



Racism and the Colonial Roots of Gendered Language in Biomedicine and Public Health

Aunchalee Palmquist, PhD, MA, IBCLC, RLC
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North Carolina is home to the Occhaneechi, Lumbee, Coharie, Haliwa-Saponi, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Meherrin, Tuscarora, Sappony, Waccamaw-Siouan Nations, along with many other indigenous peoples.

I acknowledge these histories, and that we continue to benefit from their displacement. May we all commit to standing with First Peoples and their descendants through cultivating good relations and collective action.



I acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of West African nations that were stolen, enslaved, and brought to North Carolina.

May we remember all who walked and labored here before us with truth, integrity and honor. May we all stand together against the racism that continues today with words and actions.

My positionality









Why is “sex” or “gender” an organizing principle in western biomedicine and public health, and what does gendered language have to do with racism?



Learning Objectives

- Describe settler colonial influences on the language used in public health and biomedicine
- Challenge inflexible views of language in the First Food Field through science, respectful dialogue, and cultural humility
- Name resources and practices for researching cultural perspectives on language



My goals for this presentation

- Lift up the scholarship & voices from the Global South & scholars of color on racism/coloniality of gender
- Share critical ideas and perspectives to help move our field forward
- Empower allies and accomplices to engage in dialogue about person-centered, inclusive language with evidence and courage

...et per ...



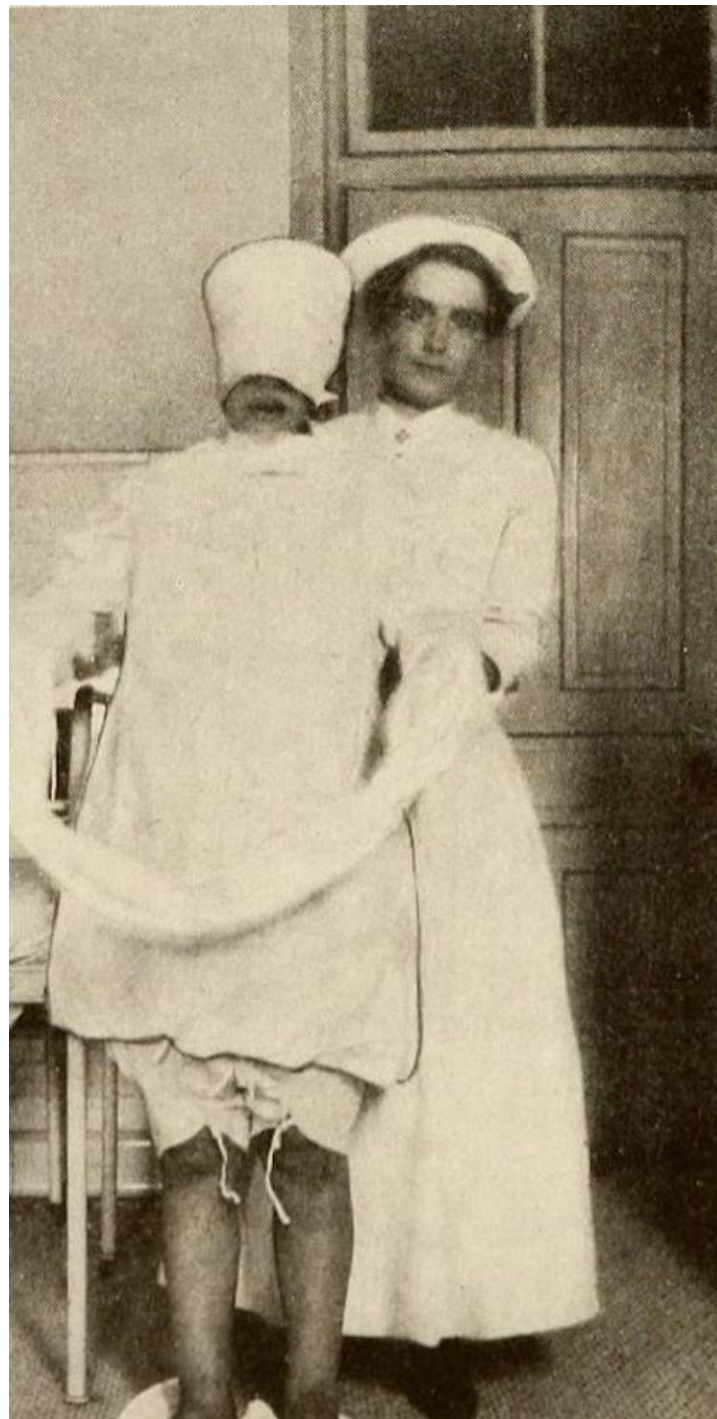
Deinde ...



