

# Decolonisation and Gender: Perspectives on Literatures and Cultures of the Americas

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**Abstract:** In the recent past, decolonial proposals have become more and more important for feminisms of the Americas, that is, for Latin American and U.S. Latina/o theories and practices negotiating the significance of gender. Decolonial feminist thought proposes multiple ways of deconstructing coloniality (the ongoing effects of colonisation), and distances itself from postcolonial feminisms by emphasising not only its own unique, historically diverse geopolitical situatedness in the Americas, but also discordance with the assumption of the postcolonial “silenced subaltern female subject”. The article traces some of the conceptual travels of a decolonial feminist project as it is, today, under construction, and ponders on the options it presents for literary and cultural studies of the Americas on a transborder level. It then presents two decolonial feminist theoretical proposals: María Lugones’ *Coloniality of Gender* and her attempt to move, as she says, toward a decolonial feminism, as well as Gloria Anzaldúa’s concepts of *Borderlands* and *Nepantla*. Lugones analyses “gender” as an inherently colonial category which defines an ecological, economic, political, spiritual, and epistemological modernity for the Americas; Anzaldúa envisions a world of decolonial, feminist poetical interstices while employing creative practices. These notions reshape the tools available for future cultural and literary analysis and propose a holistic politics of healing.

**Keywords:** decolonial feminism, literary and cultural studies, the Americas, María Lugones, Gloria Anzaldúa

Radlwimmer, Romana. 2017. ‘Decolonisation and Gender: Perspectives on Literatures and Cultures of the Americas.’ *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research*, Vol. 18, No. 2: 16–34. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13060/25706578.2017.18.2.369>

## Preliminaries

Predominantly in the last decade, a rapidly growing theoretical and literary awareness about a colonial, patriarchal history has been articulated for the Americas in rich and multiple ways. Philosophers, writers, artists, academics, and activists have been building, interrupting, questioning and continuing what could be called a diverse *decolonial feminist project*. This postulated the need for a feminist decolonisation (the conscious deconstruction and reconstruction of patriarchal, colonial cultural patterns), and an abundance of creative voices articulating their own versions and theories. This may now be characterised as one of the most striking features of the recent philosophical, literary, and cultural thought of the Americas shaping academic discussions and arising out of communal struggles.

In this article, I first reflect on the intersections between the postcolonial and the decolonial. In the very making of a project of one's own in the Americas, there is a strong discourse both taking up and criticizing postcolonial approaches. As I argue, the very differentiation from the postcolonial forms an important part in the construction of the decolonial project, which also means that the postcolonial has been a present sub-narrative of decolonial theory. Thus, my point is not in making a strong case differentiating between the notions of the postcolonial and the decolonial, but rather in reflecting on the complex intersecting characters of both lines of thought, an obvious intersecting that cannot be ignored. I start my article explaining this understanding and pondering on a possible genealogy of the decolonial/postcolonial. Through a concrete example of Latin American literary adaptations of Greek myths, I show some theoretical tensions the postcolonial/decolonial poses for literary studies. I continue asking what the decolonial project means on a transborder level, as for example for European Latin American Studies.

When I think of literature, gender, and decoloniality together, I explicitly perform what Gloria Anzaldúa has called a "tolerance for ambiguity" (Anzaldúa 2007: 101). Rather than constructing "hard facts" about what "decolonial literary gender studies" or similar labels do or should look like – this might rather be an understanding adequate for social or natural sciences –, I turn to approaches which are informed by subtle nuances and soft meanders. In no way does this decision mean a lack of direction or intentionality; in fact, it is central to decolonial literary thought. I seek to apply textual and conceptual standards found in literary theorising of the Americas to my own writing. I call such a decolonial literary approach to the Americas a *methodology of poetic ambiguity*. In my book *Wissen in Bewegung*, I have analyzed how reflections on literary feminist work in the Americas have suffered from their necessity to read and define "clear, logic" structures which they did not find representative of their condition (Radlwimmer 2015: 48–88).

These studies have continuously tried to validate recognizably “innovative ideas”, but rarely reflected on the criteria of their own epistemological approaches, which were based on Eurocentric understandings of what theory production needed to look like. They were seeking originality and innovation and found it hard to stand (or recognise) poetic or ambivalent theoretical designs. When feminist projects on a global scale have criticised the dominant use of a masculine voice, then Latin American and U.S. Latina literary theory positions have even more clearly articulated a dismissal of the master’s voice. These positions thus postulate that they can, and will no longer speak in terms of a philosophic tradition based on European modernity, perpetuating “white”, male, university-educated, heteronormative, adultist or other hegemonic frames of reference. As I have shown in my book, the notions of coherence, logic, objectivity are interrupted and questioned. A Latin American feminist literary theorising replaces these illustrated ideas by a capacity of political movement, cultural flexibility, and literary performativity. These concepts do not appear as “solid” texts, but are gently woven within different textual worlds (Radlwimmer 2015: 129–141).

