

Bodies as territories: Revisiting the Coloniality of Gender

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Abstract

In this article, I reconsider the coloniality of gender in light of Trans* anti-colonial contributions and feminist and women's social movements' mobilisation of the multidimensional concept of 'territorio-cuerpo-tierra' (territory-body-land) in contemporary Abya Yala. I ask what might be gained in centring the reconceptualisation of the relationship between gender and bodies offered by these activists and scholars within the theorisation of gender and coloniality opened by María Lugones. The article starts by revisiting Lugones and related decolonial and non-binary approaches to gender that highlight the coloniality of knowledge informing medical and racist constructions of gender, to then examine different approaches to territory-body-land as contemporarily mobilised against gender-based violence and femi and trans-cide in Abya Yala. I locate this examination in the context of increasingly authoritarian forms of social precarisation and exclusion, where the question of gender has become centre stage. Against these reactionary trends, these popular social movements' use of the trope of bodies as territories foregrounds the differentially gendered bodily dimension of this politics in promising ways. Ultimately, the article sheds light on the need to centre coloniality in the gendering of democratic claims.

Keywords

Bodies, coloniality, gender, Latin America, territory-body-land

Introduction

One of the lessons one can learn from the decolonial turn within the social sciences and the humanities is, as the editors of this special issue rightly emphasise, the need for conceptual diversity and anti-imperial epistemic justice. As I understand it, this involves the need to enter serious dialogue with other genealogies and epistemological traditions in

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neither appropriative nor condescending ways. Rather, for this dialogue to be genuine, one needs to be ready to question one's own conceptual maps radically and do so precisely where our concepts emerge as shaped by the colonial character of the Western/Modern epistemic fulcrum on which they depend. In other words, a commitment to conceptual diversity against the reproduction of colonial logic of knowledge entails decentring some of the key concepts with which we work. Within gender studies, and in line with the fact that 'gender' harbours myriad – even antagonistic – conceptualisations, and this instability has been constitutive to the field, the question of its relationship to the coloniality of knowledge continues to be a contested one.

Concerned with this question, then, in this article, I reconsider the coloniality of gender, particularly as it has been theorised by feminist scholar Lugones (2007, 2010, 2022) putting it in dialogue with the notion of *bodies as territories* that has been mobilised by popular feminist and women's social movements in their struggle against gender-based violence and femi and trans-cide in contemporary Latin America/Abya Yala. This notion is indebted to the multidimensional concept of body-land-territory (Cuerpo-Tierra-Territorio) produced by Indigenous and communitarian feminist activists from Abya Yala (Cabnal, 2015). Therefore, I ask: What might be gained by centring the reconceptualisation of the relationship between gender and bodies offered by these activists within the theorisation of gender and coloniality opened by Lugones? What can we learn from these two ideas – the coloniality of gender and bodies as territories – when thought together? How do they recast gender?

By reflecting on the implications of considering gender as a colonial formation, I aim to tease out the potential of a subsequent reconceptualisation of bodies for a critical approach to the connection between gender, violence and self-determination for the present. I offer two interventions: at the level of the politics of knowledge production, I put forward significant contributions from Latin America/Abya Yala to theorise gender beyond the pervasive insistence on its alignment with 'naturalised sex' – today saliently mobilised by anti-gender, gender-critical and transphobic movements. Second, I argue that for gender to offer a lens for a radical critique of violence, not only should it address the coloniality that structures our contemporary World but also do so from a non-binary, trans* perspective.

To address these questions, the article starts by revisiting Lugones' and other related anti-colonial and non-binary approaches to gender that highlight the coloniality of knowledge informing medical and racist constructions of gender and body classification. Drawing on Duen Sacchi's (2018) critical reading of these constructions as colonial somatic fictions, in the following section, I critically consider the relationship between bodies and the somatic to examine different aspects of the concept of body-land-territory developed by Indigenous and Communitarian feminists from Latin America/Abya Yala. The third section further elaborates on the gendered colonisation of bodies, patently evoked by the figure of bodies as territories temporarily mobilised by feminists across the region. The article concludes by highlighting the potential of this reconceptualisation of bodies to shed light on the need to centre coloniality in the gendering of democratic claims.

In so doing, I aim to illuminate the interventions made by scholars and activists from the South as they track the work of gender under coloniality from different locations.

