Coloniality at work: 
Decolonial critique and 
the postfeminist regime

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Abstract
In this article I address the imbalance in the production and circulation of knowledge in 
the dominant Anglo-American academic circuit, aiming to make visible feminist work in 
a decolonial vein carried out in Latin America, to recentre the decolonial option with 
regard to established postcolonial studies and to propose a way of understanding global 
postfeminist female subjectivity as mediated in mass media. The decolonial option offers 
a rich theoretical toolbox for exploring contemporary junctions of gender, race and the 
question of representation. I propose a reworking of the concept of the ‘coloniality of 
gender’, and briefly discuss how Femen and the figure of the exoticised female pop icon 
exemplify coloniality at work.

Keywords
Coloniality, decolonial, Femen, gender, knowledge, popular music, postfeminism

Introduction
The title of this text encapsulates what I expect to name and challenge, while 
showing my position in the ‘geopolitics of knowledge’ (Mignolo, 2008). Accordingly, I need to start with my own locus of enunciation, that is, the place in geographical, emotional and theoretical terms from where I speak. I am a non-white woman from the South (Latin America), living and thinking in the North (Europe) and concerned with the culture and politics of the place where I was born and grew up, as much as with the culture of the place(s) I now call home. I am thus located on the borderlines and this has entailed constant reflection about my own locus of enunciation and epistemological practice.
This reflection has stimulated further thinking about the theoretical frameworks that inform my work, most importantly feminism, postcolonialism and the decolonial option, so that certain unease has grown in me. Firstly, both feminist theory(ies) and postcolonial studies are largely dominated by Western academia (mostly Anglo-American), while postcolonial studies – which emerges from British (as well as French to a limited extent) colonial experience – has become securely established as a framework in a way that undoes its own purpose. Secondly, I see the decolonial option – which emerges from the Latin American colonial and intellectual experience – as lacking feminist theoretical work, and as being fully involved with issues of praxis while being entirely unconcerned with the question of culture. The ideas I advance here stem from this unease.

The project has two aims. First is to address current dynamics of production and circulation of knowledge by bringing Latin American feminist work into the mainstream English-language-dominated academic circuit, and bringing the decolonial option into broader discussions of the (post)colonial. Second is to rework some concepts from this literature so they help in understanding global representations of female subjectivity in the mass media. The argument places the question of power at centre stage, and is grounded in the field of culture – normally the realm of postcolonial studies. I am concerned with the way just one representation of female subjectivity is projected globally in the modern-colonial imaginary as the right way of being female, and argue that this is intrinsically connected to the postfeminist regime.

Right at the centre

Feminist theory and postcolonial studies provide the most obvious and compelling theoretical frameworks for a woman intellectually inserted in Anglo-American academia but whose locus of enunciation is ambivalently in and outside ‘the West’, and who is personally and intellectually concerned with issues of social justice. Feminist theory and postcolonial studies emerge in the twentieth-century epistemological West, but engage theoretically and politically with the world in global terms, which has had consequences for the type of knowledge produced. In this regard, feminist postcolonial critique has pointed to the power-knowledge relations embedded in certain “‘Western feminist’ scholarship’ (Mohanty, 2003: 501).

Feminist theory outside Anglo-American academia has also been rich and varied. Yet most of the theoretical and empirical feminist work carried out in languages other than English, and by scholars other than those coming from or legitimised by the Anglo-American academic circuit, remains invisible. The wealth of this in the fringes feminist work was recently shown in Feminist Theory, in an extensive survey of what has been done by women from/in Africa, China, Latin America, India and the Middle East. The abundance Connell (2015) reveals is astounding. Yet, as she also remarks, only a handful of non-Western-based feminist scholars manage to be published – and therefore known and
legitimised – in the metropolitan centre, something necessary for getting scholarly value even in peripheral academic circuits (de Lima Costa and Álvarez, 2014: 560; Connell, 2015: 51).

Such imbalance testifies to the dominance of the English language as the academic lingua franca (Lillis et al., 2010), and of Western epistemological frameworks. These affect the circulation of knowledge by impacting citation practices, which create scholarly canons and constitute the most salient (or ‘most objective’, as de Lima Costa and Álvarez (2014: 561) put it) measure of academic merit. Citations and influence become part of a self-reproducing loop.