I would like to argue here that these facts are preliminary to any further understanding of decoloniality, gender, and literature of the Americas. These facts directly feed into the current construction of decolonial literary thought and should be taken in account when analysing decoloniality and literature. This way it becomes clear how decolonial gender concepts of the Americas transform literary theory in structural and geopolitical terms: they do not perpetuate the same Eurocentric textual/literary and epistemological goals. They no longer accept one single way of making strong (literary or conceptual) texts. They introduce other values. Based on this understanding, I present two different decolonial projects—those of Gloria Anzaldúa and of María Lugones—and their connections to literature and literary theory. My aim is to ponder on some contemporarily important coordinates on decoloniality and literature. Together, Anzaldúa and Lugones reshape the tools available for future cultural and literary analysis and propose a holistic politics of healing. Lugones radically modifies our understanding of an epistemological given of the past when she questions gender as a valid concept for the Americas. Lugones’ theory offers the tools of thinking and rethinking “gender-free” American cultures and literatures. Anzaldúa’s latest book, *Light in the Dark*, envisions in a more accentuated way than ever before what a *Nepantla*—an “in-between”—present and future could look like. This new book brings unheard-of insights into a decolonial understanding of literature and culture. Her *Nepantla* world sees the interconnections of life through feminine, subalternised, and peaceful eyes. It is precisely through these reflections that decolonisation and gender and their intersections demonstrate how they are relevant to re/thinking literatures and cultures of the Americas.

The notion of *the Americas* encompasses the understanding of common colonial imprints on the connected continents. In non-colonial epistemologies, this geopolitical space has been called *Abya Yala* by the Kuna indigenous community (Gargallo 2012), and called (*North, Central and South*) *America* ever since the time which was defined and effectively institutionalised as the era of “discoveries” by Eurocentric modernity. For the same reason—its continuing, inscribed colonial semantics—the concept of *the Americas* has been criticised. Yet, it also implies a *rewriting* that transports ancestral knowledge of relationality and community: *the Americas* not as one, but as many (and especially within U.S. American discourses, not as a synonym for the United States); *the Americas* as a signifier for the lived experience of subalternised and excluded individuals and communities through a shared colonial, patriarchal, capitalist hegemonic history; *the Americas* as a possibility of resistance. The notion also specifically points towards Latin American and U.S. Latina/o forms of expression, and the connections and connectedness between them.

## A Decolonial Feminist Literary Framework

I am employing the term *decolonial feminism*, rather than *postcolonial feminism*. This semantic decision alludes to the most common terminological use of the recent years in feminisms working on dismantling colonial structures of the Americas. Interestingly, these feminisms have generally been building on (internationally discussed) postcolonial insights as well as on anticolonial struggles of the Americas. In fact, several decolonial thinkers (such as Walter D. Mignolo or Breny Mendoza) first used *postcolonial* parameters to question the intersections of race, class and/or gender in their various formations and as part of the colonial history of the Americas (Mendoza 2002, Mignolo 2003). Postcolonial studies and postcolonial feminisms were established especially in and for Asian-African contexts (Mendoza 2016). Among them, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s feminist intervention prominently added an internationally renowned gender perspective to analyses of scholars such as Edward Said or Homi Bhabha. “If,” says Spivak, “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 1994: 83).

In recent years, decolonial theorists have started to debate the difference between postcolonial and decolonial thought. They aim to establish a decolonial Latin American and U.S. Latina/o project that differs from the postcolonial. This is a project which is currently under construction, and it has to be dealt with in its processual forthcoming rather than as a final product. In no way do I regard this processual understanding as a deficiency. On the contrary, the inherent openness to transformation has to be understood as a conceptual strength and is one of the theoretical core operations decolonial literary thought has brought forward. Several theorists have tried to grasp

and formulate the difference between both over the last few years and have offered brilliant analyses and have come to various, multilayered conclusions (cf. Castro Gómez, Grosfoguel 2007; Curiel 2007; Espinoza Miñoso 2009; Mendoza 2016). In my reading, the following aspects are the most striking features of the differences and similarities drawn between postcolonial and decolonial thought. Prominently, feminist scholar Breny Mendoza's analysis of connections between decolonial and postcolonial thought is significant and convincing for literary and cultural studies of the Americas: "The certitude that the subaltern can speak is one distinguishing feature of decolonial theory" (Mendoza 2016: 112). Decolonial theorists have been concerned with investigating common grounds and variations of decolonial and postcolonial feminisms, re/constructing the rise of decoloniality by drawing a decolonial lineage of thought while distancing the discipline from postcolonial theory. This decolonial dissociation from postcolonial thought takes place on three levels: on a historical-cultural level, on a disciplinary level, and on a conceptual level. Chicana historian Emma Pérez proposed the postcolonial as an entity not yet achieved, and the decolonial as the space-in-between the colonial and the postcolonial (Pérez 1999). Historical-cultural differences between postcolonial and decolonial positions have been shown; Walter Mignolo, for instance, interpreted the European colonial point of view by arguing that the Americas were considered as an extension of Europe, unlike Africa or Asia (Mignolo 2003: 198). Ramón Grosfoguel and Santiago Castro Gómez differentiated between Anglo-Saxon postcolonial studies and Latina/o/Latin American<sup>1</sup> decolonial studies, defining the latter as *decolonial perspective*. According to the two authors, the decolonial project arises out of social sciences, cultural studies and semiotics. They base their argumentation on the disciplinary affiliation of the major part of postcolonial and decolonial thinkers. While they criticize disciplinary divisions, they introduce another one, letting literary studies aside (Grosfoguel, Castro Gómez 2007: 15).