While Lugones' concept of the coloniality of gender reveals that we must think of gender and embodiment otherwise, the notion of body-land-territory represents a powerful onto-epistemic intervention and a most generative path in this direction. My focus on these concepts and contributions from Latin America/Abya Yala, however, is not intended to promote their appropriation to readily apply them in other contexts. Rather, the intention is to illuminate similar preoccupations and unexpected resonances between ideas while honouring the deep dissonances between concepts and their trajectories.

My intervention as a scholar originally from Argentina, with a European background, and writing from an academic position in UK academia is not meant to 'fill a gap' by introducing 'subaltern knowledge from the South', far less impersonate it. Perhaps due to my migrant condition, it is animated instead by the willingness to generate conversations among scholars who do not share common intellectual histories and references, illuminate confluent views and destabilise taken-for-granted modes of conceptualisation. In line with the critique of coloniality that is imperative to our task, this gesture demands us to decentre ourselves as gender scholars and be open to examining our presumptions and questioning our modes of knowledge. At a moment when gender studies are under attack far and wide, I believe this openness is the only possibility for feminist scholarship to remain politically relevant.

Gender as a colonial formation

One of Lugones' (2007, 2010) most important contributions to feminist philosophy and decolonial thought is her concept of the coloniality of gender. Building on Aníbal Quijano's (2000) theory of the coloniality of power, Lugones reconceptualises gender as a structuring device of coloniality and theorises its co-constitutive relationship with race. Quijano conceptualises coloniality as an onto-epistemological and material condition whose matrix continues to structure our contemporary World, understanding race as the onto-epistemological axis that partitions the human from capitalist colonial modernity onwards. Lugones expands the scope of coloniality by considering that it is through the articulation of *both gender and race* that the Eurocentric onto-epistemological divide between White/Western reason (self-instituted as the universal representative of the human subject) and the colonised world occurs.

But how is gender conceptualised when referring to the 'coloniality of gender'? This is a notion widely taken up by queer and trans-feminist, critical race, postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholars. And yet, gender does not necessarily work in the same way when this notion is mobilised. This is partly due to the plurality of understandings of gender that inflect diverse experiences and interpretations of coloniality within different traditions of gender studies and contexts. As I will show in what follows, we already have a complex problem of translation and temporalities here.

Lugones' first articulation of gender as a colonial formation posits that the European gender system developed into a different complex structure when brought to the colonies, which Lugones (2007) will call the Modern/colonial gender system. One of Lugones' main arguments when developing the concept in 2007 is that the hegemonic heteronormative binary structure of gender did not belong to the colonies and their systems of knowledge. Hence, Lugones' effort to find in precolonial onto-epistemologies

the sites from where to contest the power relations entailed by the gender system as she deconstructs the naturalisation of its hegemonic heterosexualist binary organisation (Lugones, 2007: 196–200). As Lugones (2007) puts it, '[a]s global, Eurocentred capitalism was constituted through colonisation, *gender differentials were introduced where there were none*' (p. 196, my emphasis). According to Lugones (2007), the source of these gender differentials is '[b]iological dimorphism, heterosexualism, and patriarchy' (p. 190), which in turn led to the notion that the organisation of patriarchal, heterosexualist, dichotomous gender was not part of societies other than the European.

Admittedly, this line of interpretation of the coloniality of gender has served to show that neither heteronormativity nor the gender binary is universal, and it has been helpful to contest (more often than not) nationalist or religious conservative claims that sexual and gender plasticity is a modern imposition of the Global Northern anglosphere. But this formulation becomes problematic when it lends itself to romanticising precolonial and irrecoverable pasts. It is imperative to dispute the weaponisation of anti-colonial rhetoric to justify conservative, if not reactionary, gender and sexual politics. But we must do so while refusing this romanticisation, for it contributes to forms of cultural essentialism, which invest in idealised figures of purity, disavow the intricacies brought about by the violence of the colonial encounter and run the risk of depriving said cultures of their complexity and historicity (Falconí Trávez, 2022; Matabeni, 2014; Matabeni et al., 2018; Rao, 2020). As far as Lugones' historicisation of precolonial societies and patriarchy is concerned, her conclusions are in stark contrast to the work of Indigenous communitarian scholars from Abya Yala, centred on the 'conjunction of patriarchies' from pre-Columbian to colonial times (Cabnal, 2015; Lagarde, 2012; Paredes and Guzmán, 2014). Lugones dismissal of precolonial patriarchal relations is also in tension with the work of South American anthropologist Rita Segato (2011, 2021) who, like Xinka and Aymara scholars, also confirms the existence of ancestral patriarchy.

