



Latin American Decolonial Studies: Feminist Issues

Author(s): Sandra Harding

Source: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Decolonial and Postcolonial Approaches: A dialogue (2017), pp. 624-636

Published by: Feminist Studies, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.43.3.0624>

Accessed: 10-01-2018 15:47 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.43.3.0624?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Feminist Studies, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Feminist Studies*

SANDRA HARDING

Latin American Decolonial Studies: Feminist Issues

LATIN AMERICAN MODERNITY/COLONIALITY STUDIES EMERGED in the early 1990s from a network of scholars focused on charting the nature and consequences of causal connections between the first appearances of modernity in Europe and Spanish and Portuguese colonialism in the Americas beginning in 1492. Important influences on their thinking were provided by post-Marxian *dependencia* (dependency theory), liberation theology, Freirean pedagogy, the emergence of significant Indigenous social movements, and recent economic and political environments of Latin America.¹ The work of these theorists is often referred to as Latin American decolonial studies, though, of course, anticolonialism in Latin America began in 1492. (The term “decolonial” already had a valuable generic use as a resistance to the assumption that colonialism and its effects have been safely left in the past and are irrelevant today. Here, I use the term to refer to its specific use to name this Latin American theory.)

-
1. Arturo Escobar, “Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise: The Latin American Modernity/Coloniality Research Program,” in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, ed. Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (New York: Routledge, 2010), 33–64; and Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, 354–5.

Theorists of Latin American decolonial studies argue that Iberian colonialism in the Americas differs in significant respects from the predominantly British colonialism in India, the Middle East, and Africa that has produced the field of postcolonial studies. Iberian colonialism in the Americas began 250 years earlier, encountered different scientific and technical challenges because of a different geography (among other reasons), and was engaged by different peoples and cultures on both sides of the Atlantic than those who encountered each other in British colonialism. While these two kinds of anticolonialism share important concerns and perspectives, and Latin American decolonial scholars have insisted that they have learned a great deal from the earlier established postcolonial studies, these differences also create distinctive contexts, practices, and possibilities in Latin America, including for feminisms.²

In this article, I address primarily epistemological and ontological issues raised by this literature pertaining to the history and philosophy of science. The first section briefly summarizes the sixteenth century differences that were the starting point of the modernity/coloniality analyses and points to just a few of the still-emerging feminist issues about this early era. The second section focuses on the distinctive epistemic and political stances that Latin American decolonial theorists use today to frame such analyses: they intend to do theory “otherwise.” This Latin American project has been conceptualized through Gloria Anzaldúa’s influential “borderlands” thinking and aligns with the feminist standpoint methodology and other knowledge-from-below projects that have appeared in all of the social justice movements.³

1492: THE NEW WORLD SYSTEM EMERGES

The decolonial theorists argue that it was no accident that early elements of modernity began to appear in Europe precisely when the Spanish and Portuguese began to colonize the Americas. Modernity and Iberian colonialism are two inseparable halves of a newly emerging world system. This system began with the creation of two important trade routes that

-
2. Ileana Rodriguez and María Milagros López, ed., *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
 3. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987); Sandra Harding, *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

greatly expanded Europe's reach around the globe. One was from Portugal to Asia and the other from Spain to the Americas. Enrique Dussel puts the point this way:

I argue that while modernity is undoubtedly a European occurrence, it also originates in a dialectical relation with non-Europe. Modernity appears when Europe organizes the initial world-system and places itself at the center of world history over against a periphery equally constitutive of modernity. . . . When one conceives modernity as part of a center-periphery system instead of an independent European phenomenon, the meanings of modernity, its origin, development, present crisis, and its postmodern antithesis change.⁴

Thus the Americas, too, are the origin of modernity, not just Europe. European colonialism and its persistent residues and reinventions ("coloniality," in these writings) constitute the "darker side of modernity."⁵

New sciences and technologies

Reconceptualizing the causal connections between Iberian colonialism in the Americas and the origins of modernity has several significant consequences for feminist philosophies of science and technology. One is that the success of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial projects required new kinds of scientific and technical achievements. Thus modern Western sciences and technologies are implicated in the violent, oppressive, and destructive consequences of colonialism from 1492 onward. The voyagers needed an astronomy of the Southern Hemisphere and better principles of cartography to enable them to chart their locations and routes across the Atlantic and in the Americas. They needed better metallurgy and mining procedures to extract the silver and gold they would take back to Europe. They needed better climatology, oceanography, and nautical engineering, as we would identify such research today, to enable the voyagers and their precious cargoes to survive such journeys. They founded a number of technical institutes in Spain, Portugal, and South

4. Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "The Other" and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995), 9–10, 11.

5. Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

America in the sixteenth century to train pilots, navigators, cartographers and miners into the new sciences.⁶

Additionally, they needed knowledge of the dangerous and/or valuable new flora and fauna that they encountered, as well as social knowledge of the societies that they intended to conquer.⁷ Of course they extracted virtually all of their knowledge of “natural history” from the indigenes: “discovery” consisted primarily of asking indigenes to report what they already knew.⁸ Women’s as well as men’s Indigenous knowledge from the Americas contributed to the advance of “European” science.

It was three kinds of long-distance corporations whose activities, including interactions with the indigenes, created the early modern sciences: the Jesuits, the European trading companies, and the European empires.⁹ These sciences were far more important to the emergence of the scientific revolution than is conventionally recognized in the standard histories of science. Moreover, these long-distance sciences do not tend to exhibit the supposedly necessary Kuhnian paradigm shifts. Furthermore, there were virtually no women visible in standard accounts of these corporations. But that doesn’t mean that gender relations were not central to their development, as we shall see.

Successful colonization requires control of women’s labor and sexuality

Several studies have documented the importance of women’s family labor to efforts to resist colonization. The colonizers appropriated as much of the indigenes’ labor as they could for their economic and political projects. Conquests are always violent, and these were no exception. The conquistadors brutally enslaved indigenes and peasants, forcing them to provision and care for the colonizers, thus starving and killing the enslaved people. They were treated as easily replaceable sources of labor.¹⁰ Moreover, it is conventionally their lack of immunity to diseases

6. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in the Iberian World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

7. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

8. Canizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation*.

9. Steven J. Harris, “Long-Distance Corporations, Big Sciences, and the Geography of Knowledge,” *Configurations* 6, no. 2 (1998).

10. Todorov, *The Conquest of America*.

common in Europe that is claimed to be responsible for their hideous decimation during the early years of the Iberian colonialism. This was certainly one powerful cause of the genocide. However, it is also the case that the indigenes were already weakened by their ill treatment by the colonizers, increasing immensely their mortality by such infections.

The labor that the colonizers were least able to control was that of reproducing, provisioning, and caring for Indigenous children and other household members: reproducing the colonized kinship group, its culture and practices. Additionally, without such control, Indigenous domestic relations remained intact and thus a source of support for Indigenous resistance. Thus appropriating control of women's sexuality and domestic labor reduced the power of Indigenous men and of Indigenous communities. Households were the last sites of resistance to the colonizers, as Mina Davis Caulfield has argued. It was around the kitchen table that slave revolts were organized in the United States, as Angela Davis had documented.¹¹

Feminist scholars have insisted that this theme has been inappropriately neglected in the initial work of the Latin American decolonial theorists. Gender and sexuality considerations should not be regarded as an optional addition to analyses of colonialism; they are an intrinsic element of such phenomena. Furthermore, colonialism could not succeed without the constant interference in Indigenous sexual relations that was Iberian colonial policy. The Iberians legitimated and managed this disruption in different ways in different locations and at different times. The Portuguese and Spanish instituted different policies and practices, and there were differences within these cultural groups. María Lugones argues that the miscegenation policies introduced new, hierarchical, complex and rigid, pre-Darwinian, racial categories about blood purity that persist in Latin America to this day, as well as in the colonizers' homelands.¹² On this account, new sciences intended to establish the natural foundations of racist, sexist, and class social order were coproduced in both the colonized and the colonizing societies.

11. Mina Davis Caulfield, "Imperialism, the Family, and Cultures of Resistance," *Socialist Review* 4, no. 2 (1974); Angela Davis, "The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 2 (1971).