Disciplinary differences appear as simplifying border lines. While mapping a trend of scholarly work involved in both decolonial and postcolonial studies, this disciplinary question is not intrinsically inherent in decolonial/postcolonial theoretical positions. On a conceptual level, decolonial thinkers tend to dismiss Spivak's theorem of the "subaltern"; by introducing, instead, the concept of the "subalternised"/

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<sup>1</sup> By Latina/o Studies I refer to an area of study in the United States dealing with all cultural, literary, artistic, historical, economic, sociological, philosophical, etc. forms of expression through and by the Latin American presence in the United States, may it be through immigration or through Mexicans (now Mexican-Americans) who have always lived in the territory that is today a big part of the United States. By referring to Latin American Studies, I describe the field of studies concerned with Latin America from Mexico to the Cono Sur (Argentina, Uruguay, Chile), but not with Latina/o presence in the United States.

“subalternisation” by which they intend to make visible the artificial, constructed nature of this category of thinking (Mignolo 2011: 72). It seems that the decolonial (both as a feminist and as a non-feminist) project is not only established explicitly (as in Lugones 2010; Espinoza 2014; Mendoza 2016; Curiel 2007), but has become a discursive pattern able to nurture a confident reflection on what the Americas mean today. For example, in Latin American literatures, one often repeated feminist motif has been the figure of the Greek heroine Antigone.<sup>2</sup> Griselda Gambaro’s Argentinean pre-Coup d’État play *Antígona furiosa* can be read as a feminist critique and allegory of the repressions, tortures, and killings during Pinochet’s dictatorship. First premiered only in 1986—after the end of the military junta—, it performed the dangers of ethics and censorship (*Antígona*’s central conflict) in real life, for the exiled writer Gambaro allegedly sought to protect family members by inhibiting a public performance (Nelli 2009: 74). Perla de la Rosa’s 2004 Mexican adaptation *Antígona: Las Voces Que Incendian el Desierto* negotiates an infinite feminist hotspot of anger and despair: the disappearances of the women of Ciudad Juárez, in different analyses directly linked to exploitation by transnational entrepreneurism such as the *maquiladoras* (for lucid Juárez murders analyses see for example Gaspar de Alba 2010; Jiroutová Kynčlová 2015). Both dramas—de la Rosa’s and Gambaro’s—elucidate how the Greek myth has become a referent for feminist resistance in the Americas. Yet, the literary import of the Greek myth is inconceivable without colonisation. The figure of *Antígona*, thus, becomes a literary figure that can be read as a decolonial and as a postcolonial referent, expressing tensions in the question of self-expression of Latin American thought. *Antígona* becomes the self-expressed, self-conscious decolonial literary option, as well as the postcolonial literary understanding of literary import and its dependent condition and, thus, of an ongoing silencing of the Latin American voice. Precisely in this way, Moira Fradinger’s brilliant literary analysis on the multiple adaptations of the Greek tragedy *Antigone* in Latin America can be seen as an account of an implicit decolonial shift in Latin Americanist literary thinking. As Fradinger explains, the abundant literary critiques mystifying *Antigone* as “universal” lead to a dead end when applied to Latin American contexts. They perpetuate problematic readings of comparing and contrasting different European and Latin American texts: “Antigone’s presence on the continent cannot be understood through the connotations of the phrase *new world*: colonialism, Occidentalism, and peripheral modernity” (Fradinger 2014: 224). Fradinger explains that the apparent “universal values” displayed in *Antigone* do not necessarily coincide with precolonial values of indigenous societies,

<sup>2</sup> In order to show the difference between the Greek myth and its adaptation in Latin American and U.S. Latina/o contexts, I distinguish between “Antigone” when I refer to the Greek myth and “Antígona” when I refer to the versions articulated in the Americas.