Notwithstanding this debatable aspect of Lugones' argument, the coloniality of gender is a most generative concept and suggests several interpretative paths. A salient different reading of the concept indicates that it is the very European gender system that distinguishes sex from gender that took universalist form as the result of colonialism and continues to depend on coloniality. In effect, Lugones insists on how biological dimorphism is recast as the basis for a heterosexualist patriarchal order and, along these lines, reminds us that precolonial gender differentials 'did not rest on biology' (Lugones, 2007: 196). This interpretation implies that the gender heterosexual binary to which Lugones attaches the coloniality of gender – and, most importantly, the sex/gender system as it came to be figured within the field of gender studies – would not be thinkable at all if it were not for the colonial encounter. This is an encounter through which the structure of Western European modern modes of knowledge and social organisation is also actually formed. According to this second interpretation, what is at stake, then, is not just that the notions of heterosexualised femininity and masculinity attached to the gender binary and their internal hierarchies and exclusions are traversed by whiteness understood as an episteme/paradigm – and yet, understood as already existing European constructs. As I have just remarked, Lugones points out that biologised gender based on sexual dimorphism (i.e. naturalised sex) was a European invention. This would mean that the Modern sex/gender distinction and further alignment – framed as parallel to the nature/culture

divide – on which the normative conception of the heterosexualised gender binary is sustained cannot be thinkable at all outside colonialism/coloniality.

Lugones (2007, 2010, 2022) argues that in line with the fracture of the human operated by race – where the human is equated with whiteness (embodied by the European/coloniser subject) in contrast with the colonised world that is racialised in such a way that it is deprived of full humanity – gender emerges as a characteristic condition of the human and therefore cannot simply be attributed to those who have been deprived of that humanity. As Lugones (2022: 7) summarily posits: ‘Indigenous and African people in the Americas were denied humanity, and thus, gender’. Furthermore, to the extent that this gender is normatively presumed to be based on/or aligned with sex, as Judith Butler (2024: 220–222) remarks, Lugones notes that also sexual dimorphism was denied to colonised peoples. In later articulations of the coloniality of gender, though, Lugones further analyses how sex, working in tandem with gender but at the same time distinct from it, ‘was made to stand alone in the characterisation of the colonized’ so that ‘colonized people became males and females’ (Lugones, 2010: 744). Only the coloniser would have gender (signalling their full humanity). Correspondingly, the dehumanisation of the colonised and African enslaved and diasporic subjects would involve their classification ‘as male and female only based on their sexual organs’ or, in other words, ‘being reduced to labor and raw sex, conceived as non-socializable sexual difference’ (Lugones, 2022: 9). (I will return to this problematic point about the conception of sex as a natural attribute of the human-animal in the following lines).

According to this latter reading of Lugones, which I propose, gender would not only operate as a dehumanising vector for those who have been racialised in line with the logic of modernity/coloniality. Most significantly, it would also implicate that, as a category, gender would also lose universal validity. As Lugones’ intervention suggests, the distinction between sex and gender is impossible to think if not through the mediation of race. In this way, her postulation throws overboard the canonical distinction of sex and gender, a distinction whose Eurocentrism obscures the exclusions it operates. Seen in this light, Lugones’ coloniality of gender aligns with Black feminist and trans* feminist traditions of knowledge that shed light on the problematic limits of the interpretation of the ground-breaking concept of the sex/gender system (Rubin, 1975), where gender emerges as the cultural interpretation of sex.

In effect, this conclusion is definitely in line with key Black feminist interventions from the 1980s, which, as Hemmings (2020: 34–36) explains, pointed out the racial underpinning of the sex/gender system considering the legacy of slavery (Carby, 2005[1982]; Haraway, 1991; Spillers, 1987). Furthermore, as Tudor’s (2019) and Butler’s (2024) analyses also suggest, it resonates, in particular, with the path-breaking work of Hortense Spillers (1987), which reveals that the dehumanisation of the Black body entailed its reduction to flesh and the subsequent exclusion of Black bodies from the realm of gender – in Spillers’ terminology, anti-Black racism as a system ungenders Black people.¹ But also, with the work of more contemporary Black trans* scholar C. Riley Snorton (2017), who, relying on this genealogy, also shows how gender was one of the vectors that facilitated a white supremacist dehumanising project. In sum, it has been the violent development of colonial/modern racial capitalism that sutures Lugones’ colonial/modern gender system to the sex/gender system, dear to the annals of feminist

theory. Hence, the critique of the latter for its incapacity to account for its racial and colonial base (Hemmings, 2020; Tudor, 2019, 2021).

