

BUILDING DECOLONIAL FEMINIST PEDAGOGIES

Ochy Curiel Pichardo¹

Translated by Miguel Ángel Blanco Martínez

1→ Ochy Curiel is Afro-Caribbean, born in the Dominican Republic and resident in Colombia. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work, and Master's and Doctorate's Degrees in Social Anthropology at Universidad Nacional de Colombia. She is a specialist in Higher Education with a major in Social Sciences. She is a professor and scholar at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and at the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. She is the co-founder of the Grupo Latinoamericano de Estudios, Formación y Acción Feminista (GLEFAS). She is also a singer-songwriter.

I thank the invitation to this space. I thank those who made it possible.

I was born and raised in the Caribbean, more specifically in the Dominican Republic, a country that shares the island with Haiti as its neighboring country. This island was the first laboratory of colonization and, at the same time, where the biggest resistances and decolonization processes were carried out.

I come from a feminist genealogy. Firstly, from that which universalized women according to their gender without considering a complex matrix of oppression identifying “race,” class, sexuality, and geo-politics in many experiences. Later, from my Afro-Caribbean condition, as such a White and hegemonic feminism became insufficient. For this reason, along with fellow *compañeras* we built in the region an Afro-descendant feminism where we placed a politics and theorization imbricating all oppressions. I considered myself as a lesbian feminist challenging the heterosexual regime. I was also part of a Latin American autonomous branch that contested the institutionalization of feminism through the rise of NGOs, the dependence on international cooperation, and the State. I then encountered the decolonial turn, which delineates that colonialism configured a matrix of power, defined as coloniality,² that has continued to the present strengthening racial, gender-based social, and epistemic hierarchies.

All the above was key for me to position myself as a decolonial, anti-racist, and *cimarrona* feminist.³ This has led me to a revision process, the redefinition of the former political places, and re-interpretation of narratives displayed by hegemonic history to account—instead—for the effects of colonialism in the social and racial structures not only of the continent, but in my own life.

The decolonial feminism where I position myself questions

- 2 → Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder, Eurocentrismo y América Latina,” in *La colonialidad del saber: Eurocentrismo y Ciencias Sociales*, ed. Edgardo Lander (Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales), 1-14.
- 3 → Translator’s note. *Cimarronaje* addresses the actions of the enslaved and colonized to escape from slavery and build free spaces with their own currencies in different territories across Abya Yala. Some of these were known as *Palenques*, *Quilombos*, or *Cumbres*, among others. For more information, see: Ochy Curiel and María Galindo, *Descolonización y despatriarcalización de y desde los feminismos de Abya Yala* (ACSUR-Las Segovias, 2015), 13.

hegemonic feminism in its theories and political practices for being racist and classist by reproducing the universalization of the woman-subject that keeps conceiving of Black and Indigenous women as lacking agency, hence perceiving and assuming them only as victims of patriarchy. Decolonial feminism approaches race, gender, class, (hetero)sexuality, and geo-politics as a systemic and structural matrix of oppression that can only be understood from the critical consideration of modernity / coloniality axis of power.

This approach stands as a political positioning imbricating collective political thinking and praxis from autonomy and self-management. It also articulates a *cimarrón* liberation project not only for women but for the wretched of the earth more generally, and is influenced by other ontological relationalities—like those fostered by a manifold of Indigenous and Afro-communities in the region developing other forms of doing that are not recognized within colonial institutions.

After having clarified this, I proceed now to address the central topic of this manuscript: decolonial feminist pedagogies.

The simplest and most widespread Euro-centered definition of pedagogy is the science whose object of study renders education as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Nevertheless, pedagogy, just like that, has implied the reproduction of the coloniality of knowledge. This rests upon a Euro-centric consideration that legitimizes the assumption of a neutral, objective, and a de-contextualized type of knowledge reproducing the domination logics to keep the status quo sustaining inequalities and social hierarchies.

Against this vision, critical pedagogies emerged in many parts of the world to reverse this dominant model, challenging the knowledge pattern it produces by situating education in the interest of social transformation. We could cite the Frankfurt School of Social Sciences, the Budapest School, and—more fundamentally—the pedagogy of the oppressed developed by Paulo Freire in Brazil.⁴

Freire encouraged awareness-raising pedagogies enacting a critical reading of economic, social, and political orders. Via literacy

4 → Paulo Freire, (1921-1997) & Ramos, M.B. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press. 1970).

processes, he aspired to the liberation of all the oppressed, thus conceiving popular education as a method, praxis, theory, and modes of doing enhancing dialogical approaches to facilitate their humanization.⁵ In this light, Freire's pedagogical proposal focused on several keys: the oppressed would become aware of their oppressed condition and consequently seek for their emancipation from oppressors; a shift to be undertaken from autonomy and the articulation of hope as a leading utopia.⁶ This kind of education would be liberating for the oppressed and would craft their freedom.

