Coloniality of Gender

The coloniality of gender builds upon the coloniality of power, as developed by leading theorists in the decoloniality group, Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo. The coloniality of power is understood to act to dismantle ‘Other’ knowledges and ways of life, and is the persistent categorical and discriminatory discourse that is reflected in the social and economic structures of modern postcolonial societies. María Lugones, a leading decolonial theorist and member of the decoloniality group, adjusts Quijano’s formulation of the coloniality of power through a deeper consideration of gender and its entwined relationship with race. She argues that Quijano’s understanding of sex/gender as defined by patriarchal and heterosexual contestations over “sexual access” is a paradoxically Eurocentered understanding of gender. She therefore sees Quijano’s framework as a further means through which the subjection and disempowerment of colonised women can be obscured.

Understanding these features of the organization of gender in the modern/colonial gender system—the biological dimorphism, the patriarchal and heterosexual organizations of relations—is crucial to an understanding of the differential gender arrangements along “racial” lines. Biological dimorphism, heterosexual patriarchy are all characteristic of what I call the “light” side of the
colonial/modern organization of gender. Hegemonically these are written large over the meaning of gender. Quijano seems not to be aware of his accepting this hegemonic meaning of gender.

(Lugones 2008: 2)

Lugones moves beyond this critique to explain how coloniality permeates all aspects of social existence and gives rise to new social and geo-cultural identities, thereby creating gendered identities, as well as racial identities.

From a coloniality of gender perspective, colonisation altered the indigenous sense of self and identity, as well as understandings of cosmology, and of gender relations. In so doing, modernity/coloniality implemented European understandings of gender and sex, erasing the various conceptualisations of sex and gender that pre-existed European modern/colonial gender systems. The concept of gender was introduced by Western colonisers and became a tool for domination that designates two binary oppositions and hierarchical social categories; women became defined by their subordinate relation to men in all categories. Colonisation thereby created the concepts of race and gender; the imposition of race accompanied the inferiorisation of the indigenous and the imposition of gender accompanied the inferiorisation of indigenous women.
Raewyn Connell explains that the pre-colonial conceptions of gender are complex and structured differently from European conceptions. However, gendered violence played a formative role in the shaping of colonial societies, and subsequently flourished post-colonisation through the coloniality of gender. In her own words:

Colonization itself was a gendered act, carried out by imperial workforces, overwhelmingly men, drawn from masculinized occupations such as soldiering and long-distance trade. The rape of women of colonized societies was a normal part of conquest. The colonial state was built as a power structure operated by men, based on continuing force. Brutality was built in to colonial societies

(Connell, 2014).

Oyèrónke’Oyèwùmí, a leading post/de-colonial feminist scholar and gender theorist, finds from her research of the Yorùbá people, of the contemporary Nigerian, Benin, and Togo states, that gender was not an organizing principle in Yorùbá society prior to colonisation; there simply was no gender system in place in Yorùbá society and culture. The subsequent oppressive gender system that was imposed on Yorùbá society through colonialism encompasses the subordination of females in every aspect of life. Oyèwùmí explains that the concept of gender was introduced by the West as a tool for domination that designates two binary oppositions and hierarchical social categories; women became defined in their relation to men and
were unable to have power, own land or participate in leadership roles in society. The implementation of the concept of gender in Yorùbá society resulted in the emergence of women as an identifiable category subordinate to men in all situations.

Audra Simpson provides insight into how lingering heteronormative discourses of settler-colonialism inform political structures in contemporary Canada, exposing how the indigenous female body comes under scrutiny in gendered settler-colonial political structures. Simpson highlights the erasure of Native women within the settler-colonial geopolitical structures by discussing the hunger strike of Chief Theresa Spence, of the Attawapiskat First Nation. Chief Theresa Spence’s hunger strike, in December and January 2012-13, was met with public incredulity and scepticism. Simpson cites blog posts, editorial commentary, mainstream media and popular discourse in responses to Spence’s hunger strike revealing how Spence’s political claims were ignored but her body came under attack. Simpson identifies the sexist and racist response to the female Native body to question the hetero-patriarchal normative of settler-colonial Canada.

From the brutality of colonisation to the gendered and racial identities of Native and Indigenous women in contemporary post-colonial societies, María Lugones leads the call for decolonial feminism, and argues for a review of modernity/coloniality from a consciousness of race, gender, and sexuality. Decolonial feminism, like postcolonial feminism, forms part of the third wave of feminism and provides a structure for understanding and constructing identity for non-Western women, particularly Indigenous and other women of colour. Decolonial feminism deconstructs Western gender concepts that have become normalised, and seeks
to recover indigenous worldviews of gender and incorporate them into feminist discourse. Feminists working within this frame are a community of mainly Native and indigenous women scholars constructing a new feminist geopolitics of knowledge.

**Essential Reading**


**Further Reading**


Questions

How does the coloniality of gender influence the coloniality of power?

What is the relationship between decolonial feminism and postcolonial feminism?

What is the relationship between race, gender, and sexuality in the coloniality of gender?

How are decolonial feminists contributing to a new geopolitics of knowledge?
Submitted by Jennifer Manning