The two lines of interpretation of gender as a colonial formation that I have laid out thus far share the understanding that not only race but also gender has worked as a dehumanising vector operating at the core of the genocidal logic of slavery and colonial power. However, they differ in their genealogies and onto-epistemological implications. The insistence on the inexistence of patriarchal heterosexuality in precolonial societies, in the first case, seems to suggest that the sex/gender system is intrinsically European/modern and eventually imposed on the rest of the World. In contrast, the second line of reasoning points to the very constitution of the sex/gender system within the colonial encounter. In both cases, we are confronted with the violence and the particularity of this system; both interpretations point to the subsequent multiplicity of gendered social systems (within and beyond the binary). However, there is a significant difference regarding the question of its origins. In the first case, the understanding is that gender, as an originally European construct, is transposed into the colonies in a way that violently reshapes the lives of the colonised. In the second, gender, as articulated through the race/sex/gender system, is understood as a notion emerging out of settler colonial practices, structuring the relationship between the Metropolis and the enslaved and the colonised.

The paradoxical situation is that to make these interventions, both interpretations must mobilise gender as a category of analysis, and it is this use of gender as an analytical concept, which, in turn, has emerged in the North Anglo-phone sphere, that allows them to elaborate a critique of the gender-binary system as a colonial formation. In other words, gender – a colonial formation in nature – is mobilised against its own formation as an analytic lens, and this is key to decolonial feminist, queer and trans/feminist epistemological projects that are, in turn, indebted to a North Atlantic Western epistemic framework. In this regard, let us remember that while Lugones develops her decolonial perspective writing as a scholar originally from the South and a feminist of colour, she does so as a scholar trained and based in the United States. Having this paradox and positionalities in mind, rather than refusing gender as a Western/Modern construct altogether, one may still have to grapple with it while being attentive to its analytic limits and other concepts that offer a different account of it.

In line with the second interpretation of Lugones' analysis of gender as a colonial formation I proposed, in the following sections, I engage contemporary Indigenous, trans* and feminist anti-colonial work that provides different interpretive paths into bodies' onto-epistemic status. In so doing, while not dismissing a gender lens, this work sheds light on the analytic limits of gender as an anatomically grounded category *vis a vis* bodily exposure and resistance to colonial violence.

Gendered bodies as pathogenic fictions

As an analytical category, gender poses challenging translation issues, not the least because 'gender' is an English word at odds with other logo spheres (Butler, 2024). Often, Anglo-phone centres of production and circulation of knowledge from the North reinforce the hegemony of just certain genealogies and associated conceptualisations of gender and understandings of the field of gender studies. The epistemic violence tied to

this logic is not over despite the decolonial turn in the field. And my position and this article are part and parcel of this conundrum! However, this field has developed in manifold ways in the South and other logo spheres, responding to divergent genealogies and posed in other terms, often engaging different epistemological and political vocabularies (Mendoza, 2017). Confronted with the paradoxes and tensions that emerge when we think of gender as a colonial formation, would these mean that we should abandon the category of gender altogether? Would it be a refusal to engage with it the ultimate pathway towards a genuine decolonisation of knowledge production? As suggested in the previous section, we may concur that it would be better not to. Quite the contrary, if anything, its use against instituted hegemonies should allow us to expose the ontological and epistemological violence facilitated by it, both as a social system and as an analytical lens.

Such undertaking would also need to account for how this violence has been epistemically and politically interpreted and resisted. It is at this point that it becomes necessary to engage with concepts that, as Sumi Madhok (2020: 395) remarks, not only ‘capture but also produce theorized accounts of different, historically specific and located forms of worldmaking in “most of the world”’. Following the lead of Duen Sacchi, the Indigenous scholar from Latin America/Abya Yala, I offer a possible path to embark on this task. Sacchi’s (2018) work on ‘pathogenic fictions’ will allow me to show how the concept of territorio-cuerpo-tierra/territory-body-land developed by Indigenous scholars and activists offers another interpretative lens to conceptualise gendered violence and resistance.