CAUSAE QUAE ...

...et per ...







The coloniality of gender



Doctrine of Discovery 1452

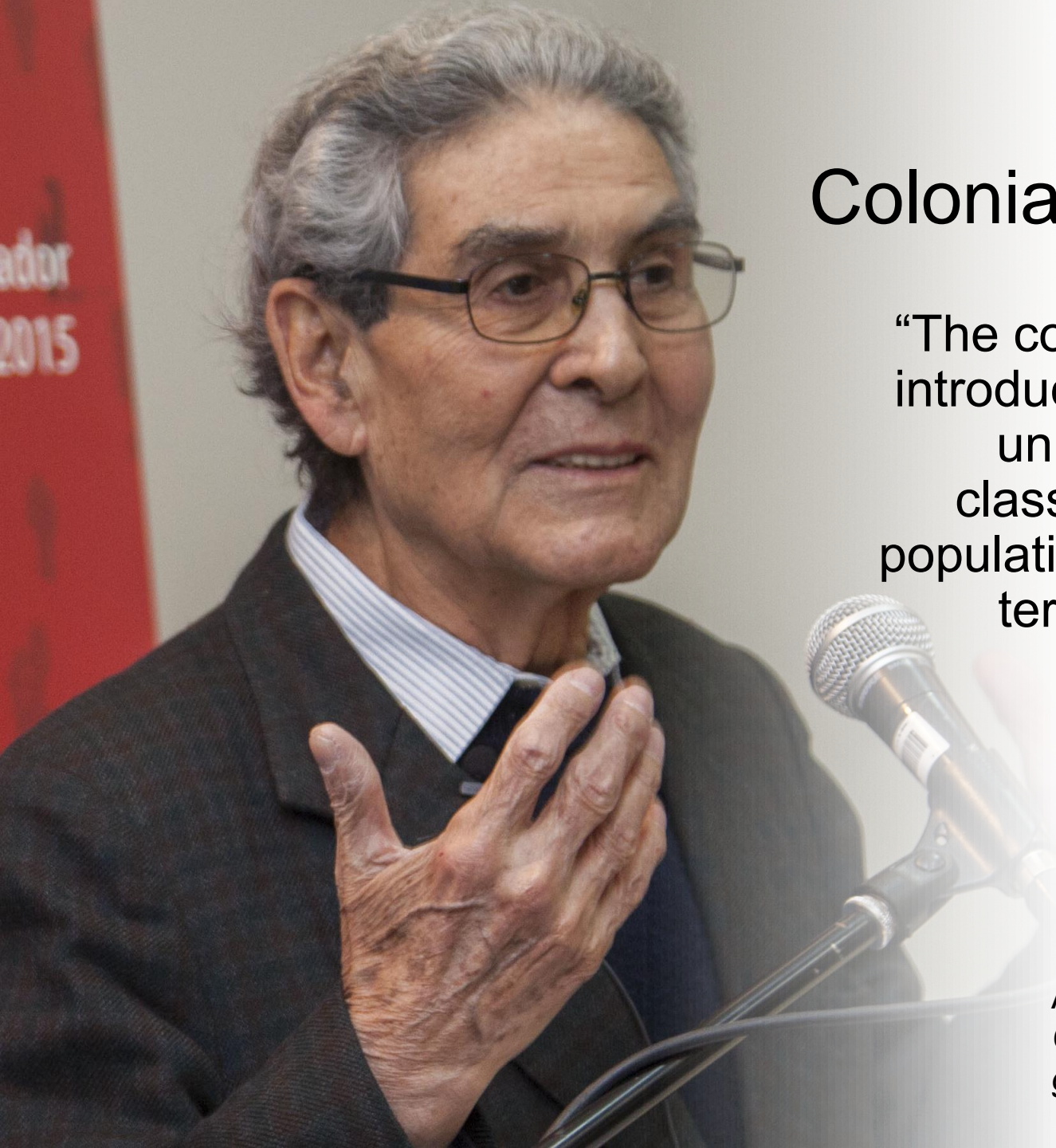
“...invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all moveable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.” Pope Nicholas V (Papal Bull 1452)



Dehumanization of Indigenous peoples

“White land-owning
men gave
themselves the
authority to decide
who is human and
not-human.”

Mark Charles (Navajo) Jan 24, 2019, TedEX



Coloniality of power

“The coloniality of power introduces the basic and universal social classification of the population of the planet in terms of “race.”

