feminism and, therefore, it is to help complete the history of a feminism of crucial contemporary importance.

In this way, the collection presented here has fundamental historical value, since it seeks to expand the knowledge of the early reception and development of decolonial feminism, as well as the Spanish-speaking subaltern voices that have been a substantive part of its promotion from territories and contexts poorly known in the US and the global North. The public has in their hands some of the first and most recent approaches to the decolonial feminism movement in Latin America, that, very early on, built the foundations for the configuration of decolonial feminism at an international level in which Lugones was a strong influence as a crucial thinker who connected the contributions from Black feminism and feminism of color in the US with Latin American critical philosophy. This is why this compilation adds value through exposing to the English-speaking public a little-known part of decolonial feminism's trajectory and its important development in Latin America.

The selection we present corresponds to those texts and authors with whom Lugones had a close and direct dialogue or influence, before and while she was part of GLEFAS, and while she was active in the modernity/coloniality research network. Through it we hope to contribute to a greater comprehension of the origin, fundamentals, and objectives that encourage us, as well as the importance that the advent of decolonial feminism

entails for many of us, racialized women from the global South, as part of the configuration of an international antiracist movement.

Several of these authors have been published in compilations that we have promoted. Although there is no consensus among the theses that we produce and from which we assemble this special issue, the authors share the common goal of placing the critical analysis of race and racism at the center of the decolonial feminist proposal. Thus, one of the particularities of this issue is that the selected authors follow a line of discussion attached to the heritage of Black and women of color feminism in the United States and in the rest of Abya Yala.

This issue presents a total of seven articles of individual authorship and one collective text. The collective text serves as the prelude. It is an activist statement that, according to the reading proposal suggested, announces the end of a subaltern critical model in Latin America and the entrance of the decolonial critique, which is already around the corner. The seven articles are arranged in order of their original publication. The selected texts show the variety of problems, research themes, and concerns of decolonial feminism, as well as the initial developments that led to it and the later developments that show the critique's maturing process. All the texts have all been published and recognized for their impact and importance thanks to the number of readers and citations, but even more important, thanks to the originality of the ideas they develop and the contributions they have made to the development of decolonial feminism.

We hope this material will facilitate English-speaking university professors, tutors, students, and activists in order to broaden their knowledge about feminist politics in Latin America and its contributions in diverse fields of knowledge, such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, postcolonial science, gender studies, contemporary politics, and history.

Notes

1 Email from Nelson Maldonado-Torres, July 13, 2020, regarding a conversation about the introduction to Espinosa Miñoso, Lugones, and Maldonado-Torres 2022.

2 Three texts by these authors are part of this compilation. They are precursors to and opened decolonial feminism in Latin America: Ochy Curiel, "The Contributions of Afro-descendant Women to Feminist Theory and Practice: Deuniversalizing the Subject 'Women'" (2007); Yuderkys Espinosa, "Ethnocentrism and Coloniality in Latin American Feminisms: The Complicity and Consolidation of Hegemonic Feminists in Transnational Spaces" (2009), and Breny Mendoza, "The Epistemology of the South, the Coloniality of Gender, and Latin American Feminism" (2010).

3 According to an internal document (soon to be published on social media), GLEFAS is a network of *compañerxs* workspaces and organizations that are committed to collective construction of thought and strategies for action against the particular ways in which the matrix of oppression that overlaps racism, classism, the heterosexual regime, and the gender-modern-colonial system acts at local, regional, and global levels. GLEFAS is made up of people, organizations, autonomous groups, and workspaces that contribute to our perspective in the construction of antiracist and anti/decolonial feminist thought and action, seeking to strengthen their actions and objectives through linkage, experience sharing, and learning, as well as collaborative work. Its membership results from nominations and invitations proposed by the coordinating group and its active members, as well as by self-nomination.

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