From an anti-colonial trans* position, Sacchi (2018) argues that gender works as a political-somatic fiction that emerges as a compound of a series of Western/Modern fields of knowledge and discursive practices. I would also remark that we should include Eurocentred feminist discourses on gender – be it either as an object of study or an analytical framework – among them, as my reading of Lugones has suggested.²

By focusing on bodies’ soma, Duen Sacchi means not just – as Foucault would put it – that bodies are inscribed with social meanings. Sacchi’s main point is not that the body is a privileged site of subjectivation or the focus of bio- and necro-political forms of regulation and hierarchisation. Instead, the emphasis is put on the fact that these ‘fictions are somatic, that is, *they take the form of life*’ (Sacchi, 2018: 30).³ Taking distance from a humanist conception of the body, structured by modern notions of nature and organic *corpus*, here soma already exceeds the human. To make this proposition, Sacchi draws on the work of Paul Preciado (2008) on the ‘pharmaco-pornographic’ somatic-political regime. As Sacchi reminds us, Preciado characterised this regime by the emergence of the medical-psychiatric notion of gender and the proliferation of technologies that intervene in the body’s soma (i.e. pharmacological, surgical), whose emergence Preciado located in the mid-20th Century (Sacchi, 2018: 30). Preciado’s posthumanist view resonates with the work of Pugliese and Stryker (2009) and Aren Aizura (2009, 2018) who reconceptualise race and gender as somatechnic devices. Indeed, it concurs with the posthumanist perspective of somatechnics more broadly (Sullivan and Murray, 2009).

But from an anti-colonial standpoint, and in contrast to Preciado’s location of somatic fictions that quite literally ‘enter the body’ in ‘our’ techno-political historical present,

Sacchi redefines these as colonial 'pathogenic fictions' while making two critical interventions. First, he underscores the coloniality of present and *past* somatic-political regimes, which have provided the epistemic basis for the genocidal violence against Indigenous peoples, entering and transforming their bodies *since the 15th century*. These colonial regimes have produced somatic fictions that determined the contours of 'nature', thanks to which one could argue, following Lugones, gender was separated from sex. Second, he draws attention to the fact that these fictions not only delimit the natural world but most importantly, operate a partition within it between the human and the non-human. The fictional element of the history of the natural sciences is central to Sacchi. Looking at the orders of classification of the (human and non-human) natural world in Argentina, Sacchi remarks that 'the representation of the visible resembles more a collective delirium than a positivist ideal of objective classification of forms and entities'. Ultimately, Sacchi (2018) concludes, this 'positivist ideal is an eugenicist delirium' (p. 36).

Considering the resonances and tensions between these authors, one question arises: What is the value of a posthumanist approach to gender if such an approach does not take into account that somatic-political fictions are tied to the history of the coloniality of gender as dehumanising and genocidal practice? How is the medical-psychiatric notion of gender developed from the mid-20th century on related to the coloniality of knowledge, and more specifically, to the colonial formation of gender that has left colonised populations genderless, marking to this day the hierarchies and boundaries of the human within the coloniality of being?

For a different approach to the partition of the (human and non-human) nature/culture continuum and their proposed reconciliation from a posthumanist view, the force of the figure of penetration, or incursion, seems relevant. In the contemporary somatic-political regime Preciado is thinking about, gender becomes prosthetic, penetrating the human body and becoming soma in myriad ways. Preciado graphically emphasises that technology enters the human body in a literal sense.⁴ But within the pathogenic-political landscape that Sacchi is thinking about, which is pivotal to the history of the delimitation of the human where gender is produced, penetration evokes the enterprise of conquerors and colonisers (and more contemporarily multinational capital) entering, appropriating and decimating territories, lands, resources and peoples, unceasingly rendering them inhuman – just flesh as C. Riley Snorton would put it, or in Sacchi's terms, pure soma.

These fictions evoke the entangled work of economic, political, 'scientific' and cultural penetration, from the Jesuit missions and Imperial rule in Latin America/Abya Yala – a matrix of penetration indeed – to the *criollo* wars of independence and further expeditions and settler enterprises; followed by the penetration of an ongoing and ever-changing imperative to modernise these societies since times of the formation of national-republican states (which have been inherently colonial and oligarchically structured), accompanied by relentless extractive enterprises to this day.