For these reasons, Paulo Freire's pedagogical contribution was and continues to be an important reference for critical pedagogies not only for Abya Yala but for the world. His was a revolutionary proposal that challenged and broke with traditional educational forms and the manners in which knowledge was conceived, and ingrained a liberation project. However, Freire's articulation displayed important limits.

One of these limits, as Catherine Walsh has noted,⁷ is the disregarding of modernity/coloniality in his elucidation of domination. Paulo Freire did not consider the particularity of those "oppressed" as defined from what Walter Mignolo has called the colonial difference.⁸ That is, Black and Indigenous people since the very moment of colonization were deemed inferior, dehumanized, and obviously oppressed. In addition, Walsh highlights two further issues: Freire neither referred to the historical resistances these groups have deployed in many spaces and times under decolonization process, nor challenged anthropocentrism by not relating to non-human beings. However, and as Walsh herself notices, Paulo Freire's

5 → Paulo Freire, *Pedagogía del oprimido*, trans. Jorge Mellado (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1970).

6 → Paulo Freire, *Pedagogía de la esperanza*, trans. Stella Mastrangelo (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002).

7 → Catherine Walsh, "Introducción. Lo pedagógico y lo decolonial: Entretejiendo caminos," in *Pedagogías decoloniales: Prácticas insurgentes de resistir, (re)existir y (re)vivir. TOMO I*, ed. Catherine Walsh (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2013), 23-68.

8 → "By introducing the notion of colonial difference, I will be able to expand on Dussel's notion of transmodernity and Quijano's coloniality of power." (p. 58) Walter Mignolo. "The Geopolitics of knowledge and the colonial difference." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101:1, Winter (2002). Duke University Press.

pedagogical model becomes a relevant antecedent for decolonial pedagogies.

On its part, feminist pedagogy can also be stated as a critical pedagogy striving for disrupting the androcentric pedagogical rationality by offering a critique of patriarchy and the sexism causing inequality for “women.” From different methodologies and contents, this pedagogical alternative has generally analyzed social and patriarchal structures as well as provided action proposals to break with such cultural and socialization processes; achieving, in turn, transformation and emancipation—especially for women.

Nevertheless, feminist pedagogies have neither considered the power matrix exerted by modernity / coloniality. As Iris Hernández has analyzed:

Even though feminism provides a relevant critique against the hegemonic order, it still operates within a modern / colonial power matrix and, because of this, keeps affecting the same subjects and knowledges devastated by the conquest.⁹

Hernández points out that feminism, through different pedagogical forms, has unveiled power relations among men and women, even the one produced within the heterosexual regime. However, because of its strict focus on gender, feminism disregarded the European colonial imposition of gender,¹⁰ which subordinates to what it addresses as other axes of equality. Hernández accounts that, although some feminist pedagogies consider intersectionality by implementing race and class, they do so in an additive, accumulative, and descriptive fashion without realizing how colonial and neocolonial hierarchies operate within the power matrix.

This is evident in several feminist proposals. Their genealogy is

9 → Iris Hernández Morales, “Hacia un currículum feminista decolonial,” *Nomadías* 28 (2019): 45. Personal translation. Original quote: “*Si bien el feminismo representa una crítica relevante al orden hegemónico, aún opera vinculado a la matriz de poder moderno/colonial y por lo mismo afecta a lxs mismxs sujetxs y saberes devastados por la conquista.*”

10 → María Lugones, “Colonialidad y Género: Hacia un feminismo descolonial,” in *Género y Descolonialidad*, ed. Walter Dignolo (Buenos Aires: Del Signo, 2008), 13-25.

Euro-North-centric. Such concepts like patriarchy, gender, and sexual division of labor are defined without a full historicity according only to the experiences of White women from the Global North, reproducing in consequence the modern / colonial order.

TOWARD DECOLONIAL FEMINIST PEDAGOGIES

I understand as decolonial feminist pedagogies those knowledge-production practices challenging the modernity / coloniality relationship.

This means to realize that Western modernity has been possible due to colonialism resulting in racial, class, sex / sexuality, and epistemic hierarchies leading to the dehumanization of those beings excluded from the modern paradigm—that is, the White, heterosexual, catholic, liberal citizen. Historically, people with colonial difference have been placed at the bottom of social hierarchies and as victims of plunder, extractivism of their lands, eradication of their social fabric, and war. It is about comprehending, and hence questioning, the anthropocentric logics subordinating every being to the human. It is about contesting the Euro-North-centered knowledge that legitimizes some knowledges over others through official and hegemonic narratives that have silenced other narratives.

Decolonial feminist pedagogies are not about schooled knowledges. They emerge from the memories of villages and communities, social struggles, and mobilizations in dialogical relationships that engage the unlearning of colonial knowledges through collective thinking and action.

Decolonial pedagogies are based in an intellectual *cimarronaje* questioning the categories produced by the coloniality of power that even feminism and the left have supported,¹¹ and that have placed colonized subjects in exclusion and invisibility. It is about:

11 → Ochy Curiel, "Hacia la construcción de un feminismo decolonizado," in *Aproximaciones críticas a las prácticas teórico-políticas del feminismo latinoamericano*, ed. Yuderkys Espinosa (Buenos Aires: En la frontera, 2010), 69-78.