Aníbal Quijano, 2001-2,
*Colonialidad del poder,
globalización y decmocracia*


Coloniality of gender

“The naturalizing of sexual differences is another product of the modern use of science that Quijano points out in the case of race.”

Western European epistemology assumed that all societies were patriarchal and viewed human existence through biological determinism.

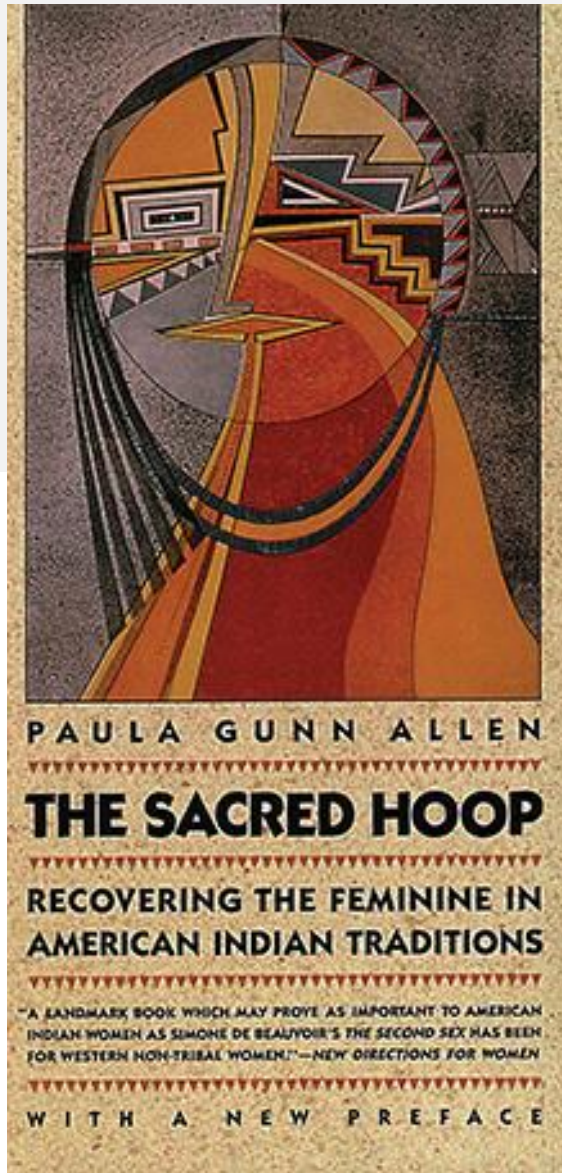
Maria Lugones, *The coloniality of gender*, 2008





“It is important to ask how sexual dimorphism served and serves Eurocentered global capitalistic domination/exploitation.... Considering critically both biological dimorphism and the position that gender socially constructs biological sex is pivotal to understand the scope, depth, and characteristics of the colonial/modern gender system.”

Lugones, *The coloniality of gender*



Paula Gunn Allen, author of
*The Sacred Hoop: Recovering
the Feminine in American
Indian Traditions* (1986)



The stereotypes of Black women as “mammy” or as “Jezebel” have historic origins in slavery.

Colonial governance racialized a sex and gender binary, which weaponized reproduction through racialized oppression, which reinforced patriarchal systems of power and wealth extraction.

Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Consciousness and the politics of empowerment*, 2008

“It is only when we perceive gender and race as enmeshed or fused that we actually see women of color.”

Lugones, citing the contributions of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality in understanding the racism of colonialism and sex/gender-based oppression



