

Light and Dark: Intersections of Gender and Race in Butler and Lugones

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Within feminist philosophy, the need to recognize how gender intersects with other axes of difference, notably race, has long been recognized. However, while an intersectional perspective on gender is generally widely supported, intersectionality is sometimes taken up in an additive sense. That is, an intersectional approach is, in practice, often taken to mean expanding the focus to look not at gender in isolation but instead to look at gender *and* race, or to recognize the different experiences of white and racialized women, for instance. While these approaches are important and valuable in their own right, recognizing the mutual constitution and co-construction of gender and race demands a different approach altogether.¹ What does it mean to understand gender as inherently and constitutively shaped by and through race/racialization? Where does this leave – or, rather, take – the theoretical apparatus developed for theorizing and analyzing gender in feminist philosophy?

The decolonial feminist philosopher María Lugones posits that we should understand gender *itself* as a racialized category and distinguishes between a “light” and a “dark” side of what she, drawing on the decolonial tradition, calls the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones 2007; Lugones 2008).² Lugones criticizes other feminist thinkers for focusing predominantly on the so-called “light” side of the colonial/modern gender system and ignoring its constitutive other – its “dark” side. This paper asks to which extent Lugones’ critique is legitimately directed at the work of Judith Butler, arguably one of the most famous and influential theorizations of gender of the late 20th century.³ Does Butler’s thinking focus on what Lugones calls the “light” side of gender, at the expense of recognizing its “dark” side? Does it overlook the mutual constitution and co-construction of gender, race, and coloniality, and if so, at what cost?

To assess this, I will first introduce Lugones’ notion of the coloniality of gender. Next, I will examine whether her critique of “white feminism” should be understood to include also Butler’s theorization of gender. I

argue that, while race and coloniality do not feature prominently in Butler's theorizations of gender, that does not mean that these frameworks are in themselves incompatible. On many key points, we can think of Butler and Lugones in conjunction with one another.⁴ However, there is a crucial point where Butler's thinking goes a step further than Lugones', and that is in the questioning of biological essentialism. Although Lugones claims to go *beyond* the sex/gender distinction, biological reasoning is nonetheless at work in the key examples she puts forward. While Lugones' intervention allows to diagnose a form of "race trouble" in Butler, with Butler we can see a form of "gender trouble" at work in Lugones' thought. This paper thus brings these two feminist thinkers in conversation with one another – using Lugones to interrogate Butler, and using Butler to interrogate Lugones – in order to advance an understanding of the relation of gender and race in the context of coloniality.

The Coloniality of Gender

In introducing her framework of the "coloniality of gender," the decolonial feminist philosopher Maria Lugones brings black feminism and women of color feminism (specifically the framework of intersectionality) into dialogue with decolonial theory. She draws on the decolonial framework of the "coloniality of power" developed by Anibal Quijano (cf. Quijano 2007) but also argues that decolonial thinkers before her have overlooked or even naturalized gender. By contrast, Lugones brings gender into the picture and argues that we need to understand "race as gendered and gender as raced" (Lugones 2007, 202). In "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," she explains:

"Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing."

(Lugones 2007, 186)

Here, Lugones posits that “gender” as we know it today is foundationally a *colonial* construction. It was constructed in Eurocentric modernity, and violently (yet differentially) imposed upon colonized peoples and, in the process, erased other ways of knowing and being. Gender and the colonality of power are mutually constitutive for Lugones (Lugones 2007, 202).

It is important to note that this colonial/modern gender system is not uniform or homogenous, according to Lugones. While colonialism “exported” globally a specific gender system and, in doing so, eradicated other forms of social organization and categorization that were present in pre-colonial societies, such as seniority, that does not imply that colonized and racialized people were fully and equally inscribed in this Western gender order. Rather, they were denied access to the hegemonic gender system at crucial points. To clarify this differential “access” to the colonial/modern gender system, Lugones speaks of a “light” and a “dark” side. The “light” side is the “Western” or “white” gender order, which Lugones understands as being characterized by biological dimorphism, heterosexuality, and patriarchy (190). The “dark” side is its constitutive other: it is marked by dehumanization and animalization (203), and Lugones describes it as “thoroughly violent” (206). Racialized and colonized women were denied the characteristics and the status of a femininity marked as white, Western, and bourgeois. In this vein, Lugones writes that

“The light side constructs gender and gender relations hegemonically, ordering *only* the lives of white bourgeois men and women and constituting the colonial/modern meaning of men and women.”

