

# **Decolonising Knowledge: Feminism and Embodied Resistance in the Caribbean. A Conversation with Nadia Celis**

**Julia Borst, Rebecca Fuchs and Martina Urioste-Buschmann**

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** Decoloniality as a key concept has been developed in recent years in order to analyse power relations along the axis of centre and periphery. Walter Dignolo, one of the main critics with respect to decoloniality, deliberately distinguishes his idea of decoloniality from postcolonial theory. What are the main differences between these two approaches in your opinion?

**Celis:** I think it's an issue of emphasis. They are both dealing with similar realities, namely the heritage of colonialism in contemporary social structures and its effects on the psyche of postcolonial subjects. But they look at different aspects of these realities. In postcolonial thought, the spotlight is mostly on the resilience of oppressive structures in peoples' minds and behaviours. In decolonial thought, there is more emphasis on the agency of the colonised both within the process of colonial domination and the process of decolonising their own minds and social structures. Yet I have a concern with if not a critique of both of these concepts. They share the assumption that the colonial enterprise was fully completed. Even if in decolonial thought there is more interest in the capacity of the individual to respond to subjection, I think they both come from an understanding of the colonial enterprise as "successful" and the colonial and postcolonial subjects as fully indoctrinated by colonial regimes and their hierarchies of race, gender, and class. But there have always been people who have exercised agency and have encountered ways to respond to power forces creatively. We just have not looked at them... I am not suggesting that there was no oppression but that the colonial enterprise and the imposition of the colonial worldview onto indigenous peoples' minds and bodies was never fully accomplished. There was agency in those times and there continues to be agency in ways that are not always counted by the concepts we use to inquire into

relationships of power. We are very limited by our own emphasis on reason as a response and an effective resistance to power. So my apprehension with both concepts relates to how they enable us to analyse freedom or resistance and to what extent they may give accounts of practices that are not always accessible through reason. What we now call “decolonial thought” has always been there. The decolonial approach is definitely closer than the postcolonial one, I think, to account for those alternative worldviews, practices and realities, yet they are both limited by their dependence on the colonial as their framework.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** Do you think that postcolonial and decolonial approaches can be read in dialogue with one another or do you think that they are opposite perspectives as some critics do? What is your position in this discussion?

**Celis:** I think they do not exclude each other but can be used concomitantly. My general critique of how we currently practise academia is that the emphasis on terms sometimes distracts from the realities that these terms talk about. Even before, for example, Walter D. Mignolo, Emma Pérez or María Lugones came out with the “decolonial”, or before thinkers like Edward Said or Homi Bhabha implemented central terms of Postcolonial Studies, there were plenty of postcolonial and decolonial thinkers out there, people who have been talking about issues of subjugation and subjectivity within the constraints of colonial power, and people who have been looking at how colonised people responded to these structures. For me, the central question to decolonisation is not even how power has been enacted but how people can and do exercise freedom. I am convinced that there have been plenty of practices out there that some scholars who do not label themselves as postcolonial or decolonial have been discussing as alternative paths to both knowledge and freedom. In my view, a postcolonial and a decolonial perspective are not opposed to each other. The creation of such oppositions is a product of a need in academia to name and classify, to almost create brands around certain terms.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** Thus, it is a means of appropriating the discussion on these topics?

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**Celis:** Exactly. New terms are created to rename an already existing problem. This is how we have learnt to produce knowledge within the Western market of ideas. I find this ironic because we are trying to think of new, “decolonised” ways to understand the world. But the tools we use are westernised – language and writing, the boundaries of disciplines, the constraints of the university as the institutionalised site for knowledge production. If we look back to the intellectual history of Latin America, to give an example, we can observe the prevalence of a model of public scholars closer to the knowledge produced “from below” – in María Lugones’s terms. Although alternative ways to understand knowledge are a priority for decolonial scholars, we often get caught in the traps of imperial academia. The issue of terms somehow displaces and even obscures the essence of the search that guides the creation of these concepts for there are plenty of thinkers who have reflected on these phenomena without necessarily naming them this way.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** According to our experience at the workshop in Hannover, a decolonial approach is sometimes hard to grasp and to implement. Do you think that the reason lies in the fact that decoloniality requires (Western) critics to broach the issue of their own discursive power position as a sort of metacritique, so that they have to question their own role in relation to their object of research?