thereby placing the literary discussion of the Latin American *Antígonas* right at one center point of decolonial thought: the critique of colonial, modern universalism. As María Lugones stresses, “the critique of feminist universalism centers on the claim that the intersection of race, class, sexuality, and gender exceeds the categories of modernity” (Lugones 2010: 742). Fradinger’s analysis of the Latin American elaborations of *Antigone* not only implicitly introduces and demands a decolonial perspective on Latin American literatures, but also distances itself from postcolonial literary writing and reading practices, rejecting the concept I introduced in the beginning of my article when referring to *the Americas* as a decolonial concept: the practice of *rewriting*. She states that “[p]ostcolonial reception studies in the Anglophone ex-British colonies have tended to engage with [...] rewritings of the Classics [...] seen as a ‘response’ to the cultural impositions of the ex-metropolis” (Fradinger 2014: 225). Fradinger classifies this postcolonial reading model as insufficient for the understanding of the two hundred years of Latin American post-revolutionary history. This is a common decolonial argument as it points out the specificity of the historical colonial experience in the Americas as opposed to its specificity in colonial Asian and African contexts. As for the practice of rewriting, Fradinger also criticizes a subtle postcolonial nostalgia for “being at the center of the ex-colony’s life” (Fradinger 2014: 225) which decolonial feminism dismisses.

The *Antígona* texts and co-texts illustrate an underlying decolonial feminist discourse present in today’s literary analyses of the Americas. This means a discursive transformation. While Latin American feminist letters have at times perpetuated discourses of intellectual dependence (Radlwimmer 2015), they have now moved to a self-conscious identification and description of the Americas as a powerfully intellectual, artistic, philosophic, activist conglomerate. Going back to Spivak’s and Mendoza’s hypotheses, the subaltern(ised) female (subject/literary text/theory) articulates itself powerfully and is recognised as such. I regard this as a highly constructive, and indeed long-needed turn in (Latin) Americanist (feminist) thought which for too long has been restricted by hegemonic discourses that doubted Latin American and Latina literary feminisms’ ability to speak, such as the highly polemic 1980s and 1990s arguments that Latin American or Chicana feminist literary theories do not exist (Radlwimmer 2015).

## **Decolonisation, Gender and Transborder Cultures**

The above mentioned decolonial feminist discussions are highly necessary in contemporary Latin American and U.S. Latina letters, as well as in cultural criticism and neighboring disciplines. Yet, they still seem to have been bypassed within European discussions, both on an academic level and on the level of cultural revision and an

activism that transcends borders. As a matter of fact, postcolonial feminist studies *have* been quoted and employed, even if just at its margins: as exoticisms with apparently little connection with European cultural coordinates or as philosophic points of view that are—ironically—positioned as peripheral within humanities and social sciences.

Decolonial feminist studies, though, have been rather absent in European academia, or have entered it only very rarely, such as through the Utrecht Decolonial Summer School (Utrecht Summer School, Web, 2016) with Walter D. Mignolo as its participating speaker, or other limited events or circles. It is no surprise, in this case, that an interest in decolonisation comes from the Kingdom of the Netherlands with its ongoing political-economic presence in the Americas. Yet, in the literary and cultural realm of European Latin American studies, the dominant academic discourse still tends to repeat postcolonial visions, mainly ignoring the emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century decolonial concepts that have effectively altered the mapping of Latin American and U.S. Latina/o criticism.

Decolonial feminist thought is one possibility to structurally rethink contemporary cultural configurations as a transborder issue. By *transborder* I mean concerns that go beyond confined territories and that affect cultures and modes of thought transgressing constructed limits (such as nation states). As María Lugones points out, the much-discussed category of gender has, in itself, always been a category of colonial modernity, and coloniality (thus: the effects of colonialism) cannot be thought of without its close links to global modernity and capitalism (Lugones 2010: 745). “Modernity organises the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogeneous, separable categories,” says Lugones (Lugones 2010: 742), referring to the European philosophic systems established and “exported” with the rise of capitalism and expansionism in the early 1500s. What would it mean to decolonise gender in European debates? For Breny Mendoza, decolonisation is not equivalent to antiracist, anticapitalist critiques, or to critiques of Eurocentrism (Mendoza 2016: 111); decolonial feminisms are rather concerned with recovering ancestral indigenous knowledges and non-modern ways of thinking of the Americas than with critiquing Eurocentrism. Also, Mendoza’s analysis reflects the dangers of thinning out of the concept, of losing its political potential. Yet, which transborder cultural effects would a decolonizing feminist philosophical stance from Europe (as a multifaceted concept in all its ramifications) have if not a thorough organic revision of all the critiques Mendoza mentions? How to introduce, then, decolonisation and gender cross-readings as meaningful tools for cultural and literary analyses in a European context without appropriating and distorting them? Decolonial feminism, much rather than an object of study, defines itself as a theoretical model, a subject of study and as a way of enacting feminism; it is set up as an ethics of investigation and of activism.



Should these values be ignored, what would remain is an empty label, ready to prove colonial modernity's self-proclaimed superiority of being. In the words of decolonial feminist critic and activist Yuderkis Espinoza Miñoso: "The coloniality of the discursive practices of hegemonic feminisms in the Third World, or at least in Latin America, lead to the reproduction of an Other within feminisms" (Espinoza Miñoso 2009: n/a). This argument resembles the postcolonial one, such as Mohanty's in *Under Western Eyes* (Mohanty 1991), which shows the structural similarities between both currents of thought.

