Decolonial feminisms and degrowth

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A B S T R A C T

Degrowth has become a major topic of interdisciplinary scholarship and practice that critiques the ideology of growth, reimagining social and economic relations and measures of well-being outside economic rationality. While the movement engages with gender politics peripherally in coalition with feminist schools of thought and activist groups, e.g., the feminisms and degrowth alliance, I argue the politics of gender, race, and labor are fundamentally tied to the development of a modern capitalist global system and therefore must be central in the understanding and praxis of non-capitalist alternatives. In this article, I examine how a decolonial feminist approach can address this condition by challenging the epistemes and ontologies that constitute modern colonial systems of power and furthering plural understandings and practices of being, seeing, and knowing across the North-South divide. By engaging in decolonial feminist praxis, degrowth stands to better address, dislodge, and reimagine the elements and relations that maintain an ideology of growth, building instead towards a stronger coalition across movements that encourages socially just and ecologically sustainable futures.

1. Introduction

Degrowth has become a persuasive conceptual framework for envisioning and mobilizing alternative political and economic actions that improve human well-being and respect ecological limits. At its core, it challenges the prioritization of growth and efficiency and their automatic association to better social outcomes (Latouche, 2005) as well as the hold of economic rationality on other social domains and objectives. In addition to proposing material downscaling, degrowth calls for a voluntary and democratic transformation of the economy that reorients economic relations around different principles and priorities, such as care, solidarity, justice, and conviviality (Akbulut, 2021) towards an "altogether new, qualitatively different world that will evolve through confrontation with the existing one" (Kallis & March, 2015: 362). Within the degrowth community, there has been an effort to engage with other visions that question the paradigm of growth, situating degrowth within an umbrella of worldviews that express similar ideas of good living within ecological means (Kothari et al., 2015).

Yet in assuming environmental justice movements appeal primarily to the Global South and degrowth to the Global North, many degrowth scholars have sidestepped or deferred some of the critical discussions that connect environmental justice with degrowth, especially as it pertains to historic economic and political relations between the North and South. This leaves degrowth proposals, such as appeals for conscious self-limitation or equitable downscaling (Schneider et al., 2010) evading connections between colonial/modern dynamics of race/class/gender and capitalist sociality within and between the Global North and South, further anchoring white/European middle-class histories, epistemes, and ontologies within the movement (Muradian, 2019). To address these gaps, I propose degrowth adopt a more critical social lens that engages how historic processes of colonialism and modernity still instruct

social, economic, and political relations of knowing, seeing, and being, informing present and fictive states of the world. While degrowth as a conceptual framework and political mobilizer influences present decisions through "fictional expectations," or mental representations of future states (Beckert, 2013: 220), in this article I argue that even fictions, or present imaginaries of future conditions, are still instructed by historic understandings of being and knowing in the world. This is because the social concepts, structures, and organizations that constitute present circumstances are the bases for imagining the future. By centering decolonial feminisms within the movement, degrowth stands to re-envision spaces that shift away not only from an ideology of growth, but from the coloniality of power and modernity (Quijano, 2000) that enables global Eurocentered capitalist world structures to persist.

Instead of considering environmental justice movements as engaged in politics of 'resistance' and degrowth in projects of 'reimagination' (Singh, 2019: 139), part of coalition building entails seeking to understand the entangled histories of people who have been hierarchized by systems of modern and colonial domination. This understanding "creates spaces for listening to multiple, and often competing, knowledge traditions [and ontologies] that all have opportunities to be recognized, explored, debated, and critiqued" (Sriprakash et al., 2020: 9). This epistemic shift, according to Audre Lorde (1984), signals a feminist politic truly committed to cross-cultural and cross-racial solidarity departing from dominant neocolonial logic that reproduces cases of assimilation or exclusion. To further shed light on this approach, I introduce decolonial feminisms as a lens for understanding the centrality of the relationship between capitalism and modern/colonial structures of power within the call for alternatives to growth ideology. I then examine how it relates to other popular feminist theories, specifically liberal feminism and ecofeminism. In doing so, I explore how decolonial feminisms holds critical historic, philosophical, and empirical understandings of coloniality central in a way that transcends the limitations of many of these feminist traditions. In the last section, I examine why decolonial feminisms not only enriches degrowth thought but relays important insights that are frequently unrecognized within its scholarship and practice. In maintaining decolonial feminisms as a fundamental approach for degrowth praxis, the movement stands to address its own limitations while creating spaces for coalition by engaging with the interrelated forces that shape life and well-being in all its forms.