**Celis:** Definitely. Another issue with the creation of new terms is that they displace and even produce the illusion of closure around the matter the previous term had addressed. However, we do not invent a new concept because we have solved the previous problem. What we are naming, in the best scenario, is a new way of looking at it. We tend to forget that we ourselves are postcolonial subjects, all of us. Even those citizens who remained in the metropolis only receiving the news of a far colonised world were tied to the imperialist economy. So we all respond to its legacy. The issue of underrating our own location has elicited criticism around the concept of intersectionality, allegedly appropriated by feminist scholars who study the overlapping identities of their research subjects without accounting for their own identities and their implications with relations of power. All of these contradictions result, again, from how we understand, seek and produce knowledge. We are

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entangled in a hierarchy of knowledge that prevents us from really delving into how people engage with life. As long as we continue to practise the cult of rationality that entitles us, as subjects of reason, to study and understand others, we will keep on missing a lot, for there is so much wisdom beyond Western understanding embedded in the practice of colonised people. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests, experience is the real source of thinking and knowledge. But scholars are always somehow behind – they even aim to be detached – with respect to what the people they study experience in reality. Therefore, humility may also be of help to approach the inner contradictions of our work. I look as a model to the Chicana, Latina and Caribbean feminists whose first object of research was their own self. They redefined the feminist call for making the personal political. Their radical thought came from stripping themselves to the core, and from materially, intellectually and spiritually engaging with their specific situations as a way to create theory.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** Critics such as María Lugones have highlighted the theoretical interconnectedness of decoloniality and gender. Lugones, for instance, speaks about the “coloniality of gender” that reveals the complex entanglements of overlapping oppressive mechanisms with respect to the categories of class, race and gender. According to her approach, those mechanisms need to be overcome. Which critics or works of criticism, in your view, offer additional potential to enrich and further develop this discussion? What do you think are the main questions and approaches in this field that should be pursued in future research?

**Celis:** Rather than talking about decolonial theories we should look at decolonial readings of texts by people who do not necessarily identify themselves as decolonial, for instance people concerned with Caribbean identity such as C.L.R. James or W.E.B. Du Bois. Chicana thinkers such as Gloria Anzaldúa or Cherríe Moraga likewise propose a way of negotiating with forces and relations of power that moves beyond the binaries that postcolonial thought is more caught in. In the case of Caribbean feminism, I am very fond of Jacqui Alexander because of her emphasis on the spiritual search of the subject in *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (2005).<sup>1</sup> I also think of the work of Mimi Sheller and the way how she engages practices of embodied freedom in

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*Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (2012).<sup>2</sup> And I am very interested in the question of love and power which is addressed by a recent collection by Eudine Barriteau, entitled *Love and Power: Caribbean Discourses on Gender* (2012).<sup>3</sup> These women focus on how Caribbean women resisted and negotiated forces of power from places other than the rational. They are concerned with emotions and sexuality, with love, intimacy and the spiritual as expressions of a need for connection, with the body as both the carrier of power and the direct object of oppression but also as the agent of freedom. All of these thinkers give us clues on decolonising practices.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** How can we adopt a decolonial feminism into cultural studies practice? What is the significance of decolonial feminism for the Caribbean and which role does it play with respect to Caribbean theorising? Do you think there is a reluctance to incorporate a decolonial approach in gender studies?

**Celis:** I think that Caribbean feminists are actively in dialogue with the work of feminists of colour in the United States – Latinas, Chicanas, African Americans. With regard to gender studies in the Caribbean, I think that there is not so much a reluctance to engage with decolonial thinkers as to engage with both decolonial and postcolonial *male* thinkers. This is the result of the systematic subordination of the question of gender equality to the opposition of race and class hierarchies within anti-colonial and postcolonial research and writing. Caribbean feminists are still struggling to make gender and sexuality transversal to discussions of oppression and to counteract the symbolic and material domination of men in the region – including partners, scholars and writers.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** A decolonial critique of Western modernity points to the need to transcend supposedly fixed binary categories of thought and to think “in the border” and “beyond the border” between opposites. In how far is the term decolonial feminism problematic in this respect? Does the focus on feminism not result in further exclusions, for instance of queerness and masculinity? Is this a danger in this discussion and what can we do against it so that we cross these artificially erected borders?