Even where Central European national narratives dissociate from their colonial past, the effects of colonialism have structurally shaped their knowledge systems and constitutions of gender. Ignoring such impact means to ignore how modernity functions as a transborder phenomenon, and, thus, to ignore the wide-spread constructions of one's cultural past and present. Pondering on coloniality and decolonization from a European perspective might be an uneasy task when enacted from a position of closeness rather than that of distance. I use the word *uneasy*, for such an intimate reflection necessarily leads towards an encounter with inherent colonial structures in contemporary dominant epistemologies and ontologies.

In a recent interview, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gives her reading of deconstruction: "It's critical intimacy, not critical distance. So you actually speak from the inside" (Paulson 2016). Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa sees the decolonising reality as opting for an "attached" rather than a "distant, separate, unattached mode", "enabling us to weave a kinship *entre todas las gentes y cosas*" (Anzaldúa 2015: 83). Such an interpretation of deconstruction may count as much postcolonial (as an awareness of ongoing processes of the colonial), decolonial (an awareness of one's own ability to feel, think and speak), as it is feminist (an awareness of the private as public and vice versa). Hence, negotiating coloniality and gender within the European context may become uncomfortable when understood as deconstruction from within. It may give rise to old-new discussions on internal European colonising structures (such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and their effects on or discussions about the secondary benefits gained by colonialism in the Americas, Africa and Asia by those countries that apparently had never participated in the colonial quest. It may also renew discussions about structural violence caused by what Lugones calls the *Coloniality of Gender*: "Unlike colonisation, the coloniality of gender is still with us; it lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as the pivotal construct of the capitalist world system of power" (Lugones 2010: 746). Lugones—and this is one intriguing aspect of her texts—never clearly specifies the concept, avoiding apparently safe, fixed definitions, but circles around the questions of gender and coloniality philosophically, approaching it in various ways and therefore never simplifying it. *Gender* itself is, in her point of view, a colonial concept, and therefore brings along the ongoing effects of colonisation

(that is, coloniality) every time it is reproduced as a method of analysis or figure of thought.

### „We are also other”: On Cultural Revisions

María Lugones' decolonial feminism has an explosive potential, for it radically deconstructs gender as a valid category of thought for the Americas. Taken seriously, her affirmation urges us to completely reconsider present approaches to thinking about human and textual relations. For the Argentinean-born but U.S.-based philosopher, the whole dichotomy *sex-gender* itself is irreversibly linked to colonial modernity. In her analysis, Pre-Columbian societies of the Americas neither knew, nor conceived of their communities under the sign of *gender*, which has always been a colonial imposition (Lugones 2010: 746).<sup>3</sup> Such hypothesis leads to radical rethinking of the contemporary feminist cultural research on the Americas. As Lugones points out, (anthropological) investigations on indigenous societies have been frequently conducted with an underlying colonial epistemology, using *gender* as a central signifier when describing the division of practical tasks of indigenous communities. Following Lugones' analysis, such an approach cannot do justice to research on the Americas for it imposes colonial frames of reference on societies functioning (partly) with non-colonial frames of reference. Lugones describes the capitalist, “modern, colonial, gender system” and its intrinsic logics of dividing the world and its phenomena into separable, hierarchically structured dichotomies that have shaped the “thinking about race, gender, and sexuality” (Lugones 2010: 742).

The basic division was then between the *human* and the *non-human*. In such a logic, colonisers fall into the categorisation of the *human* which operates with a sex-gender-dichotomy, positioning women not as equal partners to men, but subjugating them as inferior, passive reproducers. The colonised, though, were never seen as *human* at all, but were described as *non-human* and bestial by colonial modernity; and therefore, in terms of the colonial normativity of gender, as—in biological terms—males and females. In this sense, Lugones argues that colonised “[m]ales became not-human-as-not-men, and colonized females became not-human-as-not-women” (Lugones 2010: 744). The colonised men/males were constructed in a “tension between hypersexuality and sexual passivity”, and colonised women/females in relation to, or mounted by, Satan. This interpretation takes into account the visions of Christianity and inquisition that

<sup>3</sup> Other decolonial feminist scholars have criticised this idea in its radicalism, arguing that e.g. Andean indigenous communities did use a gender concept, albeit not in the same way as the colonial power introduced it. For further discussions, see Mendoza's summary of the critical voices of Lugones' concept (Mendoza 2016).

informed the world constructions of the colonisers of the Americas (Lugones 2010: 744–745). Such invention of the colonised by colonisation was the justification of unnamable brutalities committed by the colonisers (Lugones 2010: 747).

