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Decolonial Feminism as a Future Direction for Liberatory Feminist Futures

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of decolonial and feminist futures, arguing that one cannot – and should not – happen without the other. We introduce decolonial feminist futures as an approach to dismantling interlocking structures of oppression that shape much of mainstream futures thinking. By interrogating futures-as-practice, futures-as-methods, and futures-as-visions, we highlight how dominant epistemologies can limit the scope of collective visioning. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship, we advocate for a futures praxis that centers epistemic pluralism, inclusivity, and agency. Ultimately, we contend that a decolonial feminist approach is not only necessary for more equitable and just futures but also as an act of radical reimagination and structural transformation.

Keywords

Feminist Futures, Decolonial Feminism, Coloniality, Epistemic Injustice, Futures

Introduction

“Feminist futurists acknowledge the possibility that the future has already been colonized by patriarchal imaginings. If and when this is deemed to be the case, two parallel projects need to happen. First, the project of critiquing and decolonizing. And, second, the project of envisioning different, post-patriarchal futures.”

Ivana Milojević, *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future*

In a world choked by interlocking oppressive structures, futures thinking offers us an opportunity to imagine worlds liberated from the strangleholds of even the most dominant power asymmetries and to see these worlds as within our reach, rather than as hopelessly naive flights of escapism.

As Milojević (2024) stresses in her recent monograph, this liberatory potential of futures overlaps with feminist thinking, which is at its heart an active and agentic project to challenge the patriarchy as a gendered structure of power asymmetries. Feminist thinking has long been employed by a subset of futurists as a lens through which to envision brighter futures (Albuquerque & Pischetola, 2023; Bergman et al., 2014; Bhavnani & Foran, 2008; Campt, 2017; Feukeu, 2024; Gunnarsson-Östling, 2011; Hurley, 2008; International Women's Development Agency, 2020; Jöster-Morisse, 2020; Milojević, 2008, 2024; The African Women's Development Fund, 2017). As feminism more broadly has evolved to be intersectional and pluralistic, so too have practices associated with and visions of feminist futures. The shift towards intersectional feminism, first conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), has provided feminist futurists with the tools to interrogate how markers of marginalization intersect with and amplify each other to produce unique lived experiences of inequity and inequality based on one's race, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, age, ethnicity, geography, socio-economic status, and more. Subsequently, our parameters

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for feminist futures have expanded to acknowledge and address interlocking structures of oppression.

If our visions of feminist futures are truly ones of equality and liberation, we must confront this complex and interlocking web to free our futures of oppressive structures. Milojević's (2024) warning that (feminist) futures might already be colonized by patriarchal imaginings, and subsequent call to decolonize, resonates with us as decolonial feminist thinkers who operate from a point of intersection to call out and confront the intertwined nature of coloniality and patriarchy. Inextricably connected through ideology and history, these structures of oppression are largely responsible for the hierarchization of beings - which calculates the 'value' of each individual based on deeply gendered and racist systems - imposing compounding penalties on people who do not conform to the colonial 'ideal'.

In this paper, we explore what it means for the future(s) to be (de)colonized, share the conceptual underpinnings of our decolonial feminist approach to futures, and propose decolonial feminist futures as a critical step in moving us towards more equitable and just futures for all. We preface our deep dive into decolonial feminist futures by acknowledging that while "gender" and "women" are often used interchangeably, our work is built on an understanding of gender asymmetries as manifestations of patriarchal systems that punish anyone – regardless of gender – who fails to live up to the exacting standards of hegemonic masculinity.

What does it mean for our futures to be (de)colonized?