12. María Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, 369–90.

Imperial eyes

Mary Louise Pratt's influential analysis of colonialism's "imperial eyes," which are always also masculine eyes, certainly holds for the Spanish and Portuguese practices.¹³ European travelers' reports of just observing and simply reporting what was seen were often framed as having no consequences at all for the violence and destruction that was subsequently done by militaries and corporations, which had their own uses for such reports. Colonial scientists were always commenting on the economic value of local plants and Indigenous practices for Europeans and on how nature (including the indigenes) could be improved, as they collected samples and renamed everything on which their gazes focused. Scientific exploration inherently makes use of such "imperial eyes" — today no less than in the past. Its posture of innocence in the face of the consequences of its practices simply masks colonial realities. Establishing and maintaining this disconnect between scientific observation and the uses of such observations has taken a lot of epistemic and ontological work on the part of Western scientific communities.

Men's gender relations

Conventional historians, including many decolonial theorists, seem to think that gender issues cannot be relevant to colonial events and processes when they perceive no women in the worlds they observe (and even when they do see them). Yet, the significant roles in colonialism that have been the focus of historians' and popular attention are all hyper-masculine ones: the heroic navigators, conquistadors, traders, priests, Indigenous chiefs. In fact, colonialism is about creating powerful masculinities precisely through European expansion in service to God and gold, as the popular saying goes. Moreover, men's homosocial relations with each other form an important vector in this expansionist process (homosexual relations have been less frequently studied).

Feminist men's studies analyses have focused on a number of topics. For example, they have focused on the heraldic Christian medieval imagery of scientist/explorers as knights on religious missions of conquest.¹⁴ Also they focused on the gendered hierarchies between the

13. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

14. Canizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation*.

Jesuit pharmacologists, who officially authored texts on health remedies that their religious orders sold at great profit, and their Indigenous servants, who conducted the scientific work of collecting and organizing reports of local pharmacologies. This pharmacological work was part of the servants' feminized household services — cooking, cleaning, mending, and so on — that they performed for the European priests. The priests created familial gender relations in their households in the absence of women.¹⁵ Thus, classed and racialized gender relations between men in the development of colonial sciences are an important part of the picture.

“I THINK WHERE I STAND”

The desire for knowledge that is “otherwise,” or another knowledge, appears repeatedly in decolonial writings. For example, there is Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar’s “The Emergence of An-Other-Paradigm,” and Escobar’s “Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise.” Mignolo’s book series is titled, “Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations.” Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that *Another Knowledge is Possible*. Catherine Walsh writes of “gender and its otherwise.”¹⁶

“Otherwise” is always used to contrast with the conventional modern Western insistence on conceptual binaries. For example, “otherwise” is articulated as alternative to both neoliberal and Marxian understandings of democracy, anticolonialism, modernity, tradition, capitalism, ontology, epistemology, and positivism. It is used to characterize a refusal of favored Northern binary categories of gender, sexuality, and race. Thus Latin American decolonial thinkers insist on engaging with but moving through and past not just one kind of problematic way of thinking about knowledge and the world, but also its conventionally conceptualized alternative or opposite. These theorists resist the assumption that the conventional binary choices exhaust the reasonable possibilities.

-
15. Steven J. Harris, “Jesuit Scientific Activity in the Overseas Missions, 1540–1773,” *Isis* 96 (2005): 71–79.
 16. Mignolo and Escobar, *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*; Escobar, “Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise,” Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies* (New York: Verso, 2007); Catherine Walsh, “On Gender and Its ‘Otherwise,’” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, ed. Wendy Harcourt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

“Otherwise” is to provide a new framework that has learned from the older ones, one which relocates selective features of the older ones within a cognitive, ethical, cultural, economic, and political framework that centers relevant local values and interests. It is to create a world in which other worlds exist. Thus it poses a “third way” through or between prevailing binaries.

Mignolo adopted his notion of otherwise and “the colonial difference” from Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” thinking.¹⁷ He refers to Latin American decolonial theory in general as borderlands thinking, and Anzaldúa’s phrase is now used widely in this context. Such thinking refuses to assimilate to dominant, colonial categories of thought, but it also refuses to go away. Borderlands thinking directs researchers to start off thought from their everyday lives — from where they stand on the borders between modern and nonmodern assumptions and practices. “I think where I stand” is how Mignolo puts it. (He should probably have said “where we stand,” since such thinking locations are always only discursively identified.)