Lugones' notion of the *Coloniality of Gender* follows, adds to, and critiques the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano's concept of *coloniality of power* which describes the ongoing effects of coloniality in contemporary societies and forms of knowing. Lugones explains, "I mean to name not just a classification of people in terms of coloniality of power and gender, but also the [...] attempt to turn the colonised into less than human beings" (Lugones 2010: 746). *Coloniality of Gender* not only altered and controlled sexuality, intimate relations and reproductive practices, but implied the "colonisation of memory" in order to eliminate different epistemologies of the Americas: "[T]he normativity that connected gender and civilisation became intent on erasing community, ecological practices, knowledge of planting, of weaving, of the cosmos" (Lugones 2010: 745). Hence, the decolonisation of gender is defined as a theory and a practice of resistance and a process in the making, rather than an answer already fabricated (Lugones 2010: 746). Resistance means, for instance, all practices that challenge the denial of "legitimacy, authority, voice, sense, and visibility" in colonial public politics from a communal, personalized point of view; a colonised, gendered elocution is, thus, necessarily generated from a "fractured locus" (Lugones 2010: 753): "In our colonised, racially gendered, oppressed existences we are also other than what the hegemon makes us be" (Lugones 2010: 746).

What becomes significant in a constructivist rather than in an artistic and literary way (nevertheless also significant for the purposes of decolonial feminist literary and cultural analysis) is the notion of *reading* that Lugones proposes. Drawing on the Nigerian feminist scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's postcolonial analysis of sex and gender regarding the Yoruba ethnic group where "a colonising reading of the Yoruba reads the hierarchical dichotomy into the Yoruba society, erasing the reality of the colonial imposition of a multiple oppressive gender system", Lugones claims that the concepts of *chacha* and *warmi* of the Andean Aymara communities cannot be translated as *man* and *woman*, for both are complementary opposites that—depending on the context—can be performed by both *men* and *women* (Lugones 2010: 749, 750). When discussing ways of decolonising gender resistance, Lugones cites Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's (as Walter Mignolo calls it) *border thinking*. Lugones herself claims to propose a "feminist border thinking, where the liminality of the border is a ground, a space, a borderlands [...], not just a split, not an infinite repetition of dichotomous hierarchies among de-souled specters of the human" (Lugones 2010: 753). When referring to *border thinking*, Lugones builds her decolonial feminist theory on Chicana writer and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's best-known book *Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza*, which gives a poetical and accurate cultural description of the "actual

physical borderland” of “Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border” (Anzaldúa 2007, n.p.). At the same time, Anzaldúa’s text deals with “the psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands” that are “not particular to the Southwest”, but “present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa 2007, n.p.). Decolonial feminisms of the Americas, may they be cultural concepts or may they be literary texts, recuperate those zones that officially do not exist, they envision a “feminism from and at the grassroots, and from and at colonial difference, with a strong emphasis on [...] a historicised, incarnate intersubjectivity” (Lugones 2010: 746). More than just citing an example to strengthen for her own notions, Lugones gives credit to Anzaldúa’s concepts as a possible and meaningful decolonising practice and theory.

## Unlearning Consensual Reality

Examining the connections between decolonial gender concepts and literatures of the Americas, Gloria Anzaldúa’s work plays a prominent role within literary and cultural theory making. If postcolonial positions emphasised the silence of the subaltern subject, and decolonial positions the subalternised subject’s ability to speak, the Chicana theorist and writer promoted both, softly shifting from the first to the latter. In fact, Gloria Anzaldúa has been cited both as a postcolonial critic (Brah 2002: 625–626) and a decolonial critic alike (Mendoza 2016: 114). Her theoretical path always questioned colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative, and classist cultural imprints in their amalgamations. Besides *Borderlands/La Frontera–The New Mestiza* (1987), her earlier publications include *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), co-edited with Chicana theorist and writer Cherrie Moraga. *This Bridge* belongs, undoubtedly, to the basic bibliography of anyone interested in the connections between literature, culture, coloniality, decolonisation and gender and has its place among feminist voices within “U.S. Third World” contexts. It is a forward-looking attempt to write and create in a world hostile to artists acting from the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, disability, etc. Echoing Virginia Woolf’s words and complicating them according to the problems of colonial and patriarchal collisions, Anzaldúa’s *Letter to Third World Women Writers* advises: “Forget the room of one’s own—write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping and waking” (Anzaldúa 1983: 170). *This Bridge* significantly nudged conversations for later decolonial feminisms; as Norma Alarcón pointed out in her 1990 essay *The Theoretic Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism*, “the editors

and contributors believed they were developing a theory of subjectivity and culture that would demonstrate the considerable differences between them and Anglo-American women" (Alarcón 2003: 404). In 2015, *This Bridge* was relaunched by Cherrie Moraga in a new edition with a foreword by Moraga herself who accentuates the ongoing struggle of women immersed in decolonial gender coordinates.