The need to 'decolonize' futures or to be aware of colonized futures has been a theme in the literature since at least the mid-1970s (Dator, 1975; Sardar, 1993). However, in line with an overall increase in calls to consider and confront the continued impact of colonialism, there has been a notable resurgence of calls for decolonization and decoloniality within futures and foresight in recent years (Anderson & David, 2022; Bisht, 2017; Bourgeois et al., 2022; Cruz & Kahn-Parreño, 2022; Feukeu, 2024; Jae, 2024; Krishnan, 2019, 2022; Singh, 2019). Within the literature, we see three facets of colonized futures:

- **Futures-as-practice:** Who practices futures and for whom? Milojević (2024) observes that men have largely dominated the field, and she is not alone in raising this point. In 1993, Sardar illustrated the intersection of patriarchy and coloniality by noting that the field was dominated by "an elite of white, mainly American, male scholars" and, resultantly, "futures studies is increasingly becoming an instrument for the marginalization of non-Western cultures from the future" (Sardar, 1993).
- **Futures-as-methods:** What epistemic tradition does futures draw from and why? Despite a diversification of methods in the futures toolkit, it is crucial to interrogate how notions of coloniality have shaped and continue to shape the standards by which we measure the validity and value of methodologies. We must also note that these standards are formulated based on aims and agendas – what and whose interests have historically been prioritized in the design and implementation of futures?
- **Futures-as-visions:** How do we apply futures, and to what end? Milojević (2024) warns that the future might already be "colonized by patriarchal imaginings" (p. 75); similarly, Dator (1975) talks about the long-term implications of actions taken by people in the present as a form of colonization, as well as the ability of value systems and social norms of the past or present to taint the future. In other words, how might visions of our futures be both constrained by and continue to uphold the oppressive power structures of our past and present?

As a whole, the term "decolonization" is most commonly used to refer to the critical interrogation of futures-as-practice and futures-as-methods.

Increasingly, however, there is an emphasis on futures-as-visions and the anticipatory capacity, or lack thereof, of those who live(d) under the yoke of colonization and coloniality. A crucial distinction separates colonization and coloniality: while colonization refers to the physical act of invasion, appropriation, and exploitation, coloniality encompasses both tangible and intangible systems of dominance and power. It thus follows that while colonization can be ended by the physical eviction of occupying forces (i.e., decolonization), coloniality is a more complex challenge to address. Indeed, the nature of coloniality is such that even societies that have never been physically colonized can adopt internalized and externalized colonial structures and notions of power, giving rise to decolonial thinking that interrogates how ways of knowing, being, and doing have been warped by domination, exploitation, and oppression. One way coloniality can manifest in futures praxis is through "used futures", when our imaginations

of what might be possible for one society or setting are limited by what has been possible for another (Sheraz, 2021). A decolonial interrogation of this ‘symptom’ of coloniality might ask: “Why is our future limited to and by your past?” or “Why can one thing be deemed no longer good enough for you but something to strive towards for us?”.

Within the futures literature, we identified papers that push for decolonial thinking to inform futures-as-visions by expanding the range of futures we can envision through a systematic identification and elimination of false constraints, which are, in reality, colonial constructs that can be done away with. However, this appears to be a nascent avenue of exploration as Boonmavichit (2022) finds that “few pieces of literature have addressed how colonialism impacts the capacity to imagine a different future” (p. 2). Another developing strand is that of decolonial futures, in which futures thinking and tools are interrogated and adapted to create and work toward visions of tomorrow that address colonial trauma, confront the invisible hand of coloniality and neocolonialism, and empower all people to shift from passively accepting probable futures which are based on oppressive power structures to actively realizing equitable and just futures (Anderson & David, 2022; Boonmavichit, 2022; Cruz & Kahn-Parreño, 2022).

It is within this emergent space that the overlap between decolonial and feminist futures becomes most apparent, such that we argue one cannot – and should not – happen without the other.

Bringing a Decolonial Feminist Lens to Futures

By visualizing the driving forces of inequity and inequality as interlocking components of oppressive structures, we make explicit the intertwined nature of the forces that have shaped our past and continue to shape our present. We conceptualize decolonial feminism as an explicit interrogation of intersecting power dynamics and asymmetries and, in doing so, argue that we cannot achieve the inclusive and equitable futures feminist thinking calls for by solely eliminating patriarchy as a colonizing force. Rather, we must acknowledge patriarchy as only one of many colonizing forces. In this section, we introduce the conceptual underpinnings of our decolonial feminist approach as it informs our futures praxis.

A fundamental tenet of both decolonial and feminist thinking is that of pluralism, encompassing but not limited to epistemologies, worldviews, and praxis. After decades of imposed colonial and patriarchal universality within both bodies of literature to erase and silence, it is crucial that we center this hard-won acknowledgment, which creates space for us to apply different lived experiences, entry points, and ways of working towards a plurality of equitable and just futures. As such, we offer here our approach to decolonial feminism as ‘one of many’ rather than as a definitive take.