(Lugones 2007, 206, my emphasis)

On the one hand, Lugones notes that *both* the “light” and the “dark” side of the colonial/modern gender system are violent and oppressive. In this vein, she urges us to “understand the depth and force of violence in the production of both the light and the dark sides of the colonial/modern gender system” (Lugones 2007, 201). On the other hand, she positions the dark side as more (explicitly) violent than the light side. As oppressive as it may be, there are also advantages to the light side, that are denied to the dark side: “Colonized females got the inferior status of gendering as women, without any of the privileges accompanying that status for white

bourgeois women” (203). This terminology of “light” and “dark” supports the differential weight Lugones gives to each side of the coin.

Lugones connects her introduction of the notion of the coloniality of gender to a critique of what she – albeit carefully and hesitantly – names “white feminist theorizing and practice,” that is, a feminism that does not (adequately) take into account race (187). This type of feminist thinking does not recognize the intersections of gender with race and, in doing so, it focuses on the “light side” of the colonial/modern gender system and overlooks the dark side. She contends that “there has been a persistent absence of a deep imbrication of race into the analysis that takes gender and sexuality as central in much white feminist theory and practice, particularly feminist philosophy” (189). Here, Lugones’ critique of “white feminism” connects to critiques made by black and women of color feminists since the early 1980s (Amos & Parmar 1984; Carby [1982] 1997; Collins 2009 [1990]; Hooks 1981). However, Lugones makes these points in a series of articles in the early 2000s, suggesting that feminist philosophy has not taken these critiques to heart and that the recognition of the mutual imbrication of race and gender is *still* lacking in the field. This leads me to ask to which extent we can say that this is the case for one of the most prominent gender theorists of the late 20th century, Judith Butler. Can their work be characterized as “white” in the sense that Lugones’ implies; or is it, in fact, compatible with the insights of Lugones? To assess this, I turn to Butler next.

Race Trouble in Butler?

Judith Butler’s theorization of gender as performative has had a big influence on the field of feminist philosophy (Vasterling 1999). In this section, I will not go deeply into Butler’s theorization of gender but rather focus on assessing the intersectional nature of their approach. In the very first pages of *Gender Trouble*, Butler asserts that:

“Gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.”

(Butler 1990, 4)

In other words, Butler, at the outset, recognizes that gender is intricately entangled with other axes of difference, to the extent that these can hardly be disentangled and cannot but be considered in their mutual entanglement. In addition, Butler is very critical of a universal(izing) notion of “woman” or “patriarchy,” noting that such a conception can effectively “colonize” non-Western cultures (Butler 1990, 3). Naming a “transcultural notion of patriarchy” a “colonizing epistemological strategy” (35), Butler argues for recognizing the specificities of different contexts. When it comes to the notion of “woman,” Butler notes the efforts to recognize the differences between women’s experiences based on race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality. Yet, while recognizing the importance of this, Butler’s own criticism of the category of woman is of a different nature: they question how that category comes into being, to begin with, what meanings it is invested with, and what work it is expected to do for feminism.

In *Bodies That Matter* (Butler 1993), Butler argues explicitly against an “analogizing” understanding of oppression based on race, gender, or sexuality:

“It seems crucial to resist the model of power that would set up racism and homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations. The assertion of their abstract or structural equivalence not only misses the specific histories of their construction and elaboration, but also delays the important work of thinking through the ways in which these vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation.”

(Butler 1993, 18)

In other words, Butler here advocates for thinking through how gender and race are shaped by one another – how gender is articulated *through* race, and vice versa (Butler 1993, 116, 182).⁵ This is in line with an intersectional approach to gender, which should not be confused with an analogizing approach which insists that sexism functions “like” racism. In addition, Butler also rejects a pluralizing approach to intersectionality when they write that “it is not simply a matter of honoring the subject as a plurality of identifications, for these identifications are invariably imbricated in one another, the vehicle for one another” (116).

In the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler emphasizes that performativity theory *may* have something to say about the working of race, but

that “the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race” (Butler 1990, xvi). With this statement, Butler insists on the importance of not reducing race to gender and avoiding a “one size fits all” mode of analysis. Gender and race are interwoven and intermeshed but cannot be reduced to one another.