Moraga reflected on how the book's importance was not equivalent to the smooth conversion of precarious decolonial women writers' lives into romantic fairy tales; that means, they were not necessarily able to live easy, comfortable lives just because the book was a publishing success. Several contributors to *This Bridge* have already passed away and the challenging relations between decolonisation, gender and literary production as a lived experience are not just a text, not just words, not just a theory. Theory as presented in texts arises, in a Chicana understanding, out of practices, and is meant to inform and nourish such practices. One of the women no longer present is Gloria Anzaldúa herself. The 2015 posthumously published *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Anzaldúa 2015) is an edited version of what Anzaldúa's dissertation project—an ambitious new work of theory—could have been (Radlwimmer 2016). In its appendix, editor AnaLouise Keating published some of Anzaldúa's letters and notes: evidences of her struggles against diabetes, with various writing projects, deadline pressures, readers' and editors' expectations, and constant reading journeys. These accounts of everyday life challenges faced by a decolonial feminist writer can also be found within the enormous material of the Anzaldúan archive at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of the University Libraries in Austin, Texas. There, Anzaldúa's posthumous papers are mostly open for investigations, but they also give a profound and yet hitherto only partly investigated account of Anzaldúa's life and work.

Chicana versions of decolonial feminist theory arise out of lived experience and make sense only as lived experience. This connects Chicana feminisms to Lugones' *Coloniality of Gender*: "Decolonising gender," says Lugones, "is necessarily a practical task. It is to enact a critique of racialised, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social" (Lugones 2010: 746). Similarly, Anzaldúa wrote her theoretical texts in a consciously personal manner. The literary, autobiographic, fictionalised theoretical writing, and Anzaldúa's unique style, contributed to the success of the above-mentioned *Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza*. At the time of its publication, the book reshaped feminist theory in the U.S. in unprecedented ways; it articulated postcolonial concerns in a time before postcolonial concepts became established (as it has been mentioned, decolonial discussions often started as postcolonial discussions, and were then working their way through conceptual difference to postcolonial thought), and did so without necessarily naming them in the terms they became best known for, but expressing its central

ideas. Before Crenshaw's influential work that coined the concept of intersectionality, *Borderlands/La Frontera–The New Mestiza* reflected on the meaning of intersectional experiences, such as the risks of being a woman, a mestiza, a member of the working-class, a lesbian:

As a *Mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs [...]; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. *Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. (Anzaldúa 2007: 102–103)

*Borderlands/La Frontera–The New Mestiza* examined the tensions between (neo-)colonised experience, female bodies and ways of knowing in a post-postmodern world. Anzaldúa coined the term of the *open wound* (*herida abierta*) for the decolonial feminist and any border experience. "The U.S.-Mexican border es una *herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds," (Anzaldúa 2007: 25) she wrote. In *Borderlands/La Frontera–The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa defined struggles and dwelling questions not yet theorised at that point, and focused on the reasons of what Spivak would come to denominate as "silence". Yet, Spivak's postcolonial theory does not coincide with *Borderlands/La Frontera–The New Mestiza*, which already lays the ground work for concepts and debates significantly expanded in later Anzaldúan texts. After *Borderlands/La Frontera–The New Mestiza*, the anthology *This Bridge We Call Home*, co-edited with AnaLouise Keating, or the essay *now let us shift...* no longer center around marginalisation. Instead, these texts propose a Chicana epistemology of healing, a literary theory of decolonial feminist arts, and a cultural model of a "New Mestiza" that shifted from being the "sacrificial goat" to be the "priestess of crossroads" (Anzaldúa 2007: 102). (When coining the term "New Mestiza", Anzaldúa deconstructs and reconstructs the Latin American/Mexican 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural-philosophical concept of *mestizaje*, which denoted cultural blendings as the Latin American/Mexican national(ist) format (as, for example, coined by José Vasconcelos). With the "New Mestiza", Anzaldúa eliminates nationalist notions and values, on a cultural-philosophical level, all non-essentialist forms of cross-culturalism and hybridity and does so from a feminist perspective.)

The shift constitutes a move toward decolonial feminism in Breny Mendoza's sense: from now on, Anzaldúa's theoretical stance predominantly focuses on celebrating its own, vivid voice, is less worried about imposed limitations and comes to transcend them. Anzaldúa presents a decolonial subject position that traverses borders; those who convert into a *nepantlera*, that is, into "artista-activista[s], with consciencia de mestiza" and "intermediaries between varios mundos", able to "cut through isolated selfhood's barb-wire fence" (Anzaldúa 2015: 82). The central theorem of Anzaldúa's decolonial feminism is transformation: ideas of how to destabilise the cultural coordinates that limit Chicana existence, how to deal with changes on a physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and political level. Chicana theory evolves powerfully around these Anzaldúan reflections and her quest for answers by rejecting epistemological and political obstacles, and by concentrating on the abilities and qualities of marginalized women, and feminist thought as a discipline.