2. Defining decolonial feminisms

In *Toward a Decolonial Feminism*, Maria Lugones explains how the dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human is the central dichotomy of colonial modernity (2010: 743). She argues that this distinction, imposed during the colonization of the Americas and beyond, served to classify the civilizational from the wild, hierarchizing difference from the European, bourgeois, colonial, heterosexual, Christian, modern man. White humans (rational men or reproducing women) were distinguished from non-humans (people of color, animals) through race and gender, establishing gendered European whiteness as the physiognomic and sociological norm of the human condition. This was in contrast to colonized and enslaved people who were understood as animals of labor and raw sex, or non-socializable sexual difference (Lugones, 2020: 33). Racialized women only moved away from bestiality into renditions of 'women' as it suited global Eurocentric capitalism.

Throughout Lugones's body of work, she outlines how the violent imposition of the modern racial and gender frameworks introduced a process of dehumanization that became a normative tool in judging colonized people's humanity. The 'civilizing' mission, while justifying abuse, did not seek to humanize colonized people. This mission, as Lugones explains, was the "euphemistic mask of brutal access to people's bodies through unimaginable exploitation, violent sexual violation, control of reproduction, and systematic terror (feeding people alive to dogs or making pouches and hats from the vaginas of brutally killed indigenous females, for example)" (2010: 744). In addition to violating people's bodies and lands, coloniality justified the domination and transformation of people's intersubjective selves in relation to social, ecological, and cosmological worlds. By connecting gender to civilization, colonizers intently erased senses of self and community, ecological and cosmological organizations, and endemic knowledges and practices constituted outside binary terms. The normativity that thereby connected the modern concept of nature to capitalism went hand in hand with the conception of gender to humanity and coloniality (Lugones, 2010: 745).

In her analysis, Lugones uses the concept *modern/colonial gender system* to articulate how gender fuses with race and labor in the organization of the modern global capitalist system of power. In cases where colonial relations were not explicit and encompassing, this gendering, classifying, and racializing process persisted with the expansion of European influence around the world as a marker of modernity. In *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards*, Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) maps how gender as a dimorphic system of social classification became an imperative for performing modernity in nineteenth century Qajar Iran (1785–1925). The increased intensity of Iranian-European cultural interactions conditioned elite Iranians and the imperial court to distance themselves from earlier concepts of beauty, attraction, and socialization, which were largely undifferentiated by gender in early Qajar Iran, and implement a modernizing project that emphasized western European concepts of gender and sexuality. Homoeroticism and same-sex practices came to indicate Iran as backward whereas the heteronormalization of gender and sexual expression became a condition for capitalist modernity (Najmabadi, 2005: 5). By the end of the nineteenth century, beauty had become feminized and signs of the state, such as the lion-and-sun royal emblem, had become increasingly gendered and militarized (Iran, 1916: 214−21). The enforcement of a hierarchically dichotomous and heteronormative gender system not only validated foreign socialization standards and norms above local orientations and values, but also emphasized the progressiveness of individuality over the conservatism of collectivity (Naficy, 2012: 98).