The term “decolonial feminism” was first coined by María Lugones (2007, 2010, 2016) in the early aughts, building on a colonial matrix of power initially conceptualized by Anibal Quijano (2000) and later expanded by others (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2016; Mignolo, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). This matrix encompasses three spheres and four processes of coloniality, visualized in Figure 1. Together, they operate at intangible, structural levels beyond physical occupation, such “that even with un-colonialism, coloniality remains” (Santos, 2018).

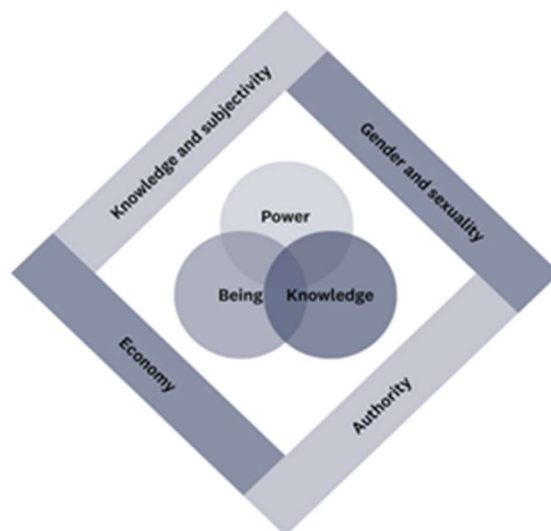


Fig 1: The three spheres and four processes of coloniality, adapted from Mignolo’s visualization of the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo, 2011).

The three spheres – power (systems and structures predicated on and perpetuating asymmetry), being (ranking of individuals based on assigned value or lack thereof), and knowledge (imposition of a single Western worldview at the expense of other epistemologies) - represent the intersecting sites through which coloniality operates, whilst the four processes are mechanisms through which coloniality exerts and reinforces control over: the economy (the exploitative systems that perpetuate inequality and dependency including global capitalism, labor exploitation and economic extraction); authority (governance structures of power and control such as geopolitical power, and governance bureaucracies with state capture from various quarters); gender and sexuality (through patriarchy, and intersectional oppression); and knowledge and subjectivity (through devaluation of indigenous systems of knowledge and elevation of western ones, and Eurocentrism in which Western knowledge is deemed the “universal standard,” marginalizing alternative epistemologies and rendering them invisible, invalid or inferior).

While Aníbal Quijano (2000) acknowledged control over gender and sexuality as one of the four processes of coloniality, Lugones (2007, 2010, 2016) argued that the key role played by gender alongside race in the colonial project necessitated the inclusion of gender as not just a lever but a sphere of coloniality in its own right. Failure to acknowledge the centrality of gender to both the imposition, and thus dismantling, of colonial hierarchies undermines and leaves incomplete any and all efforts to challenge persistent racialized and gendered power structures and social systems. Lugones (2010) thus writes, “I call the analysis of racialized, capitalist, gender oppression ‘the coloniality of gender’. I call the possibility of overcoming the coloniality of gender ‘decolonial feminism’” (p. 747).

Decolonial feminism is presented here as an active and agentic process, an act of overcoming oppression, liberating each other, and (re)creating from scratch the worlds we want to see. Françoise Vergès (2021) urges the use of a decolonial feminist lens to “hold together past, present, and future, but without foreclosing the possibility of a better future” (p. ix) as we uncover the vast spatio-temporal shadow coloniality casts over us all and dare to envision new realities at the individual, collective, and structural levels. Vergès’ writing illustrates how decoloniality, feminism, and futures not only share commonalities but are, in fact, inextricably intertwined in a mission to actively shape more equitable and sustainable futures which are rooted in values of justice and agency.