The imbalance along language and epistemological axes also has effects on postcolonial studies, which is mainly produced in English. Though certain non-white French-speaking figures, notably Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, have been central, and although the field is heterogeneous (Mbembe, 2008) and ‘deeply divided politically’ (Brennan, 2013: 68), Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha (non-Western academics trained and based in the West) are the key postcolonial studies names. They, like the other scholars recognised in the field, have a genealogical history tied to the British Empire.

Yet there has also been critical thinking about the colonial experience, colonial discourse and the ‘West’/‘Other’ relation in the context of a different colonial history: the Spanish and Portuguese invasion and conquest of the Americas in the fifteenth century. This critique, however, has rarely been taken into consideration in postcolonial studies. A recent article contrasting postcolonial studies with the decolonial option, for instance, claims that Said was the first to posit the production of knowledge in global terms in the context of a critical interrogation of ‘the Orient/Occident divide’ (Bhambra, 2014: 116). Yet in 1993 Walter Mignolo had already pointed to the work of Edmundo O’Gorman and Ángel Rama, two Latin American ‘social scientists and humanists located in and speaking from the Third World’, who articulated a postcolonial critique that preceded or was at least contemporary with postcolonial thinkers.

In La invencion de America, O’Gorman interrogates the idea of the ‘discovery’ of America, dismantling it and arguing that rather than being discovered, America had been invented (O’Gorman, 1958). The subtitle of the Spanish edition is El universalismo de la cultura de Occidente, ‘The universalism of the culture of the West’, intended not as ‘a celebration but [as] a critical dismantling of such “universality”’ (Mignolo, 1993: 123). What O’Gorman did – to provide ‘a description of the conquest of America [that] could be read as some kind of “Occidentalism”’ – was very similar, and even complementary, to ‘what Said did two decades later’ (Mignolo, 1993: 123). More than making O’Gorman, Rama and others visible, Mignolo contests the foundational history of postcolonialism, both as an academic field and as a set of intellectual concerns. Brennan suggests that the only things shared by the multiple schools of thought that constitute postcolonial studies are ‘resistance to empire and a commitment to tell a more inclusive, more truly global, story’ (2013: 68). However, postcolonial studies has not been genuinely inclusive since it has occluded the conquest of the

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Americas – an extraordinary turning point in the world’s affairs, with enormous implications for future colonial ventures and for the construction of Western dominated narratives, including the postcolonial narrative itself.

Bringing the Spanish and Portuguese colonial enterprises in the Indias Occidentales and later the Americas into the picture produces displacements of geography, of colonial genealogy, of theory, of time-frame. Thus the decolonial option operates an epistemological displacement of postcoloniality as it has been established in mainstream academia.

My goal is not to reify a decolonial theoretical position that stands against postcolonial theory. Rather, I aim at appropriating border thinking which, as Grosfoguel puts it, ‘is precisely a critical response to both hegemonic and marginal fundamentalisms’ (2011: 3), that is, a response to the premise of one single epistemic tradition for understanding the world and dealing with it (this is the significance of the term ‘option’ in the decolonial option). In this article I straddle both. I use the decolonial option’s time frame and deploy its concepts of ‘border thinking’, ‘colonial difference’, ‘coloniality of power’, ‘modernity/coloniality’ and ‘coloniality of gender’. On the other hand, I share the postcolonial school’s concern with culture and the question of representation.

**Modernity-coloniality and decolonial critique**

‘Modernity/coloniality’ is one of the decolonial option’s central ideas. The slash in this formulation is the mark unveiling the hidden side of modernity, i.e. coloniality. Since within the postcolonial framework the slash indicates a binary opposition, I am rewriting the formulation as ‘modernity-coloniality’. The core ideas of the decolonial option hinge on the question of modernity, considered as a global phenomenon originating on 12 October 1492. Moving modernity’s foundational moment back to the fifteenth century implies assuming that ‘Europe’s centrality within the world-system is not the result of an internal superiority accumulated during the European Middle Ages about and against other cultures [but...] is instead a basic effect of the discovery, conquest, colonization, and integration (submission) of Amerindia’ (Dussel, cited in Castro-Gómez, 2008: 21). This challenges Said: there is no Orientalism without Occidentalism and Europe’s ‘greatest and richest and oldest colonies’ are not the Oriental, as he claimed, ‘but the “Occidental”: The Indias Occidentales and then the Americas’ (Mignolo, 2000: 57).