In these passages that have been foregrounded here, it is clear there is not “a persistent absence of a deep imbrication of race” (Lugones 2007, 189). Butler’s theorization of gender is nominally intersectional in the sense it acknowledges the co-construction of gender with race and other axes of difference. Like Lugones, Butler recognizes the mutual imbrication of gender and race and understands “race as gendered and gender as raced” (202). Nevertheless, self-reflexively looking back at their own work, Butler also notes that “some feminist positions, including my own, have problematically prioritized gender as the identificatory site of political mobilization at the expense of race or sexuality or class or geopolitical positioning/displacement” (Butler 1993, 116). Here, we can read Butler conceding to some extent to Lugones’ critique of “white” feminism: while, in theory, their framework takes in race and acknowledges the co-construction of race, gender and coloniality, their analysis nevertheless focuses on gender primarily.

Coming back to the distinction between the “light” and the “dark” side of the colonial/modern gender system, one can say that Butler’s work indeed primarily tackles the “light” side. Their theorization of gender focuses on the hegemonic construction of gender in Western discourse and lays bare the workings of those characteristics Lugones identifies as being key to that gender order: namely, biological dimorphism, heterosexuality, and patriarchy (Lugones 2007, 190), albeit not necessarily in those terms. What Lugones calls “biological dimorphism,” Butler refers to as the binary notion of gender, as well as the idea of a logical connection between (biological) sex and (cultural) gender – I return to this point later. “Heterosexuality” and the connection between gender and sexuality is theorized in Butler as the heterosexual matrix. The term “patriarchy” is not one Butler draws on themselves – in fact, as noted above, they are critical of the idea of a “universal patriarchy,” which theories of patriarchy often fall into. Yet, in the broad sense that patriarchy refers to a system of male domination, this is exactly the gender order that Butler’s work denaturalizes and destabilizes. In this sense, the concerns of Butler’s early

work on gender fall within what Lugones would call the “light” side of the colonial/modern gender order.

In later work, Butler has made the connection between gender and the category of the human. In *Undoing Gender*, they argue that gender, as well as race, is central to the norms of recognition by which the category of the human is constituted (Butler 2004, 2) and that not being “legible” in terms of gender and sexuality can be a site of dehumanization. With these insights, Butler is getting closer to the point Lugones makes about the coloniality of gender. However, to fully assess how reconcilable these perspectives are, I now turn to Lugones’ understanding of gender to examine it through a Butlerian lens.

Gender Trouble in Lugones?

While feminist theory routinely differentiates between biological sex and culturally constructed gender – the so-called “sex/gender distinction” – one of Butler’s key interventions has been to argue that this distinction does not hold up to critical scrutiny. According to Butler, it is not only gender that is socially constructed, but sex too. That is, there is no way to approach sex that is not already shaped by gender: as a result, sex is itself already a gendered category (Butler 1990, 7). How does Butler’s understanding of gender relate to Lugones’? Or, what kind of theorization of *gender* does the framework of the coloniality of gender put forward/rely on?

The impetus for Lugones’ theorization of the coloniality of gender is the claim that decolonial thinkers such as Quijano did not integrate *gender* adequately in their analysis of the coloniality of power. She contends, “There is an account of gender within the framework that is not itself placed under scrutiny and that is too narrow and overly biologized” (Lugones 2007, 193). In other words, instead of taking up gender as a constructed category, Quijano and others inadvertently rely on a problematic notion of biological sex. By contrast, Lugones contends that hers is a perspective that regards *both* gender and sex as socially constructed – and notably, constructed in the context of coloniality/modernity. When Lugones argues that “what is understood as biological sex is socially constructed” (194) and claims that gender is “antecedent to the ‘biological’ traits and gives them meaning” (195), Lugones is very much in line with a Butlerian understanding of sex and gender.