Otherwise and borderlands thought are thus also aligned with a continuum of oppositional knowledge projects sometimes referred to as “knowledge from below.” With debts to the Marxian “standpoint of the proletariat,” these exhibit a principled relativism, as Fredric Jameson described the standpoint methodological program that was articulated in Northern feminist research in the early 1970s.¹⁸ What Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith has proposed “changes the relation of the sociologist to the object of her knowledge and changes also her problematic.” She notes,

This reorganization involves first placing the sociologist where she is actually situated, namely at the beginning of those acts by which she knows or will come to know; and second, making her direct experience of the everyday world the primary ground of her knowledge.... To begin from direct experience and to return to it as a

17. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*; Walter Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity,” 342.

18. Fredric Jameson, “‘History and Class Consciousness’ as an Unfinished Project,” in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004).

constraint or “test” of the adequacy of a systematic knowledge is to begin from where we are located bodily.¹⁹

As these similarities indicate, whatever its users name it, this kind of thought virtually always emerges when a new group steps on the “stage of history” and says something like “things look different from the perspective of our lives.” Thus, “otherwise” articulates a kind of organic methodology, epistemology, ontology, and sociology of knowledge for social justice movements. As Santos puts it, this kind knowledge-production starting point is “rear guard theory,” in contrast to the “avant-garde theory” that Northern elites have produced.²⁰ Latin American decolonial theory is to start off from and remain close to issues in the diverse social justice movements that have emerged in Latin America in recent decades, from the Zapatistas in Mexico and Buen Vivir in the Andean highlands, to the World Social Forums that were created in opposition to the annual meetings of the global financial elites.

There are valuable differences in the focus of such thought, however, and how “otherwise” is conceptualized by different authors in different social justice contexts, while all are committed to producing knowledge from below. Consider just four more such examples. These have emerged from Black feminist research, collaborative research between modern scientists and Indigenous groups, new social relations between citizens and scientists in citizen science or civic science movements, and the different forms of sexuality and gender characteristic of nonmodern Latin American Indigenous groups.

Patricia Hill Collins’s early work provides one example of a distinctive and influential way of developing Black feminist research theory and methodologies.²¹ Collins locates her analysis at the conjunction of (white-supremacist) feminist and (androcentric) Black Power accounts. Black women’s lives are not understandable when sociologists use only feminist theory or only race theory to describe them. In such cases, sociologists fail to explain accurately how dominant institutions actually

19. Dorothy E. Smith, “Women’s Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology,” in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, 28, 29.

20. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 44.

21. Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*.

work. Collins focuses on a range of Black women's narratives, from slave narratives and the lyrics of blues songs to novels by Black women and sociological studies of what Black women know about the white women whose houses they clean and whose children they care for. Of course, Black women sociologists also occupy such outsider-within social positions in the discipline of sociology. Only thought from the intersections or entanglements of such outsider-within sites can grasp Black women's distinctive epistemological resources in a racist and sexist society. Moreover, Collins uses her standpoint to challenge central concerns of mainstream sociological thinking, such as what constitutes family, good parenting, community leadership, Black women's sexuality and relations with Black men, and the racist stereotypes of Black women in mainstream (white) popular thought and public policy.

Philosopher of archeology Alison Wylie, who coauthored the code of ethics for the American Archaeological Association, has explored the new ways that modern scientists and Indigenous groups are developing collaborative research projects that pursue both the questions of interest to the Indigenous groups and the questions of interest to scientists.²² No longer are the modern scientists permitted to drag out of the ground the bones of the ancestors of Indigenous peoples and take them off to a chemistry lab to experiment on them in order to answer their own research questions. Now the scientist must give up intellectual control of the research project. The research must be initiated also by Indigenous groups, and the archaeologists are permitted to contribute their skills, ask their own questions, if the indigenes agree to them. Many scientists have discovered that this kind of collaboration in fact produces new and valuable kinds of knowledge that the scientists on their own would never have realized could be available. In her earlier work, Wylie had asked feminist questions about the ways that women archaeologists approached their projects.