Crucially, the concept of pathogenic fictions provides a lens to illuminate the colonial character of the contours of nature and the subsequent somatic separation (and normative alignment) of sex and gender and the bodily classifications associated with it. In turn, offering an epistemic counterpoint to these pathogenic fictions, the Indigenous and communitarian feminist notion of *territorio-cuerpo-tierra*/territory-body-land challenges

colonial somatic classifications with a relational ontology of bodies as territories. This connection I propose is critical in understanding how indigenous activism reconceptualises bodily autonomy and resistance against colonial and Eurocentric onto-epistemic and political violence in collective terms.

In effect, refiguring this history in terms of pathogenic fictions signals, in Sacchi's words, 'a position of critical subversion of the European somatic archive' (Sacchi, 2018: 31). Pathogenic fictions question presumed scientific partitions of nature and the human and in so doing mark the excess that colonial knowledges, understood as somatic fictions, cannot capture. This excess, which emerges in tandem with the exclusions that colonial knowledge/fictions operate, points to the places of enunciation and 'r-existence' of those excluded.⁵ Accordingly, it points to conceptual devices that refigure the somatic outside the grids of colonial systems of body classifications.

Territory-body-land could be addressed as one of such conceptual devices. This concept, in effect, conceives the body in ways that challenge the partition of nature and the human indebted to coloniality and point to other modes of r-existence (Haesbaert, 2020: 87). At the level of contemporary gender theory, it points to a relational ontology that critically resonates with the posthumanist somatechnical approaches discussed earlier, in line with Sacchi's intervention. Most importantly, it sheds light on the fact that the bodies that are debased through the occupation of their soma, or flesh, are the pivotal locus of the alignment between the coloniality of gender (which is racial in nature) and the capitalist neo-colonial violence of neoliberal destructive forces, crisscrossing the seizure of bodies and territories, past and present. As such, it has emerged as a site of collective resistance among popular women's and feminist movements across the region, marking its conceptual emancipatory potential.

'Our bodies, our territories'

Indigenous communitarian women and feminists in Latin America/Abya Yala have re-articulated the link between bodies and land through the notion of territorio-cuerpo-tierra (territory-body-land). This articulation, mainly developed by Xinka and Aymara women, is aimed at foregrounding the compound nature of patriarchal and colonial oppression, and it is through the reconceptualisation of bodies as their first territory that they claim: 'There is no descolonisation without despatriarchalisation!' (Asociación IDIE, 2011–2014: 451).

To the extent that the reconceptualisation of bodies as territorio-cuerpo-tierra/territory-body-land is a concept that addresses the history of the gendered oppression and struggles of Indigenous communities, it is one that while recovering ancestral modes of knowledge, decisively belongs to what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2020) characterises as Indigenous modernities. As Rodríguez Castro (2021) points out, following the work of Lorena Cabnal (2010), this is a concept that conveys both an epistemic position and enacts a political statement (341). In line with Sacchi's critique of pathogenic fictions, the reframing of the colonial partitioning of bodies through the lens of territorio-cuerpo-tierra not only resists dehumanising colonial somatic narratives while revealing ongoing Eurocentric epistemic erasures but also asserts a collective, relational understanding of bodily and territorial sovereignty.

As such, this conception has been taken up – and translated – by many feminist and women's movements across the region with the motto: Our bodies, our territories. This articulation is twofold. On one hand, it forcefully links gender violence to the racial capitalist/colonial structure of contemporary transnational, neoliberal modes of extraction, accumulation and concentration of capital, which renders the bodies of the racialised poor disposable, subject to extreme exploitation and exposed to the decimation of the environment and natural resources.

On the other hand, it draws on and revalues Indigenous relational cosmologies that affirm the indivisible unity between bodies and their environment – bodies are one with 'the natural world' – and conceive them as part of a continuum with the communal body, intimately attached to the philosophy of 'Buen Vivir' (Cabnal, 2010; Gargallo Celestini, 2014; Paredes, 2010; Rodríguez Castro, 2021). Key to this articulation is the fact that the reference to '*our*' territories and bodies is less connected to an individualist possessive episteme proper to the subject of Western modernity than with a radically different connection with the land and the environment. The plural formulation – our – does not evoke a collection of individuals. What is marked in the use of that '*ours*' is that these are originary peoples' territories (and not just land, understood as the detachable or transferable property of an individual or collectively discreet owner). In this sense, it also invokes the necessarily shared status of the land and resources that sustain the communal body. It is key here that the pronoun 'our' is inflected by 'territory', which names the practice of inhabitation: the relational and non-dissociable unity between lands and collective bodily life.