The decolonial option starts from the premise that modernity is the visible side of coloniality, i.e. that coloniality and modernity are concomitant (not equivalent), a fact concealed by the rhetoric of ‘progress’ in discourses of modernity. Quijano’s central notion of ‘coloniality of power’ invokes the structures of power established with the colonisation of America but extended far beyond that point. These structures, according to Quijano, are first and foremost arranged along the axis of race, an idea built on the perceived phenotypical differences between conquistadores and conquistados (2000: 202).
Quijano suggests that ‘race’ was established at that point as an instrument of social classification. Since social relations between colonisers and colonised were configured as relations of domination, those newly established racial categories – indians, blacks, mestizos – were automatically hierarchised, with the invaders’ ‘race’ on top of the list. This is what constitutes the ‘colonial difference’: a difference between the colonised and the coloniser established by the latter and built upon an arbitrary category that ends by structuring all social relations.

Although derived from the term colonialism, ‘coloniality’ differs by pointing to what is most insidious in colonialism: the invisible threads of power that emerge in colonial situations but extend well beyond a strictly colonial setting and period. Hence coloniality outlives colonialism. A succinct formula says that coloniality is the logic, and colonialism the enactment (Mignolo, 2011: 22) This makes the term coloniality a powerful tool: it reveals that the relations of power established with the colonial invasion, and on the basis of the colonial difference, are still very much at work in the world, in Latin America as in India. Coloniality then refers to the symbolic, invisible and indelible traces of the colonial experience.

The Latin American context and decolonial feminism

The clear imbalance in the circulation of feminist knowledge signalled by Connell (2015) calls for redress. Arguing for the necessity of conceiving ‘gender theory itself in new and globally inclusive ways’, she points to the different historical experiences of the colonised world (Connell, 2015: 53). Although I agree that gender and feminist theory need to be envisioned in globally inclusive ways, and that local histories ask for local approaches, to put all the emphasis on the different material, social, political and historical conditions of places in the global south would preclude the possibility for people in the global south to think theory in broader general terms.

Already in 1996 Nelly Richard argued against Latin American feminists who rejected theory on the grounds that the material conditions of the continent required action rather than philosophical cogitation (1996: 735). Richard further cautioned against the ‘fantasy of a Latin America spirited by the rescuing energy of social commitment and community struggle’, a fantasy that might reinforce the stereotype of lo latinoamericano as a romanticised other (1996: 738).

Yet this position is still very common in Latin American feminist circles. In 2013 I had the opportunity of participating in one of the largest feminist conferences in Latin America – Fazendo Gênero – held at the University of Santa Catarina in Florianopolis, Brazil. I found the activist approach so prevalent in the conference fascinating, and was very impressed by the original ideas of, say, Julieta Paredes. Yet I also sensed a rejection of more formal and theoretical approaches, either perceived as too close to the European tradition, or as useless for the struggle against oppressive forces in the context of Latin America.

A possible reason for such reticence is that in spite of Latin America being home to what Néstor García Canclini has termed ‘hybrid cultures’ – the sedimentation,
juxtaposition and intertwinement of indigenous traditions, colonial Catholic Hispanic culture and modern political, educational and communicational actions over the centuries (1990: 71) – the contrasts between rural and urban areas are sharp across the continent. Which means that Latin American heterogeneity (‘hybridity’) is not homogeneously distributed. Such sharp contrasts, and the relentless wars waged against peasant and indigenous communities by current nation-states, imply that needs and issues differ considerably between rural and urban populations. While a neoliberal gender equality rationale has permeated urban areas, strands of feminism in a decolonial vein have proliferated in rural ones. There are tensions between these currents of feminism.