22. Alison Wylie, "A Plurality of Pluralisms: Collaborative Practice in Archeology," in *Objectivity in Science: New Perspectives from Science and Technology Studies*, ed. Flavia Padovani, Alan Richardson, and Jonathan Y. Tsou (New York: Springer, 2015); Louise Fortmann, ed., *Participatory Research in Conservation and Rural Livelihoods: Doing Science Together* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

Typical ways that scientists and their publics communicate and relate to each other have been radically transformed through citizen science or civic science groups.²³ One way this works is when citizens organize to demand that scientists and their funders do research on a topic of great concern to them. For example, when AIDS first was identified, it took extensive organizing by gay men and their friends and families to get the US federal government to commit the necessary funding to research the disease. Gay health groups organized doctors to collect data about the sick people they were seeing in their offices and the untested remedies they were using.²⁴ In another case, women who had undergone chemotherapy for breast cancer organized to demand research on what could be done to mitigate the continuing exhaustion and mental fuzziness that accompanied the chemotherapy. It turned out that nurses were much quicker than doctors to recognize this as a legitimate and urgent research topic.²⁵ By now, many areas of health, environment, and other issues have their own citizen science groups that collect the initial data and advocate for research attention and funding.

Finally, what were gender and sexuality in the Americas like before 1492? In the context of a Latin American decolonial history, Catherine Walsh writes about the “otherwise” of gender as a positioning beyond the standard masculinity and femininity of “a radically distinct desire and erotics of being, doing, feeling and knowing in relation.” It recognizes an “androgyny as originary whole” that “conjures forth gender’s otherwise.”

Before the European invasion, gender constructions in the Andes and Mesoamerica were understood as dynamic, fluid, open, and nonhierarchical. They were not based on anatomical distinctions but rather associated with performance, with what people do, and their ways of being in the world, ways that were not fixed but in constant

-
23. David Hess, “Science in an Era of Globalization: Alternative Pathways,” in *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader*, ed. Sandra Harding (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 419–38; Karin Backstrand, “Civic Science for Sustainability: Reframing the Role of Experts, Policy-Makers, and Citizens in Environmental Governance,” in *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader*, 439–58.
24. Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
25. Emily K. Abel and Saskia K. Subramanian, *After the Cure: The Untold Stories of Breast Cancer Survivors* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

movement, shift, modification, and fluid equilibrium.... Gender duality implied an interpenetration of the masculine and feminine, the existence of entities (real and supernatural) that incorporated female and male characteristics; nuances of combinations and of a continuum that easily moved between poles.²⁶

However, this is not just a phenomenon of the precolonial era, but remains active and empowering at the peripheries of modernity today. This androgynous creative force challenges male models of power and goes beyond gender as we know it. "It is an energy present and imagined in many indigenous and African-descendant cultures that transcends biology and sexual orientation, recalls the cosmic-force of creation... mediates between absolute opposites, and iterates a sacred-spiritual subjectivity and complimentary whole."²⁷ It remains "lived in the same locale in which hierarchies are socially invented and maintained."²⁸

Walsh identifies this otherwise of gender in alternatives to "the master's arsenal tools — of imperial reason — with which it is impossible to destroy his house."

What might it mean to think with and from postures, perspectives, and experiences that transgress, interrupt, and break with the universalisms, dualisms, and hegemonic pretensions that these (gender) categories announce and construct? How might we think with and from postures, perspectives, and experiences that de-essentialize, debiologize, and pluralize "women" without having to compare her/us to "man"?²⁹

In conclusion, the Latin American decolonial accounts and their feminist analyses draw attention to aspects of coloniality and anticoloniality, of the history and philosophy of science, and of gender, sexuality, and race that are either missing or articulated differently from how they appear in the earlier postcolonial accounts. They suggest, also, that it might be preferable to think in terms of an anticolonial "platform" on which can be mounted the diversity of analyses appropriate to the

26. Walsh, "On Gender and Its 'Otherwise,'" 8.

27. *Ibid.*, 10.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

different ways that coloniality and anticoloniality are expressed in different eras and places around the globe.