Yet, despite this stated commitment to a constructivist understanding of sex and gender, Lugones nevertheless seems to assume biological sex as well as a straightforward connection between sex and gender. This becomes especially apparent in the non-Western cases she brings forward as examples of ways of conceiving and living gender outside of the colonial/modern gender system. A key example for Lugones is the work of Nigerian sociologist and gender scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí on gender in pre-colonial Oyo-Yoruba society. On the basis of her engagement with the work of Oyěwùmí, Lugones makes the strong claim that “no gender system was in place” in Yoruba society (196), which is used to bolster her point that gender itself should be understood to be a colonial/modern construct. The work of Oyěwùmí has been critiqued on empirical grounds by feminist scholars like Oyeronke Olajubu (cf. Olajubu 2004). This critique is important: it does make a difference whether or not Oyěwùmí’s claims about the lack of a gender order in Yoruba society have their basis in a sound historical and anthropological analysis. However, I concur with Coetzee and Halsema that we should understand Oyěwùmí’s intervention to be primarily philosophical and epistemological, rather than an anthropological or historical one (Coetzee & Halsema 2018, 182). Furthermore, my focus here is not primarily on Oyěwùmí’s work, but on Lugones’ use of it to support her theorizing of sex and gender(ing). To explore the implications of that, I now turn to Oyěwùmí.

Oyěwùmí contends that the “social map” in Yoruba pre-colonial society is not based on biological/bodily/anatomical features related to sex/gender, but rather, that seniority is key. While there is a distinction made on the basis of anatomical sex and the role in reproduction between two subjects of “obinrin” and “okunrin,” Oyěwùmí argues that this distinction is radically different from the Western gender system. These categories cannot be translated as “man” and “woman” since they follow a different logic: they do not rely on a binary opposition, nor do they designate a hierarchical relationship. However, since they do “specify a variety in anatomy” (Lugones 2007, 196-7), they are referred to by Oyěwùmí as “anafemale” (abbreviated from anatomical female) and “anamale” (anatomical male), a terminology that Lugones takes on.

Discussing the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system in Yoruba society, Lugones asserts:

“Oyěwùmí notes that the introduction of the Western gender system was accepted by Yoruba males, who thus colluded with the inferiorization of anafemales. So, when we think of the indifference of nonwhite men to the violences exercised against nonwhite women, we can begin to have some sense of the collaboration between anamales and Western colonials against anafemales.”
(Lugones 2007, 197)

In this passage, there seems to be no question that it is the anamale who takes up the position of the nonwhite “man,” and in doing so relegates the anafemale to the inferior position of “woman.” Rather than creating a rupture, the colonial/modern gender system maps rather seamlessly onto the supposedly ungendered Yoruba framework. The link between sex and gender is not undone in the example: instead, it seems that sex (anatomy/physiology) remains inextricably linked to gender (whether the obinrin/okunrin Yoruba categorization or the colonial/modern man/woman categorization). Thus, claiming that “no gender system was in place” in Yoruba society (Lugones 2007, 196) becomes questionable. Arguing that a pre-colonial Yoruba gender system took a significantly different shape than the Western colonial/modern gender system is something else than to say that there is no gender system at work to begin with.

By following the terminology of anamales and anafemales introduced by Oyěwùmí, while using this as a key case for a radically different conceptualization of gender completely outside of the colonial/modern gender system, Lugones does not manage to fully break free of the biologizing and naturalizing logics she claims she wants to counter. What sense does it make to speak of “colonized woman” if the very notion of woman is a product of the colonization if the notion of “woman” only has meaning within the colonial/modern gender system? Lugones herself admits as much when she insists that “‘colonized woman’ is an empty category: no women are colonized, no colonized females are women” (Lugones 2010, 745). Yet, even in this framing, as the gender category “woman” is exposed as a colonial construct, the sex category “female” is assumed and taken for granted, and the link between “female” and “woman” remains unproblematic. The use of the terminology of “anamale” and “anafemale” by Lugones is inconsistent with her stated commitment to recognizing sex as constructed. Rather than questioning a binary and biologized definition of sex, here, she rather uncritically adopts it.

In “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” Lugones makes her stance on the relationship between sex and gender more explicit when she argues that in her view, “sex stands alone” (744). Positioning herself in relation to the debate about the sex/gender distinction, Lugones argues:

“More contemporary analysis has introduced arguments for the claim that gender constructs sex. But, in the earlier version, sex grounded gender. Often, they became conflated: where you see sex, you will see gender, and vice versa. But, if I am right about the coloniality of gender, in the distinction between the human and the non-human, sex had to stand alone.”