Historicizing gender and heterosexuality enables us to dislodge it as a universal system of organization and facilitates more active investigation into alternative liberatory possibilities of being in relation: "In our colonized, racially gendered, oppressed existences we are also other than what the hegemon makes us be" (Lugones, 2010: 746). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asserts that the self is constructed in and through signification (1990). It is in this signification that identity is realized as a regulated process of repetition, with agency located in the possibility of variation on the repetition. Therefore, subversion occurs "only *within* the practices of repetitive

signifying" (Butler, 1990: 185). Queer understandings of gender critique a dichotomous heterosexual characterization of people in favor of a non-binary queer approach, subverting gendered practices and associations to challenge the norms that socialize sexual difference. While this subversion still occurs by recognizing social arrangements within the modern gender system, it challenges and undermines socialized sexual difference as gendered, creating a space for alternative understandings of being. In this resistance, practices, values, and norms that produce everyday habits, rhythms, economies, and senses of space and time are reappropriated away from a dichotomous and hierarchized fragmentation of the colonized self, creating space for multiple expressions and organizations of subjective and intersubjective relations.

Intersectional analysis challenges understandings of power and domination at the nexus between race, class, gender, and sexuality. While this is a critical step in understanding the extent of the colonial condition, what is proposed here is a move to critically engage this analysis with praxis and "enact the critiques of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social" (Lugones, 2010: 746). In investigating what the future of selves can look like, decolonial feminisms moves away from dichotomous understandings of being that divide the human from non-human, the gendered from non-gendered, colonizers/ "whites" from colonized/ "people of color," away from powerful fictions and toward a praxis of more plural and fluid understandings of being in relation. When Fanon calls for an alternate understanding of the human that rejects the colonial human/non-human dichotomy that denies his humanity, he is calling for a new understanding of human relations and peopled habitats (Fanon, 2005). Likewise, decolonial feminisms calls for an alternate understanding of sociality away from the current Western orientation that hierarchizes difference in relation to white men. In its place, it reimagines being as at odds with whiteness, compulsory heterosexuality, and dualities, situated instead in the struggles and possibilities of our current conditions. Thus, decolonial feminisms is a praxical process of challenging and reimagining modern colonial gender systems towards new intersubjective knowledges, practices, and relations. In the next section, I turn my attention to feminist approaches that are still prevalent among several transnational feminist networks and environmental movements and consider their limitations in developing a critically intersectional praxis.

3. Risks of universalizing rights and gendering nature

Although the connection between class and gender as racialized has been made more explicit in later twentieth century feminisms, the imposition of biologically dimorphic heterosexual understandings of gender have persisted in popular theories of feminism. In this essay, I examine how two popular approaches— liberal feminism and ecofeminism— approach social inequality through the gender experience, addressing women's oppression, in different ways, through the universalization of socialized sexual differences. What I wish to show is that while they call for better recognition and valuation of women's experiences, they maintain a logic of exclusion and heteronormativity that further limits and entrenches subjectivity within the global capitalist institutions that hierarchizes our existences.

While everyone in capitalist Eurocentric modernity is racialized and gendered, not everyone is dominated or oppressed by these classifications. Women of color have long maintained that these categories, understood as homogenous and logically separate, have erased or distorted the experiences of those at the intersections: "Women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression" (Mohanty, 1988: 65). Promoted as a universal feminist movement, liberal feminism particularly builds upon the notion of a 'race to innocence:' "the process through which a woman comes to believe her own claim of subordination is the most urgent, and that she is unimplicated in the subordination of other women" (Fellows & Razack, 1998: 335). I define liberal feminism here as a strand of feminist theorizing that emphasizes the value of individual freedoms and holds that the state can ensure these freedoms through legal reforms. As Salem (2018) notes, liberal feminism focuses on the individual's attainment of rights and the teleological goal of extending freedoms enjoyed by men to women.

The self-positioning of liberal feminism as the oppressed and never the oppressor allows white liberal feminists to avoid considering differences in socialized experiences that fall outside the purview of their own experiences and paradigms of self and freedom. Instead, much of liberal feminist discourse prioritizes white women's needs and ideas of equality and justice, inscribing people into a regulatory normative space that warrants compliance with certain cultural and sexually socialized arrangements while denouncing, castigating, or erasing difference (Kapur, 2016). Women's rights becomes the legal instrument for implementing a neocolonial/modern standard of being and enshrining Western understandings of humanity, gender, and subjectivity as universal. This engenders in many cases an unequivocal choice between women's rights on one hand and cultural identity on the other, as illustrated in the legal response to Muslim women's veiling in some liberal democratic regimes in Europe and Canada[1] . This dichotomy is not incidental but constitutive of human rights, which are shadowed by those not included or included only by specific terms (Kapur, 2016).