It is important to note here that decolonial feminism does not seek to replace or supplant existing lenses, frameworks, and methodologies; rather, Vergès (2021) understands decolonial feminism as a bridge, one which brings together as many threads as possible through a “kaleidoscopic narrative” that combines past-present-future “yet not in a linear cause-and-effect way”, aligning neatly with conceptualizations of futures as malleable, non-linear, and agentic, rather than set in stone by those before us. This reading of decolonial feminism makes possible

kaleidoscopic visions of our own, allowing us to imagine rich pluralistic decolonial feminist futures that are not just post-patriarchy but post-coloniality in all its many forms of oppression and injustice.

Guiding Questions for Decolonial Feminist Praxis

“... fostering divisiveness is a tactic often employed by systems of thought that uphold various hierarchies. Egalitarian cognitive frameworks, including feminism, aspire to be supportive and inclusive. The existence of other forms of discrimination does not diminish the significance of gender as a key factor influencing the distribution of power and resources.”

Ivana Milojević, *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future*

In this paper, we have highlighted the need to see patriarchy and coloniality as inextricably linked structures of oppression and to leverage decolonial and feminist thinking to envision and realize the more inclusive and equitable futures Milojević (2024) and many other feminist futurists call for and work towards. In closing, we submit for consideration decolonial feminism as a future direction for liberatory feminist futures by sharing the guiding questions that inform our decolonial feminist futures praxis and some first steps we have taken towards concrete action:

Futures by and for whom? Whose voices and needs shape our visions of the future? Who is considered an expert in locating where we are and identifying where we might go, and how has this been shaped by colonial hierarchies of race and gender?

The coloniality of being continues to shape who we consider worth visioning with and, consequently, what we consider worth visioning about. In adopting a decolonial feminist futures approach, we challenge the narratives underpinning these implicit and explicit biases to foster inclusive visioning processes predicated on the firm belief that everyone has knowledge to share about where we have been, where we are, and where we want to go. For us, this has required an iterative process of adapting and designing tools rooted in justice, equity, and inclusivity. These tools, such as our curation guide, serve as “checkpoints” to ensure we live these values and support the creation of safe, inclusive, and decolonial spaces that not only acknowledge but also center diverse forms of expertise.

Futures based on what and why? What knowledges and methods inform our visions of the future? Why do colonial notions and epistemologies continue to limit our evidence bases?

The coloniality of knowledge shapes and sustains an epistemic hierarchy rooted in the devaluation, dismissal, and destruction of non-Western ways of knowing and doing. Adopting a decolonial feminist approach demands epistemic pluralism in our praxis. It informs our selection, adaptation, and application of futures methodologies such that the process not only accommodates but requires a diversity of knowledges, not just a diversity of stakeholders. In practical terms, this means building in facilitation prompts that guide us, as a collective group of visioners, through processes of unlearning and relearning, of challenging internalized biases towards “objective” truths, and of embracing more expansive ways of knowing - instinctively, tacitly, and experientially. This does not call for us to discard conventional evidence such as quantitative data, but to critically interrogate their limitations and how we weave them into a bigger picture of lived realities and potential futures.

Futures to what end and how? How is power being wielded or challenged, by whom, and to what end? Who benefits from the ability to shape and realize potential futures, and to what extent do colonial systems and structures of power continue to dictate authority and influence?

The coloniality of power underpins and sustains the asymmetries and inequalities of our present, making it essential to explicitly name the architects, beneficiaries, and casualties of any envisioned future. Centering power in our visioning process compels us to ask of each future: are we merely playing a game of musical chairs that changes who sits atop the hierarchy, or are we truly challenging the colonial construct of power as a tool for domination? Ultimately, our goal is to redefine power as a collective resource for change and to foster futures founded on “power with”, not “power over” (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2007).

Conclusion

Decolonial feminism allows us to identify and eliminate manifestations of patriarchy and other colonizing forces, such as the gendering of knowledge and authority, within futures-as-practice, futures-as-methods, and futures-as-visions. Decolonial feminist futures compels us to think critically about who practices futures, why some forms of evidence and knowledge are still dismissed, and how visions of our futures can either eradicate or exacerbate interlinking structures of oppression.

Crucially, as Milojević (2024) and many others have rightly noted, feminism is, at its very heart, a call to action. Collectively implemented, decolonial feminist futures can catalyze radical (re)thinking and structural change towards a redistribution of power to envision and realize liberatory – one might even say revolutionary - feminist futures.

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