Most Latin American feminist work aligned with the decolonial option presents two features. First, it is oriented towards questions of praxis, social commitment and political activism in the face of state aggression. Second, it takes the community as its focus of attention. Despite the heterogeneity of Latin American indigenous peoples across the vast lands of the continent, the priority of the community over the individual remains central to their social organisation. The community is what has allowed many of these peoples to resist relentless oppression, dispossession and ultimate annihilation for over 500 years. Examples abound, from the Kogi in northern Colombia, to the Mapuche in the southern lands of Chile and Argentina.

In this context, a great number of feminists and a large volume of feminist work in a decolonial vein have emerged in Latin America. Among them one finds Julieta Paredes, behind the collective *Mujeres creando* (Paredes, 2014); Rita Segato, working on varied themes that range from the gender system in Yoruba culture to the question of race in Latin American prison systems (Segato, 2003, 2007); Sylvia Marcos, interested in the indigenous spirituality of ancestral traditions among Mexican indigenous women (Marcos, 2009); Ochy Curiel, a radical lesbian feminist who argues for the importance of race and intersectionality for feminist critique (Curiel, 2002); María Eugenia Choque Quispe, interested in the subordination of indigenous women in Bolivia (Choque-Quispe, 1998); and many others.

These are scholars involved in processes of decolonisation through activism, art and/or academic ventures who also stand against male domination, racism and heterosexism. The central role of political activism and social commitment, and the connections these feminists have with indigenous or black communities, sometimes implies detachment from theory. Moreover, some of these feminists are actively against theory. Curiel, for instance, distinguishes between academic theoretical production from an elitist and androcentric position, and knowledge that emerges from social movements where women play central roles, which is then transformed into theory (Curiel, 2007: 100); while Julieta Paredes asserts that ‘there is no decolonial or postcolonial theory that enlightens decolonisation because you cannot decolonise from academia or from theory’ (2014).

Yet there is a need for feminists to think theory proper from within a decolonial framework. Thinking decolonial theory is also a way of being politically engaged, because it implies an effort to decolonise one’s own mind, to unveil the coloniality
at work in the processes through which one became a colonial female subject, and
the current processes through which one is constructed on a daily basis as female
subject or as abject being (Giraldo, 2015a) within the still prevailing ‘colonial
matrix of power’ (in Quijano’s terms).

Theory, Mignolo argues, is not an instrument for understanding something that
lies outside theory itself but an instrument ‘for constructing knowledge’ (1993:
127): about oneself, about the world, about oneself operating in the world. Much of the feminist decolonial work constructs valuable knowledge but does
not construct this specifically theoretical type of knowledge. Not engaging in
theory-making reinforces essentialist ideas that abstract thought is a male domin-
ion, and that nurturing, community and the keeping of tradition are a female one.

The core theoretical concepts of the decolonial option have all been developed
by men, and none of these men is directly concerned with feminist theory. This
includes Aníbal Quijano, who coined the term ‘coloniality’ and developed the idea
of the ‘coloniality of power’; Walter Mignolo, who developed a rich theory around
coloniality and carried out a highly sophisticated critique of Western epistemology
(Mignolo, 1995, 2000, 2011); and Nelson Maldonado-Torres who engaged
with continental philosophy to propose the idea of ‘the coloniality of being’
(Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Among the twenty-four contributors to Coloniality at
Large, a 2008 compilation of articles dealing with coloniality, Latin America and
the postcolonial debate, only six are women, and none of them engages in feminist
thought (Moraña et al., 2008).

The coloniality of gender reworked

The question of how colonisation transformed gender structures in the colonial
world has been a constant preoccupation of the decolonial feminist tradition in
Latin America, but as Freya Schiwy indicates, ‘the construction and relevance of
gender to the coloniality of power has been difficult to accommodate’ (2007: 273).