In *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, Anzaldúa emphasises her decolonial vision even stronger. In her view, a decolonising practice means deconstruction and more reconstruction: "Decolonising reality consists of unlearning consensual 'reality'" (Anzaldúa 2015: 44). To Anzaldúa this means that prevailing (colonial, Eurocentric) cultural paradigms can no longer be the frame of reference in the world she envisions. Feminist decolonisation happens through acts of creativity, activism and spirituality: "For racialised people, managing losses, the trauma of racism, and other colonial abuses affect our self-conceptions, our very identity, fragmenting our psyches and pitching us into states of *nepantla*" (Anzaldúa 2015: 87). *Nepantla* is a central anti-binary, highly complex concept of later Anzaldúan writings; in this quotation, *Nepantla* may mean a state of confusion, being "torn between ways", a "zone where you struggle to find equilibrium between the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it" (Anzaldúa 2015: 126–127). *Nepantla* is a liminal space or, much rather, is multiple liminal spaces; it is a rhizomatically thinkable concept, layered in unstructured, non-hierarchical relations and connection points. By reactivating the pre-Columbian notion, Anzaldúa's *Nepantla* represents different types of in-between-ness and/or in-between-worlds.<sup>4</sup> It appears as a receptive practice where watching "the unconscious struggle between several possible readings" facilitates "interaction between ambiguity and control, between undifferentiated confusion and defined clarity" (Anzaldúa 2015: 114). *Nepantla* is also the capacity of creation, "a place where transformations are enacted" (Anzaldúa 2015: 56). For decolonial feminist literary

<sup>4</sup> *Nepantla* was used in pre-Columbian Mexico to describe a complex idea of being in between different states or circumstances and has been heavily reused in feminist Mexican philosophy, and in more recent Latina/o theories. As Norma Alarcón points out, Mexican feminist writer Rosario Castellanos uses the concept after the emblematic persona of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Alarcón 1992: 9).



analyses, such as *Nepantla*, in-between-reading/writing practice designs a literary methodology in order to capture subtle undertones of traditionally overheard (textual) realities. At the same time, it is a cultural concept proposing a politics of healing through feminist decolonial consciousness, able to modify social interaction, sexuality, spirituality, and artistic creation.

## Crossroads

In this article, I have tried to make lines of thought visible through a *methodology of poetic ambiguity*, and to read some contemporary concerns on decoloniality and literature together, without constructing them as consolidated subjects. This approach employs some of the main theorems of the current literary feminist conceptualisations of the Americas, which rely on associative, fragmented, non-coherent epistemologies, and which are unafraid of interrupting hegemonic parameters of logic, textuality, and literature. My concern was first to show how the postcolonial is a sub-narrative to the decolonial. The distancing from the postcolonial becomes a means of self-identification for a theory corpus of one's own in the Americas. This is a valid operation that allows us to define the decolonial more explicitly. Anzaldúa's understanding regards these labels in an unexcited way, identifying with one or the other, with both, or with none, while Lugones explicitly names her project "decolonial". I introduced the example of the Latin American adaptation of the Greek myth *Antígona* to show the possible negotiations between postcolonial and decolonial thought for the Americas. I then went on to ask why decolonial concerns have not yet been dominantly discussed on a transborder level—much less than postcolonial thought has—, as is the case of European Latin American Studies. I also demonstrated how Lugones and Anzaldúa propose radical thought processes that redefine hegemonic norms. Anzaldúa seeks to transcend any limits or labels. She de- and reconstructs a consensual reality of literature, textuality, and life by theorising a multilayered *Nepantla* space that allows to move within many facets at the same time. In *Light in the Dark*, literature, writing, reading have long moved beyond the "intimate terrorism" (Anzaldúa 2007: 43) that censors human, linguistic or textual agency. María Lugones' dismissal of gender will, in the future, allow further decolonial, relational readings of literatures of the Americas. As was to be shown, her concepts mark a turning point in decolonial feminism. From here, an urgent task will be how to identify decolonial literatures without the notion of gender, and to further question if such dismissal makes sense in every single case.

The theories of María Lugones and Gloria Anzaldúa, as well as Anzaldúa's literary work, are vivid examples for decolonial feminist proposals of the Americas, expressing visions of restructured cultures centering on human well-being: "We are moving on to a time of crossings, as seeing each other at the colonial difference constructing a new





subject of a new feminist geopolitics of knowing and loving,” (Lugones 2010: 756) concludes Lugones. Anzaldúa’s poem *To Live in the Borderlands* adds, “[t]o survive the Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras* / be a crossroads” (Anzaldúa 2007: 194–195). Decolonial feminisms have shifted from postcolonial feminist rewritings to powerful, creative constructions of cultural and literary coordinates as acts of resistance. They build on ancestral indigenous knowledges of the Americas and on community, are conscious about the interconnectedness of all beings, and provide their shimmering, multi-faceted *Nepantlas* as new possibilities for cultural models transcending borders.

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