Among a number of Latin American popular women's and feminist movements, Ni Una Menos (NUM) – the Argentinean feminist mass movement, whose slogan Not one less and political vision has extended to many cities across Latin America/Abya Yala and Europe – has taken up the motto 'Our Bodies, Our Territories' as an anti-colonial gesture, invoking their alliance with indigenous women's claims, and to mark the continuum of violence. NUM re-articulated this metonymic movement from bodies to territories when strategising actions that link sexual and economic modes of appropriation and exploitation and when conceptualising different manifestations of violence, connecting gender-based violence and femicide with State securitisation, the impunity of systematic police brutality and neoliberal extractive logics. It is through the articulation of this chain of violent forms of exclusion, deprivation and destruction that NUM also found in this metonymy – bodies as territories – an emancipatory cue.

In the aftermath of the Women's strike in 2017, NUM declared: 'We formed a collective body and connected ourselves with the body of the land, in the words of the feminists of Abya Yala' (Gago, 2018: 159). The rationale behind this public call is made clear by Veronica Gago, who explains the rationale behind the women's strikes NUM has been organising since 2016. Gago (2018) asserts that framing the strikes in this way allowed NUM 'to link machista violence to the political, economic, and social violence that results from the complex but fundamental logic of current forms of exploitation, which are *making women's bodies into new territories to conquer*' (158).

For thinking about women's bodies as 'new territories to conquer', some of the leading voices of NUM in Argentina were inspired by – and in quite a few of their statements

and writings refer to – Rita Segato's (2010) notion of the pedagogy of cruelty (Ni Una Menos, 2019; Santomaso and Gago, 2017⁶; Mason and Deese, 2020). The reference is warranted. Segato (2016) argues that we are living in a 'war against women', recording already 15 years ago that during the process of pacification in El Salvador, the rate of homicides of men increased by 40%, while the homicides of women by 111% between 2000 and 2006; in Guatemala, between 1995 and 2004, the increase of homicides of men was 68%, the homicides of women 144%; in Honduras, between 2003 and 2007, the rise in homicides of men was of 40%, while the homicides of women increased by 166% (Segato, 2011: 19–20). Confronted with these numbers, Segato (2011: 20) notes, 'the predatory *occupation* of female and feminised bodies . . . increases in line with the expansion of modernity and markets, as they seize new regions'.⁷

The spatial transposition from bodies to territories and from territories to bodies evoke the mutual entanglement between the appropriation, exploitation and murderous violence executed on dehumanised bodies along with the exploitation of territories in the context of so-called 'failed' postcolonial states and contemporary neo-colonial neoliberal extractive economies. In turn, the re-articulation of the relationship between bodies and lands as an indivisible territory makes apparent the haunting presence of colonial somatic fictions around which the classificatory systems of gender along with race work as dehumanising practice, forming the backdrop of contemporary feminicide or state-sponsored homicidal violence against (mostly, but far from only) women of colour from the 'pebs'.

The articulation of 'Our Bodies, Our Territories' inspired by the Indigenous concept of territory-body-land underscores the continuum of violence also pointed out by Indigenous feminists at both individual and collective levels. For individual bodies, this manifests as gender-based violence, feminicide and exploitation. For collective bodies, this continuum materialises through environmental degradation, resource appropriation and territorial dispossession, where the attack on land parallels the violence against Indigenous communities' embodied existence. This dual lens is essential to understanding the indivisibility of bodily and territorial sovereignty in indigenous and communitarian feminist resistance.

NUM is an inclusive, intersectional social movement that embraces an expansive, capacious idea of womanhood. Its reconceptualisation of bodies has been most effective in claiming bodily autonomy against gendered forms of violence and posing a demand for self-determination over bodies, genders, sexualities, lands and territories as part of a common struggle (Sabsay, 2020). In this way, beyond the concrete political alliances that were actually more or less tenuously forged with different activist groups, it is this work of reconceptualisation that best exemplifies how these Indigenous perspectives and activist-based knowledge from the South can offer a concept of bodies that generatively describes their complex social and political reality.