The most salient decolonial scholar theorising gender is Marí±a Lugones. Indeed,
Lugones is the only woman thinking feminist philosophy from within the decolo-
nial option. Following Quijano’s model of the coloniality of power – though
challenging his handling of gender – she coined the expression ‘coloniality of
gender’, treating gender, and the gender binary, as a colonial imposition

Lugones’s approach, however, is very problematic. There are difficulties about
her terminology, her claims and her methodology. Her text ‘Heterosexualism and
the Colonial/Modern Gender System’ (Lugones, 2007) is convoluted, and at times
it is difficult to make out her argument. A second difficulty arises with her use of the
term ‘gender’. On the first page of this paper she claims:

[c]olonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colo-
nized [but... ] a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colo-
nized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. [...] 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; emphasis mine)

In this introductory paragraph we find ‘gender systems’, ‘gender arrangements’, ‘many genders’ and ‘gender itself’ as what colonialism imposed on colonised people. As Lugones never defines gender, we do not know whether ‘gender systems’ and ‘gender arrangements’ are interchangeable terms, or which ‘many genders’ she is referring to. She contradicts herself later when arguing that the gender binary is the actual colonial imposition because in native cultures there was more fluidity in that respect. Her claim that ‘gender itself’ is a colonial concept implies that pre-invasion America was genderless, however she does not cite any source to substantiate this belief.

Lugones’s main aim is to prove that the colonial matrix of power affected gender structures and dynamics; that colonisers enacted racial and gender constructs at the time of invasion. I do not doubt this. Yet the grounding of her hypothesis in the distant past requires a historical methodology, that is, examination of archives or secondary material, which she does not do.

Against the unsupported claim of a genderless pre-colonial America, Rita Segato states there is abundant ‘historical evidence and ethnographic accounts showing the incontestable existence of a gender nomenclature in tribal and Afro-American societies’, as well as evidence of patriarchal organisation, albeit weaker than the European kind (2011: 32). In Segato’s account, ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are identifiable categories hierarchically ranked in terms of prestige. But transition and circulation between them are frequent, and this has been attested for the Warao (Venezuela), the Cuna (Panamá), the Guayaquis (Paraguay), the Trio (Surinam) and the Javaés (Brazil) among others (Segato, 2011: 33). Although Segato does not define ‘gender’ either, it is clear that she employs it as a category that relates to maleness and femaleness that structures social organisation so that the former dominates the latter.

The term ‘gender’ emerged in an Anglo-American context and entered Latin America in the 1990s, where it is now securely established in academia and institutions (Guzmán and Montaño, 2012). Most theorisation of the concept has been carried out in Anglo-American academia. However, Latin American feminists in a decolonial vein have also raised questions about its relation to ‘other prevalent concepts such as universality, equality, freedom, but also rights, civil society, private and public spheres, labor’ (Butler and Weed, 2011: 4). Pointing to the multiple ways that ‘gender’ – in its imbrication with these concepts – has been put to work against the interests of peasant and indigenous communities has been central for counterhegemonic feminist struggles in the continent (Uriona, 2012).

Julieta Paredes reclaims the term, which she understands ‘not as descriptive nor as performative, but as a political category allowing for denouncing’ endemic oppression against female bodies (2012: 98–99). She lambastes its ‘depoliticisation’ which, she argues, works towards satisfying ‘the political and economic needs
of neoliberal patriarchy’ (Paredes, 2012: 99). Uriona, on the other hand, signals that many Latin American women’s organisations resist the concept because they see it as a feature of urban women’s movements and therefore as a tool for reproducing unequal class relations (2012: 20). From this debate emerges the suggestion of replacing ‘gender’ with the term ‘despatriarcalización’. Despite their respective criticism, both Paredes and Uriona consider ‘gender’ – as ‘a sociocultural construction of femininity [and masculinity, I would add] produced from within patriarchal hierarchy’ (Uriona, 2012: 23) – to be a helpful concept.

Taking these criticisms, definitions and approaches into consideration, I propose a reworking of Lugones’s idea of the ‘coloniality of gender’, focusing not on the historical dimension but on the historical present. I deploy the concept to unveil the invisible threads of colonial power at work in contemporary global understandings of gender, and more specifically of female subjectivity.

I argue that the coloniality of gender works as a Western universalist enterprise pervading contemporary hegemonic discourses about women’s rights, feminism itself and female subjectivity. These discourses reify narrow ideas about ‘womanhood’, ‘femininity’ and sexual difference. They foreclose the possibility of defining female emancipation in terms other than hegemonic Western understandings. In decolonial terms, the coloniality of gender operates as a by-product of a local history – the struggle for women’s rights in the advanced-capitalist and neoliberal West, where liberal feminism is hegemonic – projected as a global design. It traps non-Western female beings in a double-bind: either comply with Western – modern, neoliberal, capitalist – understandings of being an emancipated woman, or play the role of perpetual victim in need of rescue.