(Lugones 2010, 744)

What Lugones means here by saying that “sex stands alone” is rather cryptic. I take it to mean that biological sex – anasex – functions as the *grounds* for differential treatment, both within and outside the colonial/modern gender system. But, in that move, Lugones still ends up naturalizing and reifying sex – something Butler has already warned us against and which more and more feminist scholarship in biology has questioned (cf. Fausto-Sterling 2000).⁶ And, by arguing that “sex” is the grounds for differentiation, both in colonial and pre-colonial contexts, Lugones nevertheless upholds a connection between sex and gender(ing). Even as she tries to work outside of the colonial/modern gender system and rejects its dimorphic notion of sex, Lugones inevitably still brings this model with her as she attempts to approach alternatives to the colonial/modern gender system. By interpreting these non-Western or pre-colonial societies through a frame of anamales and anafemales (a dimorphic notion of sex), she demonstrates, in practice, the point Butler makes theoretically when they claim that there is no way to approach sex outside of the framework of gender.

Not only is there a theoretical knot here, but this understanding of sex also limits the political horizon of her project. Recognizing that gender is a colonial/modern construction is important for Lugones exactly because it opens up the horizon of “decolonizing gender” (Lugones 2010, 746). But, by holding on to “sex” as the ground on the basis of which gendering takes place, Lugones restricts the depth of this decolonizing potential. When sex functions as an anchoring point, it keeps gender in place and restricts the range of the analysis of how gender is produced in/through coloniality/

modernity and how it can be challenged. Bringing a Butlerian understanding of the constructed nature of both sex and gender into the framework of the coloniality of gender would open up the horizon for the decolonization of gender(ing), and thus strengthen Lugones' framework.

In other words, I argue for bringing together Lugones' understanding of the coloniality of gender with Butler's performativity theory. Lugones' intervention of the coloniality of gender brings an important impetus to recognize how "gender" as a category has come into being in colonial modernity and how it is co-constructed with race, class, and other axes of difference. This element is less prominent in Butler's theorization of gender. However, our understanding of the coloniality of gender is further strengthened if it is brought together with a Butlerian understanding of sex/gender which does not take "sex" as the anchoring point on which gender is built. Recognizing how contemporary understandings of gender are constructed within coloniality/modernity can be brought together with an understanding of gender that does not biologize sex or assume it as the ground for gender. Bringing these approaches together allows us to better understand, analyze, and challenge intersectional oppression based on gender and race in their connection to coloniality.

Notes

- 1 Within intersectionality scholarship there are many debates about how specifically to define intersectionality and how to differentiate it from other approaches like "interlocking" and "intermeshing" oppressions. Specifically, when it comes to the work of Lugones, recent scholarship questions to what extent this can be correctly assumed to be "intersectional" in the strict sense of the term, since Lugones prioritizes the language of "intermeshing" oppressions (Belle 2020; Carastathis 2019; Velez 2019). Recognizing the intricacies and nuances of these debates, I nevertheless take up the term "intersectionality" here as an umbrella term to refer to a variety of approaches that theorize the mutual imbrication and co-constructedness of various axes of difference and that insist that gender cannot be approached in isolation.
- 2 The conjunction of the colonial and the modern in the adjective colonial/modern is used by decolonial authors to recognize how modernity is inherently shaped through coloniality: they are two sides of the same coin, where one cannot be understood without the other. I will go further into this in the first section, when introducing Lugones' understanding of the colonial/modern gender system.

- 3 Veronica Vasterling writes: “Daunting in its incessant use of highly abstract jargon, not seldom confusing in its rhetorical effects, and often implicit in its argumentation, Butler’s is one of the most difficult but also one of the most provocative texts I have been reading the past few years” (Vasterling 1999, 18). I share Vasterling’s assessment, both of the challenge and of the value of Butler’s work for feminist philosophy.
- 4 In analyzing the convergences and divergences between these two specific feminist philosophers, the larger picture of the differences between decolonial theory and poststructuralism would be interesting to bring into view as well. However, unlike many other decolonial thinkers, Lugones actually refrains from criticizing poststructuralism directly and the common antagonism between decolonial theory and poststructuralism does not come back in Lugones’ writing on gender explicitly. For an account of the relationship between decolonial theory and postcolonial theory, which touches specifically on the relationship of decolonial theory to poststructuralism, see Colpani, Mascot & Smiet 2022.
- 5 The terminology of “articulation” that Butler deploys here recalls Stuart Hall’s use of the term to understand the relations between race and class. Drawing on Marx, Gramsci, Althusser and Balibar, Hall develops a notion of articulation in order to understand how “racially structured social formations” emerge (Hall 2018).
- 6 See also the other contributions in this volume that question the construction of biological sex by Alex Thinius, Rose Trappes and Annelies Kleinherenbrink.

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