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**Celis:** I think that as long as we are negotiating these borders we always face this danger. Every time we attempt to honour one aspect, even more when we deal with identity, we risk dishonouring something else. From my personal reflection, I'd like to suggest that we do not resolve this problem by trying to perfect the terms that we use to name complexity but by looking deeper inside. The only antidote against the traps of our own positionality is becoming as aware as we can of who we are and where we stand in the ubiquitous network of global social relations. We need to embrace our own contradictions and account for them, since paradox is the very reality of women, queer subjects and men in general. We need to accept our own and others' vulnerability to partial views and readings in order to get closer not to the answers but to the questions that honour the complexity of the reality that we attempt to grasp.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** And maybe it's also the dialogue that repeatedly opens up these questions, so that nobody forgets that we are not talking about something that is finished or completed in any way, but that everything is still open and needs to be discussed further.

**Celis:** Exactly. It is precisely the dialogue that brings up a better understanding of all of these things. If we aim at creating a non-hierarchical society, we have to think and practise a non-hierarchical knowledge. In my own research, I navigate through several disciplines, methodologies and theories sometimes perceived as oppositional. I have been asked more than once: how can you mix white feminists and feminists of colour? Or: how can you be using embodiment theories to address spirituality? Well, I follow the subject, not the theories or their creators. If the problem asks for combining different perspectives, they consequently reveal themselves as compatible.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** Absolutely. Albert Memmi also writes that non-Western thinkers should not exclude Western thinkers but that we all should take the best out of every theory, no matter where it comes from.<sup>4</sup> As you have already mentioned, most Western theories affirm reason as the only way to gain knowledge. In both your workshop keynote and in your current book,<sup>5</sup> you focus on the role of the body with regard to conceptualisations of gender in the Caribbean as an alternative

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site of knowledge production. You particularly emphasise the significance of the material dimension of the body in opposition to an exclusive notion of the body as a discursive/symbolic construct. You furthermore develop the idea of an “embodied consciousness” of women and Caribbean subjects as a foundation for agency. What exactly does this embodied consciousness imply and how does the resulting agency manifest itself? In how far does the (female) body become a space of re-enacting decolonial resistance in Caribbean cultural production?

**Celis:** Research on bodies has increased in the latest decades inspired by works such as Foucault’s and Bourdieu’s that emphasised the condition of bodies as the site where the subject is produced through the enactment of power forces. However, the trend in these studies has been, especially in literary criticism, to emphasise the symbolical and passive condition of the body. Feminist theories of “the embodied subject” – Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler among the better known – built on these theories to think of the formation of female subjects and identities as a productive process, in which bodies are explored both in their “vulnerability” to social forces and in their capacity to respond to normativity. The combination of these theories with writing on Caribbean identity, and more recently with studies of sexuality in the Caribbean, has helped me to name an issue I first encountered through my own experience. As a Caribbean migrant woman, I got entangled in what I call “issues of translation” of body languages – misreadings of my identity that I eventually realised came from the apparent disconnection of several aspects of my public persona including the meanings associated in different contexts to bodily movements and appearance. This is how I became aware of how culturally influenced body languages are, how complex and codified our gestures, aesthetics and style are, and how unconsciously and effectively these languages work. My interest in what I call “embodied consciousness” comes from this reflection as much as from my reading of Caribbean women writers. The authors I study portray and problematise both the meanings and values assigned to female bodies in Caribbean culture and the impact of those meanings in women’s relation to their own bodies. By staging bodies as agents of their characters’ resistance to patriarchal gender hierarchies, Caribbean women writers highlight not only the complexity of meanings enacted by body languages but their own awareness of the communicative condition of bodies. Both

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this awareness and the agency of the writers themselves in the use of such capacities of the body are manifestations of what I call “embodied consciousness”.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** Can you give some examples for Caribbean critics?