Such recasting of bodies is not only a political act but also a conceptual intervention that reshapes their experiences against colonial somatic fictions. Seen in this light, it offers a most valuable contribution to the project of decolonising gender, part of which demands not just a thorough revision of the analytical tools with which we work but also an expansion of our conceptual vocabularies (Madhok, 2020, 2021: xxx). The notions of territories-bodies-land and bodies as territories challenge the epistemic authority (Madhok,

2020) of established critical scholarship on bodies and embodiment, whose concepts cannot account for this experience of epistemic and political resistance.

Unlearning gender?

In this article, I have engaged Lugones' work on the colonality of gender to underscore the need to keep questioning foundational presumptions within the field of gender studies that are indebted to a Western/modern epistemic framework. I suggested that no feminist theory that insists on a positivist distinction between sex and gender or that continues to think of gender as a socio-cultural construction developed from – but also at a distance from – sex, without understanding that race is constitutive of this difference, can present itself as racially neutral, or more forcefully, can rid itself of its complicity with the racism that such conceptualisation entails at an onto-epistemological level. This proposition points to the limits of a place of enunciation within feminism that does not problematise the Eurocentric racism of its foundational concepts, as it maintains – and therefore violently reproduces – the epistemic privilege of whiteness and the concomitant epistemic violence towards subalternised paradigms as well as the invisibilisation of racial difference.

Building on the work of Sacchi, I then proposed to think of gender as a fiction that impinges on bodies' soma, highlighting its differentially dehumanising effects. This fiction would work in tandem with the continuum of violence that ultimately belongs to a colonial (and white) supremacist imagination. I also showed that against this violence, scholars and activists from Indigenous backgrounds have developed the concept of territory-body-land, which has been translated and mobilised by women's and feminist social movements from the South as 'bodies as territories'. Like Sacchi's recasting of somatic fictions as pathogenic, territory-body-land marks the limits of Western systems of body classification. As such, not only does it illuminate the continuum of patriarchal and colonial violence, but it foregrounds a singular relational approach to bodies and embodiment that makes them indivisible with their environment and recast self-determination as a collective or, more specifically, communal project.

In sum, while reconceptualising gender as a colonial formation, Lugones pointed out the urgent need to decolonise gender. In so doing, she confronted us with the conundrum posed by the onto-epistemic presumptions of gender as an analytical lens – part of the effort to decolonise gender points to the need for different accounts of it. Sacchi's notion of gender as a pathogenic somatic fiction, underscoring the fictional but fundamentally violent work of gender under coloniality, is one of them. The concept of territorio-cuerpo-tierra/territory-body-land, on its part, represents a key intervention in this regard, for it offers a different way of tracking the work of gender under coloniality, one that emerges from the specific modes of r-existence of Indigenous communities, underscoring the onto-epistemic excess that the Western/modern episteme cannot capture. In different ways, these conceptual interventions from the South point to the limits of what we claim to know as gender scholars. Ultimately, they all illuminate the fact that decolonising gender entails opposing the hegemony of its already racialised binary organisation. In other words, they demand a refusal of the repeated enforcement of its foundational ontological violence, which is at once racist and gender-binary essentialist.

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Notes

1. Lugones (2022: 9) actually references Spillers (1987) in her latest conceptualisation.
2. In a similar vein, Hemmings (2020: 35) considers the relationship between sex and gender as a 'pernicious fiction'.
3. The translation of this and subsequent quotes from Sacchi are mine.
4. Preciado (2008) states: '[I]n the pharmacopornographic society of control, technologies enter the body to form part of it . . . pharmaco-porn-power acts through molecules that become part of our immune system; from the silicon that takes the form of breasts, to a neurotransmitter that modifies our way of perceiving and acting, to a hormone and its systematic effect on hunger, sleep, sexual excitation, aggression and the social codification of our femininity and masculinity (p. 110).
5. The neologism 'r-existence', coined by Carlos W. Porto-Gonçalves (2008, in Haesbaert, 2020), is formed by the combination of re-existence and resistance, to highlight subaltern's own world-making.
6. See the statements 'Nosotras Paramos', issued in 2016 and 'Llamamiento', issued in 2017 (both in Ni Una Menos (NUM), 2019: 26–30 and 38–40, respectively).
7. Note the regulative work of statistics as they present 'women' and 'men' as evidentialities.

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