The postfeminist regime

The coloniality of gender is most evidently crystallised in postfeminism. This term is difficult to use because of its multiple meanings in Anglo-American media and academia: as a positive designation for the contemporary emancipatory period in which women have ‘choice’ and are ‘empowered’ (Wolf, 1993); as a backlash against feminism with a subsequent regression in feminist gains (Faludi, 1992); as a phenomenon that incorporates feminist politics in order to facilitate their dismantling (McRobbie, 2008: 12); or as an approach to feminism and femininity occupying a liminal space suffused with hybrid and contradictory meanings, encompassing both ‘threat of backlash’ and ‘potential for innovation’ (Genz, 2009: 53).

Nevertheless, there seems to be agreement among critics in linking postfeminism to a set of cultural features concerning femininity and feminism which are emblematic of the contemporary period. Rather than focusing on the features, the contention surrounding the term lies in their positive (Braithwaite, 2002; Genz, 2009) or negative (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007) assessment. Though mainly theorised in the West, the ‘postfeminist sensibility’ (Gill, 2007) is very much at play in representations of female subjectivity in Singapore (Lazar, 2006), China (Thornham and
Pengpeng, 2010), Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2010) and Colombia (Giraldo, 2015b). Although postfeminism is a product of hegemonic Western concerns, it has successfully been projected on a global scale.

My treatment of postfeminism follows closely Angela McRobbie (2004, 2008) and Rosalind Gill (2007), and incorporates Rosi Braidotti’s third feature of what she refers to as ‘Neo-liberal Postfeminism’ (Braidotti, 2005), itself similar to Hester Eisenstein’s ‘hegemonic feminism’ (Eisenstein, 2009). Braidotti signals financial success as the indicator of the status of women and the ‘global value of profit as the motor of women’s progress’ as central features of ‘neo-liberal postfeminism’, adding Western ‘ethnocentrism’ to her analysis. Ethnocentrism in Braidotti’s account of post-feminism refers to complicity ‘with a neoliberal discourse about white supremacy’. This disingenuously assumes a liberated We – ‘Western, Christian, mostly white and raised in the tradition of secular Enlightenment’ – who are not in need of further emancipation, while the Other – ‘non-Western, non-Christian, mostly not White and alien to the Enlightenment tradition’ – require ‘enforced liberation’ (2005: 171).

In contrast to McRobbie and Gill who are concerned with media and popular culture, Braidotti and Eisenstein focus on the type of feminist discourse pervading the corporate world. Their approaches do not emphasise sexual difference, hyperfemininity or hypersexualisation, and Eisenstein even suggests that ‘the abolition of gender’ is one of hegemonic feminism’s features (2009: 65–69). I argue that ethnocentrism and hypersexualisation are connected, through the coloniality of gender.

I understand postfeminism as a contemporary discourse on female subjectivity, closely linked to a neoliberal ideology of the self (Gill, 2007), that draws from feminism while simultaneously dismantling it (McRobbie, 2004, 2008). A major feature of postfeminism is an obsessive preoccupation with the ‘sexy’ body (Gill, 2007: 246), which emphasises a specific type of female sexuality reframed within sexist structures. The postfeminist paradigm delimits female subjection on the basis of ‘beauty’, ‘sexiness’ and sexual agency from a masculinised point of view, an internalised male gaze. It provides a rigid discursive framework for female subjectivity where those who don’t fit are abjected, pushed outside the limits of subjecthood (Giraldo, 2015a).

Linking the postfeminist paradigm to subjectivity and regulation allows me to rephrase Gill’s ‘postfeminist sensibility’ as a ‘postfeminist regime’. Understanding this regime as having a local origin yet being globally projected reveals the coloniality of gender within it.