We can thus appreciate how the instrumentalization of women's rights discourse relates to the colonial 'civilizing' mission, where belonging depends on the ability to conform to Eurocentric standards of humanity, gender, and freedom. In this sense, only certain kinds of women are worth recognizing as entitled to human rights. It is in this dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion that women's rights becomes a tool in the liberal security agenda that is hardly about safeguarding rights for women except as a means to an end (Kapur, 2016). By framing liberal regimes as civilized/human against the uncivilized/non-human, human rights discourse enables states to

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[1] In France, for example, inclusion is extended to those who comply with the assimilative terms of republican secularism that imposes unveiling in government spaces. While under the name of freedom for women, veiled women's choices are disregarded as false consciousness either because it does not comply with a liberal understanding of freedom or because it is understood as a belligerent act that does not obey the social norms of a liberal society.

wield enormous power over people and borders, justifying invasion and occupation of foreign states, encouraging protectionist and conservative policies around migration and movement, and promoting ethnonational chauvinism through projects like femonationalism and homonationalism[2] . The demand for rights according to gender, sexuality, or other subalternized identities does not challenge the normative terms that constitute agency. Instead, a rights-based discourse implicates the subject even more into the coercive structure of a justice regime, resulting not in freedom but submission to modernism as: "historical legacies of colonialism, structural adjustments, market reforms and the reduction of life to economic values", elements that are still inadequately challenged (Kapur, 2018: 240). Rights thus becomes a symbol of racial superiority or access to the market, thereby continuing the production of inequalities by reenforcing a hierarchy of humans. The universalization of who and what constitutes a subjective human maintains the hegemony of modern/colonial social orientations that obscure how being in relation and agency can be experienced and protected beyond liberalism and rights accumulation. While this is not a call to disengage entirely from women's rights discourse, it is important to highlight how such a framework limits our understanding of subjectivity and agency by reenforcing existing modern colonial regulatory structures and universalizing gender as it is experienced by certain people and their histories, rather than providing a means or space for the expression of plural understandings of agentic being.

Unlike liberal feminism, ecofeminism, often regarded as a feminism of the South, argues women are intrinsically different from men in that they hold a special relationship with nature. Some ecofeminists interpret women's relationships with their environments as biologically inevitable while others see this connection as a philosophical construct. While there are several branches of ecofeminism, many of its elements implicitly draw on a link connecting women's reproductive biology (nature) and men's appropriation of technology (culture) (Merchant, 1992: 192). In this modern/colonial dynamic, nature is viewed as inferior to culture in the same manner women are viewed as subaltern to men. Consequently, the subordination of women as nurturers and the exploitation of nature go hand in hand, making the goals between feminists and environmental movements mutual (Merchant, 1982).

And yet, these representations of gender run into the very problem they are critiquing in assuming norms of social and ecological organization for the homogenized 'woman of the Global South':

> "The claim, implied or explicit, is that all societies organize dimorphic sexuality, reproductive sexuality, in terms of dichotomous roles that are hierarchically arranged and normatively enforced. That is, gender is the normative social conceptualization of sex, the biological fact of the matter. The claim regarding the necessity of gender in the organization of social, political, economic life is sometimes justified or explained in terms of the nature of humans, their experiences, and the nature of biological and social reproduction. No characterization of particular social, political, economic, religious, or moral life is given as necessitating gender given the assumed facts of sex or of reproduction" (Lugones, 2020: 29).

