



Challenging Academic Debates on Womanhood: A Decolonial Approach to Caribbean and Latin American Identities

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The title is nothing short of a great one that has been a long time coming within racism studies, critical race theory, gender studies, area studies and feminism, but it gives me pause for thought. This is so because what links the Caribbean and Latin America – a huge and diverse region in terms of peoples, languages and cultures – is a common history. In 1492, Christopher Columbus’s voyage ignited ruthless exploitation, genocide of indigenous populations, destruction of societies, nations and empires, European colonialism, African/African descent enslavement, Indian Subcontinental, Chinese and Javanese indentureship, as well as the development of new societies and cultures within the so-called ‘New World’ (Wynter, 1991). ‘The Caribbean’ and ‘Latin America’ as regions emerged out of terror, trauma, displacement, and loss, and their very names tell of the history of their emergence from Europeans’ discourse/power/knowledge complex. White Europeans were instantiated as the pinnacle of humanity, distinct from those other humans who were encountered and dubbed less than those subalterns, whose proper place is subjugation. Sylvia Wynter (1995) speaks about this as the effect of the Christian *propter nos*, which insisted that Caribbean indigenous populations, such as the Tainos and Arawaks, and Latin American indigenous populations, such as the Aztecs and Guarani, be moulded into Christians with no rights, including no rights over life. *Propter nos* became the basis of the bio-politics (Foucault, 2008), created by the racialised necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) of European colonialism, wealth extraction and plantation economies (Best & Levitt, 2009), extending from 1492 to the 1800s when African and African descent enslavement ended and indentureship began in some of the region. Economically, the plantation economies, created as



an appendage of European metropolitan economies, extended from 1492 until today, producing permanent dependence on foreign ownership, the IMF and World Bank.

As we broaden the boundaries of our affiliative, affective and political circle to link these two diverse regions, locating 1492 and its aftermath as that which produces our connectivity, this also means that we have to think about creolisation. This process was the great binding force within the region's nation states, as they were ideologically constructed as particularistic by their elites (Braithwaite, 2005; Ortiz, 1995). Moreover, creolisation as an anti-colonial impetus for movement away from "the philosophies of the One of the West" (Glissant, 1997) was also the point of the emergence of Caribbean decolonial thought (Wynter, 2003; Fanon, 1986; Césaire, 2001; Garvey, 2014), as it sought to create a Black worlding of the world outside of Eurocentrism. Indeed, Fanon's work in particular has been the foundation of Hispanophone Latin American decolonial thought. A decolonial attitude continues to lie at the centre of Caribbean and Latin American identifications even whilst the regions remain locked in neo-colonial relationships with former European colonisers and the United States.

What about these identities contained within the title? This title begs me to insert 'Black African descent' before womanhood or before Caribbean and Latin American. The will to change this title is based on my own positionality, the fact that 'Caribbean and Latin American' and 'Black African descent' as identification categories implicate mixing and European, Indigenous, Indian Sub-continental, Chinese, Javanese, Jewish, Syrian, and Lebanese ancestry but also that Blackness still impacts our lives as women from the South whether we live there or in the Global North West, since we live in the contexts of its emergence. Further, in parts of Latin America, Blackness struggles to be acknowledged as part of the nation. Of course, I do not want to say that we all occupy the same position as Black African descent women, as that would be disingenuous. We all know that class, skin colour, hair texture, education, gender identity, sexuality, gender, race, location and myriad other intersections texture our lives differently. However, there still remain points of similarity that connect us to each other as Black African descent women, whether in Havana, Trinidad, Bogota or Rio de Janeiro. It is these connections with which I can only partially attempt to engage, in order to map the outlines of what a decolonial approach to our identifications might look like in the times and spaces

in which we find ourselves within Black Atlantic zones, where strategic essentialism is politically necessary in 'post-race' states. What is interesting analytically, of course, is that we still have to start from the question of who is 'woman' in order to think through a Black African descent woman's approach to decoloniality (Wynter, 2006). Allied to this is the continuing deeply divisive political issue of who is or can be the 'authentic' Black African descent woman and, therefore, who has the right to speak for 'us' as an organic community. It is also important to look at the body itself as the position from which a decolonial approach to questions of identification must or, indeed, can proceed. However, what is this 'Black' which prefaces African descent, and how can it continue to be conceptualised given the varying approaches to race and nation in the regions with a call to 'Mama Africa' (Pinho, 2010; Cooper, 1995), centuries old Black Nationalisms (Garvey, 2014) and alter/native feminisms (Reddock, 2004; Espinosa-Miñoso, 2014)? Let us turn to looking at Blackness as a similarity and beloved home but also a space of intimate trauma and Black imposed subalternity, in order to begin some of the projects of its decolonisation.