Coloniality at work: From Femen to the ‘exoticised’ female pop icon

The hegemony of the West has of late been contested on different fronts. This has implied a variety of struggles waged militarily, politically, economically, but also culturally, since consent – crucial for the justification of war within democratic systems of government – is fought over in the cultural terrain. The most visible
of these struggles has opposed the West against a monolithically constructed ‘Muslim world’, where Islam and Islamism are conflated, and where gender is the crucial category for enacting the colonial difference (Shehabuddin, 2011). The point of entry for establishing the colonial difference between the Western/Muslim categories is the exposure/covering of the female body. This is of particular importance in contemporary Europe, attested by the French banning of the veil in 2011, and the 2013 vote in Ticino (an Italian-speaking Swiss canton) in favour of the banning of the burqa, both clear instances of how coloniality articulates with gender. It is in discussions about the female body that the modern/pre-modern opposition is currently most reinforced, which is why uttering the term coloniality is important: failing to do so makes invisible the colonial work that is actually being done.

A notable example of coloniality at work on the female body is provided by Femen, a self-defined women’s movement that emerged in Ukraine, arrived in the Western European scene a few years back and has generated a lot of controversy. Femen define themselves as ‘an international women’s movement of brave topless female activists painted with the slogans [sic] and crowned with flowers’, whose proclaimed goal is to topple patriarchy (Femen, 2015). Their actions include protests during the Euro 2012 in Ukraine (Je suis Femen, 2014), staging a mock suicide at Notre Dame cathedral in Paris in 2013 (Willsher, 2013) and disrupting political and cultural events of various types (@Femen_France, 2015).

Although Femen have been fiercely criticised in some feminist European quarters – particularly because of the colonial stance in what they term ‘naked jihad’ – they have also been endorsed by other feminists, particularly in France. Their rhetoric bears witness to the pervasiveness of postfeminism in contemporary understandings of female subjectivity.

Femen are the archetype of the postfeminist female being: young, thin, attractive, white. They rely on a rhetoric of female empowerment contingent upon ‘fitness’ and ‘sexiness’, summed up by slogans such as ‘My body is my manifesto’, ‘Sextremism’ and ‘nudité liberté’ (L’OBS, 2012) – more recently transformed into ‘nudité, lutte, liberté’. Femen’s tactics, which almost always involve violent topless stunts, have guaranteed unrelenting attention. Indeed, the media attention in Western Europe is out of proportion. In 2014, the French newspaper Libération managed to publish three articles about them on their online platform on a single day (10 September), while the Guardian (2015) has a section titled Femen dedicated to news about them. Their success has been so unequivocal in France that they are now based in Paris, and Inna Shevchenko, one of the core members, has been granted political asylum by the French government (Libération, 2013). They have multiple Twitter accounts and a large number of followers on each account (see @femen_France, @femen_Movement, @femen_Turkey and Shevchenko’s @femeninna for some examples).

At a seminar on ‘Gender, Sexualities, and Transnational Perspectives’ that took place in 2013 at the University of Lausanne, David Paternotte, a political scientist whose research focuses on social movements, suggested Femen were interesting because they were a rare case of a social movement originating in the margins
and spreading to the centre (Paternotte, 2013). He seemed to read the movement’s success in Europe as a challenge to the West/East power differential. I suggest, however, that rather than challenging the matrix of power, Femen’s success can be read as reinforcing it, which is what makes it readable in decolonial terms.

The statement that Femen’s tactics are brazenly colonial is not ground-breaking by itself. Yet they are worth exploring as a phenomenon that trades on the coloniality of gender, especially aligned with ‘rewesternization’ (Mignolo, 2011: 36), the restoring of the hegemonic role of the West within the colonial matrix of power. Femen have become actors in the cultural struggles between the West and the ‘Muslim world’, and between the West and East, more specifically Russia. This helps account for their European success. Paternotte’s remark on the reverse path of Femen as a social movement further suggests shifting attention from the coloniality of Femen’s actions to other ways in which they enact the coloniality of gender, and how these ways relate to the broader question of the coloniality of power.

I will end my discussion with another case of coloniality at work in global media: the triumphant exoticised female pop icon, whether of African American descent (Beyoncé), Latina (Jennifer Lopez), from the Caribbean (Rihanna) or Latina with Middle Eastern roots (Shakira). These women – now renowned as global brands and in the Forbes list of the world’s most powerful women, with Beyoncé topping the 2014 ‘Celebrity 100 List’ (Forbes, 2014) – also exemplify the postfeminist paradigm. They epitomise female ‘empowerment’ and how such empowerment is articulated (has been attained) by embodying the archetype of the ‘exotic’ sex bomb. It is their relentlessly exposed and hypersexualised bodies which become the site for their becoming successful female subjects in the postfeminist neoliberal framework that delimits contemporary female subjectivity.