The notion that all societies, especially indigenous ones, organize around gender is, as Oyéronké Oyewùmí argues, another instance of colonial domination in the "documentation and interpretation of the world, one that is facilitated by the West's global material dominance" (1997: 32). In *The Invention of Women,* Oyewùmí explains how gender became a social principle of organization in Yoruba society after colonization, transforming reproductive relations and subordinating females under the imposition of a patriarchal colonial state[3] (1997). Reading gender as a static dimorphic system based on sexual difference that translates into inherent heterosexually normative understandings of being with habitats imposes a universal interpretation of social organization, reproducing with significant ramifications the very logic ecofeminism seeks to critique.

The assumption of an *a priori* 'gender' in relation to 'nature' glosses over the different interactions people have with physical and nonphysical characteristics of their habitats and diminish other intersecting positionalities that influence these relations, such as age, wealth, background, temperament, affinities, and kinship (Leach, 2007; Leach & Mearns, 1996). While women's and environmental interests are commonly viewed as mutual in ecofeminism, these interests, which result from the localization of the colonial capitalist global system, also evolve under social and economic conditions and pressures, including those from market or policy changes. For example, women could be locked into natural resource dependency as a result of familial material conditions that may align some women's interests with resource conservation in some contexts, and misalign them in others, especially when it reproduces their inferior status in relations of power (Leach & Green, 1997). In interviews I conducted in the Takab district in Kerman, Iran, women who depended on gaz[4] harvesting for supplemental income were more concerned about the effects of drought on nearby tamarisk trees and thereby the consequences of budget cuts on the conservation park near their village than women in families with more material resources who did not financially depend on this activity. In many cases, including this one, familial conditions and communal relations and negotiations influence livelihood activities and natural resource usage, which in turn strongly impacts people's environmental interests and experiences (Leach & Green, 1997). In claiming that these associations are intrinsic and essential with women's being is to reduce the interrelated dynamics that influence socio-ecological practices to the modern gender system, erasing other meanings and histories of relating and structuring society, and concealing rather than uncovering the plural forms of organizing life.

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[2] In femonationalism, Muslim women are especially targeted as victims of 'bestial' masculinity where protection, though not subjectivity, is secured by entering a neoliberal civil society that abides by Western standards of socialization and organization (see Farris 2017). Likewise, under homonationalism, LGBTQIA+ rights are instrumentalized to sustain political stances against indigenous struggles, such as in the case between Israel and Palestine, or against immigrants and other subalterned identities. Both target racialized people through the instrumentalization of human rights as a marker of civilization and therefore as a justification for violence against the uncivilized illiberal Other.

[3] Oyewumi points out that Yoruba men accepted the implementation of the colonial gender system and the subordination of women. The collaboration between racialized men and colonial forces against racialized women helped undermine women's power and fomented indifference in their struggles against multiple forms of violence.

[4] Gaz, a local confectionary, is harvested from the sap of tamarisk trees.

In moving away from discourses that call for universalized subjectivities and essentialized understandings of being and knowing, how do we engage with the relations between sex, labor, and the coloniality of power and reimagine their arrangements? We can begin by stepping into a space that destabilizes normative certainties about identity to better understand the array of experiences and injustices that dictate our positions of power. Through a decolonial feminist lens, we are not simply reading women into analyses of political, ecological, and economic dynamics, nor exclusively demanding for the extension of legal entitlements of a narrow understanding of subjectivity, nor assuming a homogenous and essentialized role for gendered experiences. Rather, we are re-thinking and revaluating how modernity and coloniality influences our understanding of being in relation in current and future social imaginaries and how these interpretations can access and engage alternative practices and orientations of being that support the means for living a good life.