Blackness: Intimate trauma, subalternity, decoloniality

In the white worlding of the world, within which the academy generates the study of race and racism, Blackness and whiteness have been constructed in social, institutional and psychic life through a racialised "existential socio-diagnostics [which is] a convergence of individual involvement in social processes and the imposition of social processes on individualisation" (Gordon, 1997, p. 41). Within this existential socio-diagnostics, Jamaican feminist philosopher and cultural theorist, Sylvia Wynter OJ (2006), highlights the problem of consciousness and who can speak within the representational regimes established by Eurocentric hetero-patriarchal power/knowledge regimes:

You cannot solve the issue of 'consciousness' in terms of their body of knowledge. You just can't. Just as within the medieval order of knowledge there was no way in which you could explain why it is that certain planets seemed to be moving backwards. Because you were coming from a geocentric model, right?

So you had to 'know' the world in that way. Whereas from our 'Man-centric' model, we cannot solve 'consciousness' because Man is a purely ontogenetic/purely biological conception of being, who then creates 'culture'. So if we say consciousness is constructed who does the constructing? You see? (Wynter, 2006, p. 2)

She shows here the problem of power in constructing the world, culture and bodies, which must lie at the heart of an examination of who is let into the circle of representation and who can therefore speak (Spivak, 1993). That is how the intersections which texture our lives establish the conditions for who is made (in)visible in political struggle. The issues highlighted by Wynter here of who constructs consciousness and culture lead us to other important issues. That is, how it is that there is still feminist contestation over the construction of Black women's political consciousness, as well as struggle within Black politics and popular culture over the representation of Black women's bodies, both of which are still important politically. We are still not past these issues, and they still need to be decolonised, so as to remove intimate trauma and the divisions of Black-imposed subalternity.

This is significant because what is played again and again through Black African descent women's (in)visibility and the relations of distance and proximity to their bodies is "a violent namelessness committed against blacks whose familiarity is so familiar that it transforms the protective dynamics of anonymity itself" (Gordon, 1997b, p. 13). For anti-black racists, Black African descent women are not nameless; rather, we are the very familiar nothing (Gordon, 1997, p. 28), established by whiteness since colonialism, enslavement and indentureship. We are bodies with which no relationality is possible because we are visible only as white constructions. Thus, as Black African descent women, we experience the absent/presence, 'the perversity of 'seen invisibility' (Gordon, 1997b, p. 37), the hatred, sexism and racism contained in the term 'misogynoir,' coined by Moya Bailey in 2010 ("Meet Moya Bailey," 2010).

Misogynoir-ist theory keeps in place Black/white opposition through sociogenesis (Wynter, 2001). "Sociogenesis refers to the role of human institutions in the constitution of phenomena that human beings have come to regard as 'natural' in the physicalist sense of depending on physical nature" (Gordon, 1997, p. 33). If Black African descent women remain such 'things,' this denies their perspective on

the world, their 'worlding of the world' so to speak (Yancy, 2008). Notice the plural 'women' as we should resist the trap of homogenisation which strategic essentialist politics asks us to do because to homogenise is to erase the very differences which are fundamental to the decolonial project with which we are attempting to engage by going beyond the binary logic of colonial opposition. This logic births trauma, alienation and subalternity within Black women's political and intimate identifications.

Edouard Glissant (1997, p. 17) described decolonisation's going beyond this:

The conquered or visited peoples are ... forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror. A tragic variation of the search for identity. For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders. Whereas the Western nation is first of all an "opposite" for colonised peoples identity will be primarily "opposed to" – that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonisation will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit.

Glissant reminds us that in decolonising Black African descent women's identifications we have to leave behind that essentialist Black African descent Caribbean and Latin American womanhood, which is only capable of emerging through whiteness. What we must engage with instead is a becoming on our terms, a becoming which exists within our cultural memory of revolts, maroonage, anti-colonial struggle and the development of theory and politics beginning from Black African descent women's bodies. This is a becoming which counters "the phobic dimension of anti-black [woman] racism" (Gordon, 1997, p. 36) through decolonising the power, knowledge and effect of misogynoir. Becoming, power, knowledge and affect are important for the project of decolonising identifications as it has inserted the very Black African descent women's bodies and psyches which have hitherto been absent-presences. In the decolonising task set forth by Wynter (2006) and Glissant (1997), we must decentre whiteness but centre racism by taking a critical position on matters of racialised gender, racism and their intersections. We move away from the limitation of being solely opposed to whiteness

by undertaking explorations of anti-Black African descent woman racism from the position that “racism is ordinary” (Gilroy, 2004) and “everyday racism defines [racialised gender], interprets it, and decrees what the personal and institutional work of race will be” (Holland, 2012, p. 3). As Black African descent women, we are not beyond racism, patriarchy, homophobia, class discrimination and able-ism, even as we strive to become ourselves on our terms.

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