The construction of the exotic female other is not a new phenomenon (Hill Collins, 2004; Cashmore, 2010; Mendible, 2010), but its connection with coloniality remains to be explored. Contemporary media constructions of these women enact the coloniality of gender on three fronts.

First, by its inextricable connection with the postfeminist regime, the media representation enacts colonial difference on the basis of the binary opposition of exposed/covered bodies. This enactment of the colonial difference is aligned with Femen’s tactics, although in a subtler way since the veiled Muslim woman is not explicitly targeted.

Second, by renewing the trope of a female racialised ‘other’ who is utterly sexualised – exoticised through over sexualisation – the media construction reproduces an old colonial script about non-white women. On the one hand, native women in America were described in colonial accounts as being libidinous, attractive even after childbirth, and as possessing magical sexual powers (Hall, 1992: 210). On the other hand, ideas of Black promiscuity have always informed White constructions of Black sexuality (Hill Collins, 2004). Shakira’s She Wolf song provides an excellent case in point. The song’s title translates into ‘Loba’, a term that in Colombian Spanish (Shakira’s native language) implies sexual aggressiveness and bad taste; its meaning lying somewhere between slutty and seedy. The song’s
video shows how hypersexuality and animality articulate with postfeminist constructions of the racialised female other in contemporary global media.

These female pop icons can be taken as the paradigm of contemporary female empowerment (indeed, Shakira claims that ‘Feeling sexy is empowering’ (McLean, 2014)). There have been, for instance, positive readings of Beyoncé’s celebration of her own voluptuous figure as a force pushing for a transformation of ‘beauty industries that unapologetically favored the wasp-like waif bodies’ (Durham, 2012: 36). Yet Beyoncé’s body aesthetic, with its relentless emphasis on the ‘booty’, mostly reinforces racial stereotyping, while serving the commodification of Blackness and Latinidad (for a critical assessment see Cashmore, 2010). It is also worth asking what type of ‘transformation of beauty industries’ we are talking about since Beyoncé is not precisely reclaiming the body aesthetics of Saartjie Baartman (the ‘Hottentot Venus’).

Third, positive readings of the role of these Black and Latina icons in contesting whiteness overlook the fact that their non-white markers are modified, in moves we could denote as ethnic sanitation for marketing and consumption. Their hair is dyed blonde and straightened, while their skin is literally whitened. Shakira’s debut album in English, Laundry Service (2000), came along with her turning blonde.

These icons, therefore, are trapped – and trap themselves – in a double performance of ethnic otherness. On the one hand, they perform the exotic non-white female other. On the other hand, they perform whiteness upon the assumption they are non-white and that whiteness is hierarchically superior to non-whiteness. The performance rests on the order established by the colonial matrix of power.

Femen and the figure of the exoticised female pop icon stand on different ground with regard to colonial history. They also stand apart on other fronts, the former being a feminist social movement from marginal Eastern Europe moving to Western Europe, the latter referring to non-white female icons in the USA marketed for global consumption. Yet they come close in the ways they enact coloniality on the contemporary world stage.

**Final remarks**

In this article I aimed to highlight work from outside the metropolitan centre, and to give central attention to the decolonial option and to feminist work carried out from this perspective. I aimed to show it was important to link analysis of gender with the colonial making of social relations and with racial paradigms; failing to do this, as Schiwy argues, risks perpetuating coloniality (2007: 275).

The decolonial option has developed powerful concepts that contribute to postcolonial thinking. One of these concepts is the coloniality of gender which I deployed to explore the junction between gender and race and to reveal the coloniality at work in contemporary constructions of female subjectivity – from Femen to the exoticised female pop icon. Revealing the hidden threads of colonialism at work today (coloniality) is an essential step in processes of decolonisation, even for scholars like myself, urban subjects bound to live within Western modernity.
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