Identifying concepts, categories, theories that emerge from subalternized experiences generally produced in collectivity that hold the possibility to generalize without universalize, to explain different realities to disrupt the imaginary that such knowledges are local, individual, with no alternative to be communicated (Curiel 2014, 13).¹²

At the same time, it is about retrieving, legitimizing, and acknowledging other knowledges produced by subjects from their everyday and communitarian practices that create and recreate livable worlds to strengthen their social fabric from relational ontologies and question anthropocentrism.

Decolonial feminist pedagogies do not stay on women, although also approach the violences exerted onto them, but rather on all the wretched of the earth affected by coloniality,¹³ acknowledging them as the actors of decolonization, now and then. Decolonial feminist pedagogies approach the matrix of oppression that entails to understand how racism, heterosexuality, classism, anthropocentrism, and geo-politics are imbricated in the life of subalternized people while building a liberation project. It supposes that subalternized subjects themselves undertake research processes opposed to a research perspective rendering them as raw material for academic merits of generally White or White *Mestizo* people in academic or State institutions.

Decolonial feminist pedagogies prioritize doing, generating forms of knowledge-doing that are not solely written-based. Orality, cultural creation, music, dancing, painting, cooking, emotions, and spirituality

12 → Ochy Curiel, "Construyendo metodologías feministas desde el feminismo decolonial," in *Otras formas de (re)conocer*, ed. Irantzu Mendia Azkue, Marta Luxán, Matxalen Legarreta, Gloria Guzmán, Iker Zirion, and Iokin Azpiazu Carballo (Donosti: Universidad del País Vasco-Hegoa, 2014), 45-60. Personal translation. Original quote: "*Identificar conceptos, categorías, teorías, que surgen desde las experiencias subalternizadas, que son generalmente producidas colectivamente, que tienen la posibilidad de generalizar sin universalizar, de explicar distintas realidades para romper el imaginario de que estos conocimientos son locales, individuales, sin posibilidad ser comunicados.*"

13 → Frantz Fanon, *Los condenados de la Tierra*, trans. Julieta Campos (México, D.F: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963).

are key forms of decolonial doing challenging the hegemonic schooled knowledge. These forms of doing, which belong to what is known as subjugated knowledges, are quotidian productions that configure social and human relationships, challenge the modern/colonial order, and are responsible for an alternative memory against the memories built by hegemonic narratives—all of which constitutes a dignity restorative process to heal the pain and the violence derived from coloniality.

CIMARRONAS DECOLONIAL FEMINIST SCHOOLS

Since decolonial feminist practices are collective actions, I would like to introduce an experience carried out by *Grupo Latinoamericano de Formación y Acción Feminista* (GLEFAS)—a fabric of activists and thinkers from many places in Abya Yala that we built from a decolonial feminist thinking and doing.

The Decolonial Feminist School has been in development since 2016 and it aims to motivate Afro-descendant children, adolescents, young people, and activists from impoverished communities to strengthen their Afro-Caribbean identity and to analyze the racist, sexist, and classist violences they are subjected to so that they can understand and confront them. These schools encourage such communities to identify and acknowledge different forms of communitarian doing and resistance that have enabled, over the centuries, the continuity of life and forms characteristic of *buen vivir*.¹⁴ The first schools were addressed to children and adolescents through *Kalalu Danza*, a socio-cultural process merging dance with creation. Later, we focused on young activists so that they become the reproducers of the knowledges generated in their collectives and communities. Every year the school welcomes approximately twenty-five participants.

The school applies, among others, popular education, music,

¹⁴ → Translator's note. *Vivir Bien/Buen Vivir* refers to the Indigenous-led decolonizing philosophies implemented by some Latin American socialist States during the later decades. For more information, see: Ochy Curiel and María Galindo, *Descolonización y despatriarcalización de y desde los feminismos de Abya Yala* (ACSUR-Las Segovias, 2015), 14.

video, and team-work methodologies from participants' individual and collective experiences as the center. In this manner, we approach topics such as the coloniality of power, being, knowledge, gender, modernity, systemic racism and racism in the island, Nation-States, democracy, coloniality, and development logics. We also engage—among many other things—going through resistances like those of Caribbean thinkers, *buen vivir*, *cimarronaje*, and decolonial pedagogies and research.

These schools have facilitated two important things: the rise of collectives from a decolonial *cimarrona* feminist perspective and a closer approximation to Haiti given the fragmentation of the island—firstly on account of the colonizers, then of the *criollos*. Participation is shared by both Dominican and Haitian activists.

This is how from GLEFAS we conceive of decolonial feminist pedagogies: as practices decentering colonial knowledges and methodologies as well as proposing horizons for dignity by retrieving the knowledges and practices of the communities to build a political project that faces the effects of modernity / coloniality while acknowledging the resistances communities themselves carry out to confront them. ■