4. Degrowth through decolonial feminist praxis

Degrowth asks us to consider what well-being looks like when economic growth is deprioritized in place of different values such as communion and ecological sustainability. I turn here to my own work with a community of villages in South-Central Iran that exemplify a response to this question through a decolonial feminist approach. In the Takab district of Kerman, a group of women have organized as an artisan cooperative that in addition to facilitating collaboration and autonomy in the training, labor, and sales of their textile work, has also led efforts on rehabilitating the underground water channels that supply water to their villages. This campaign, which the group documented through participatory video methods over many years, did not result because of a stated gendered relationship with the channels or water, nor because of material pressures that limited their access to natural resources more so than men, but as a means to exercise autonomy and collective authority in their community on an issue of concern. In their focus on rehabilitating traditional and sustainable technologies, the cooperative resists the state's modernist approach in the centralization of water management, the modernization of water extraction, the commodification and privatization of water resources, and the corporatization and automation of farming and agricultural practices, engaging in a politic of post-automation[5] (Smith & Fressoli, 2021). In their engagement with participatory visual media methods, they re-signify images and create their own storylines in order to create a collaborative and intersubjective space for communication. In their organized actions, they resist and reorient social relations away from gendered difference towards a more agentic and communal understanding of being in relation that prioritizes sustainability, inclusive governance, and cooperation. Together, these practices encompass a decolonial feminist approach that I contend sustains degrowth principles, situating community action within localized knowledge traditions while contesting and reimagining the practices and expectations of socialization that further embed participative governance, ecological sustainability, community building, local wealth circulation, and creative expression into the fabric of intersubjective relations.

Centering decolonial feminisms as a methodology of degrowth practice is to look outside Eurocentric frames of being and relating and investigate how people with whom one seeks coalition understand themselves, individually and collectively across multiple geographies of power. This becomes the point of reference from which fictional expectations of future degrowth states develop and instruct present decisions and actions. For the colonized to live a human life, as Fanon points out, a new understanding of the human and being in relation outside the colonial matrix is necessary. How do we expand rather than reduce relations that have been developed to reenforce a colonial/modern capitalist system of power? By understanding degrowth through decolonial feminisms, we can begin to confront the methodologies that work within our lives, asking how do we learn from each other and act upon that knowledge? How do we build coalitions through difference, inhabiting spaces of multiplicity while engaging with the coloniality of power? A space of alternatives to global capitalist order is a space in which the process of decolonization is underway, resisting and reimaging life beyond neocolonial modernity. It is a space where self-realization can be experienced in many forms, including as an inward journey; where a communal sense of self can be understood as one of several ways we are in relation; where a future of conviviality and equality includes reparative address for past injustices; where investigation gives way to validation and celebration, visibilizing and reimagining other epistemes and ways of constituting ourselves and our habitats beyond the human/non-human divide.

To end, the challenge here is to question not only how to reconceptualize how we conceive of the economy without growth but to think of it in terms of its history and the social structures that maintain its development around the world. "The coloniality of gender is…what lies at the intersection of gender and class and race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power" (Lugones, 2011: 75). As Lugones and other decolonial scholars argue, capitalism as a complex system of power, while about economic relations, cannot be reduced to the economy or labor. It is a form of power with interstructural effects on social life, relations, activities, institutions, and expectations. In this sense, because capital constitutes a logic that surpasses questions of labor, modes of resistance and recreation that only focus on labor, exploitation, and the workplace will fail to dislodge the encompassing force of capital. Movements that refuse to address the colonial/modern understanding of humanity, gender, sexuality, and race from their logics recreate rather than excise the fundamental structures that underpin the very system they resist. Therefore, a rich theory of degrowth must include a historical, theoretical, and empirical understanding of how current growth ideology developed in and through colonial and heterosexist politics, not simply by its imposition on the world by Europe but through the racial, gendered, and labor practices of colonization itself.

Although degrowth has engaged some of this investigation, it is in a decolonial feminist tradition that we find a multidimensional and anticolonial manifestation of this praxis. In order to understand its approach, I have traced here how a decolonial feminist lens

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[5] It is loosely defined here as a politic in which technological innovation and renovation is practiced as a common good.

differs from other popular feminist approaches and examined why this difference matters. In doing so, I argue that centering decolonial feminisms as a lens to resist capitalist growth and reimagine social structures in an economically degrowing society means holding central the relationship between capitalism, coloniality, and heteropatriarchy. Gender, sex, and sexuality are not secondary or ancillary to the questions of capitalism, race, class, and coloniality but fundamental elements that constitute them.

Data availability

We have reviewed published papers, most of which have not yet made their raw EEG data available.
Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.
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