**Celis:** I have mentioned before Mimi Sheller’s book, *Citizenship From Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (2012), and will add the work of the Puerto Rican scholar Ángel G. Quintero Rivera, *Cuerpo y cultura: Las músicas mulatas y la subversión del baile* (2008).<sup>6</sup> They are both sociologists doing cultural studies, and they examine bodily practices in a series of performative activities – from dancing and sports to sexual transactions – as alternative ways of enacting agency and even citizenship. Dance studies have also illustrated how the body has been used to carry cultural memory and express individuality. The sophistication of body languages in the Caribbean may be interpreted, as suggested by Paul Gilroy for the Black Atlantic, as a response to the prohibition of the word under the violence of colonialism. This idea is implicit in many Caribbean thinkers’ use of the body in relation to Caribbean identity. Antonio Benítez Rojo starts his whole discussion about the Caribbean as a “repeating island” by mentioning two black women walking in the street whose movements make him realise why apocalypses will not come to the Caribbean. Édouard Glissant says it was through bodies we first escaped the plantation. These ideas are also a recurrent theme in Caribbean women writers and their criticism. And they are ubiquitously manifested in Caribbean popular culture but scholars have not taken the body seriously enough. My own work is a defence of the epistemology of the body, of the knowledge that is produced through the body and the way people exercise freedom within and beyond the constraints of the subjection by power through non-discursive practices. When I speak about the body I mean embodied practices, including emotions and spirituality, which in the context of Afro-Caribbean religions is a very material matter. Coming out of the colonial mind frame requires resources other than rational thinking so implicated with patriarchal and imperial power. What I call the “Caribbean embodied consciousness” is ultimately the recognition of the subjectivity of the body and its use to communicate, to resist, to produce and to carry knowledge.

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**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** So in your opinion, do we need to overcome the Western opposition of reason and the body and its implied hierarchy and regard them as equally valid and complementary? Or do you privilege an approach that focuses on the body as the neglected part?

**Celis:** In my judgment, they need to be seen as complementary. The emphasis on the body in my work does not implicate that I want to erase reason. It aims at flipping the balance of the academic discussion that has always been on the side of reason and the mind. Part of this imbalance comes from a thinking in binaries that opposes nature to culture, the feminine to the masculine and reason to emotion or sexuality. The point of the latest feminist discussion on the body, I think, is to counterbalance the preponderance of reason in the academic debate so that we can engage in conversations that really honour the complexity of human beings.

**Borst, Fuchs and Urioste-Buschmann:** To conclude, we would like to talk about the Socare Junior Researcher Workshop “Crossing Thresholds: Decoloniality and Gender in Caribbean Knowledge”, which took place 23-25 January 2013 at Leibniz University Hannover, Germany, and where you were a keynote speaker. What were the most important workshop results for you? Which impulses for your own research have you gained from our discussion?

**Celis:** My only previous reference to the research that is done in Germany about the Caribbean was the impressive collection *El Caribe y sus Diasporas: Cartografía de saberes y prácticas culturales* (2011),<sup>7</sup> edited by Anja Bandau and Martha Zapata Galindo. This workshop was a great opportunity to further see the scope and sophistication of German scholarship on the Caribbean. Meeting both established and young scholars, discussing traditional perspectives and tackling emerging approaches was really exciting for me. I did not only enjoy the papers but the informal conversations and the questions on my own work. Our discussions certainly inspired some of my responses regarding the use of concepts old or new, the importance of positionality and the relevance of experience to academic work. I had the opportunity to reflect on how to frame my own perspective when engaging with Caribbeanists from very different places and intellectual trajectories. There is

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definitely a lot left to do in our battle against patriarchal and colonial ways of thinking and engaging with each other, and it is really refreshing to see how we continue to fight with such passion. In my view, passion is precisely the fuel of our quests. Therefore, departing once and for all from the fallacy of objectiveness behind the so-called “legitimate” knowledge may be the path to our own decolonisation.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Eudine Barriteau, ed., *Love and Power: Caribbean Discourses on Gender* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Albert Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 143.

<sup>5</sup> Nadia V. Celis Salgado, *La rebelión de las niñas: El Caribe y la ‘conciencia corporal’* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Ángel G. Quintero Rivera, *Cuerpo y cultura: Las músicas ‘mulatas’ y la subversión del baile* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Anja Bandau and Martha Zapata Galindo, eds., *Cartografía de saberes y prácticas culturales* (Madrid: Verbum, 2011).