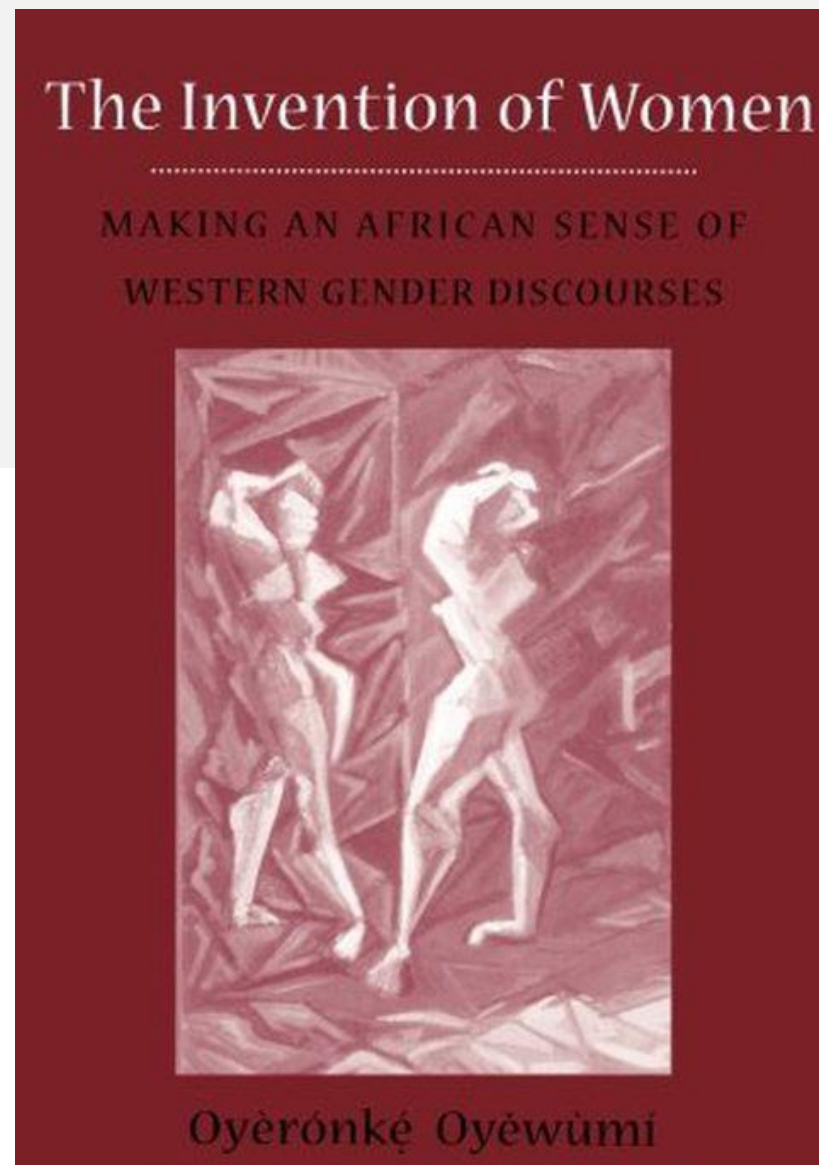
“As Eurocentered,
global capitalism was
constituted through
colonization, gender
differentials were
introduced where there
were none.”






“The usual gloss of the Yoruba categories *obinrin* and *okunrin* as “female/woman” and “male/man” respectively is a mistranslation.

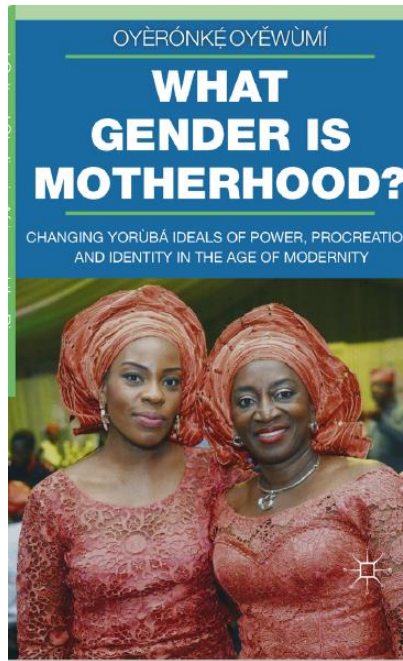
These categories are neither binarily opposed nor hierarchical.”



Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women*, 1997



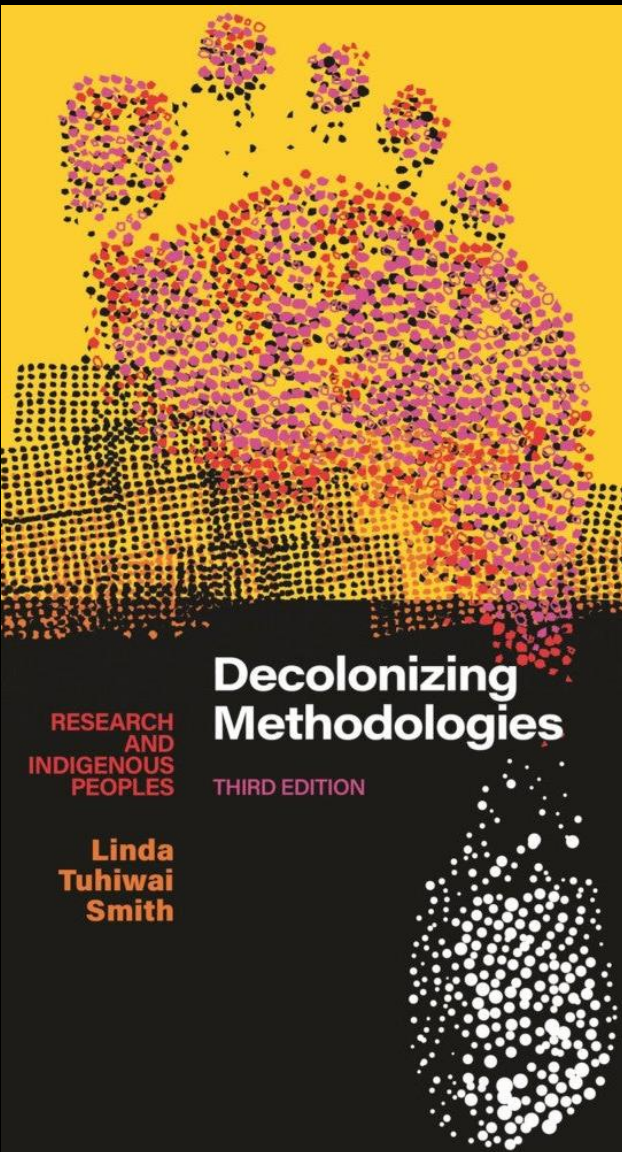
Gender has “become important in Yoruba studies not as an artifact of Yoruba life but because Yoruba life, past and present, has been translated into English to fit the Western pattern of body-reasoning.”



Coloniality of language

In any case, Yorùbá do not need to invent a new language, new pronouns, or new names, because their language is not organized on the basis of gender categories; hence there are no gendered pronouns, no gendered names, or gendered kinship categories. If Geiselman and other transgendered persons operated in Yorùbá language, they would not have had to invent any new vocabulary to express their identity. So the Western colonizers who would “civilize” the natives were actually imposing on Africans their own crude languages with their gendered preoccupations, gender binaries, and gender discriminatory and male-dominant ideologies. Unfortunately, given the global hierarchy that is a hallmark of modernity, learning is unidirectional: Africans must learn from Europeans and Americans (including their pathologies); Africans, on the other hand, are not perceived to have anything of value that they could teach the West. Thus the original nongender-ness of Yorùbá language becomes invisible as native speakers adjust their vocabulary to model the English language.

Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí, *What gender is motherhood?*, 2016



“Gender distinctions and hierarchies are also deeply encoded in Western languages. It is impossible to speak without using this language, and more significantly for Indigenous people, it is impossible to translate or interpret our societies into English, French, or Castilian, for example, without making gendered distinctions.”



Biological determinism and gender essentialism assumes a “universality” of women based on sex characteristics.

“...such simplistic formulations are both reductive and ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppression. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women.”



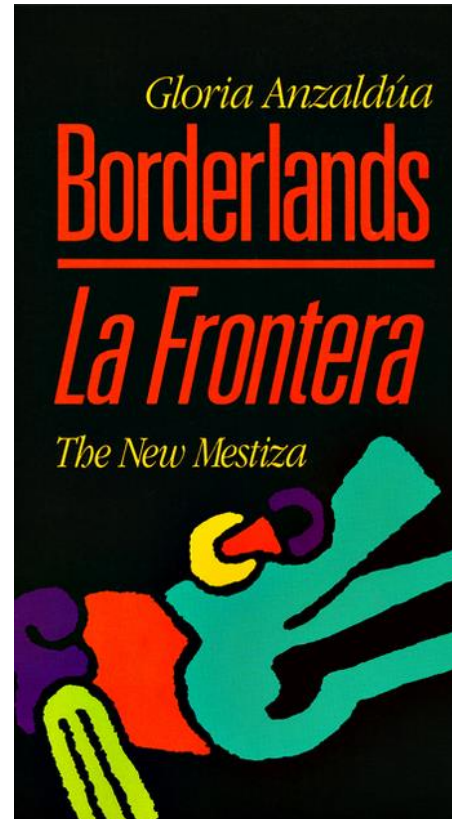


“While the category ‘women’ may be useful for some contexts for challenging gender-specific oppressions against this social group, its liberatory potential is quite limited.

Would ‘women’ for example, include intersexed persons, transgender women or lesbian women? Ramón Grosfoguel reminds us that Identity politics cannot lead to transformative change because of their links to the colonality of power.”

Finding hope
in disrupting
binaries

"A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war."





“In the west the challenge of feminism is how to proceed from the gender-saturated category of “women” to the fullness of an unsexed humanity.”



“For the master’s tools will never
dismantle the master’s house. They may
allow us to temporarily beat him at his
own game, but they will never enable us
to bring about genuine change..”

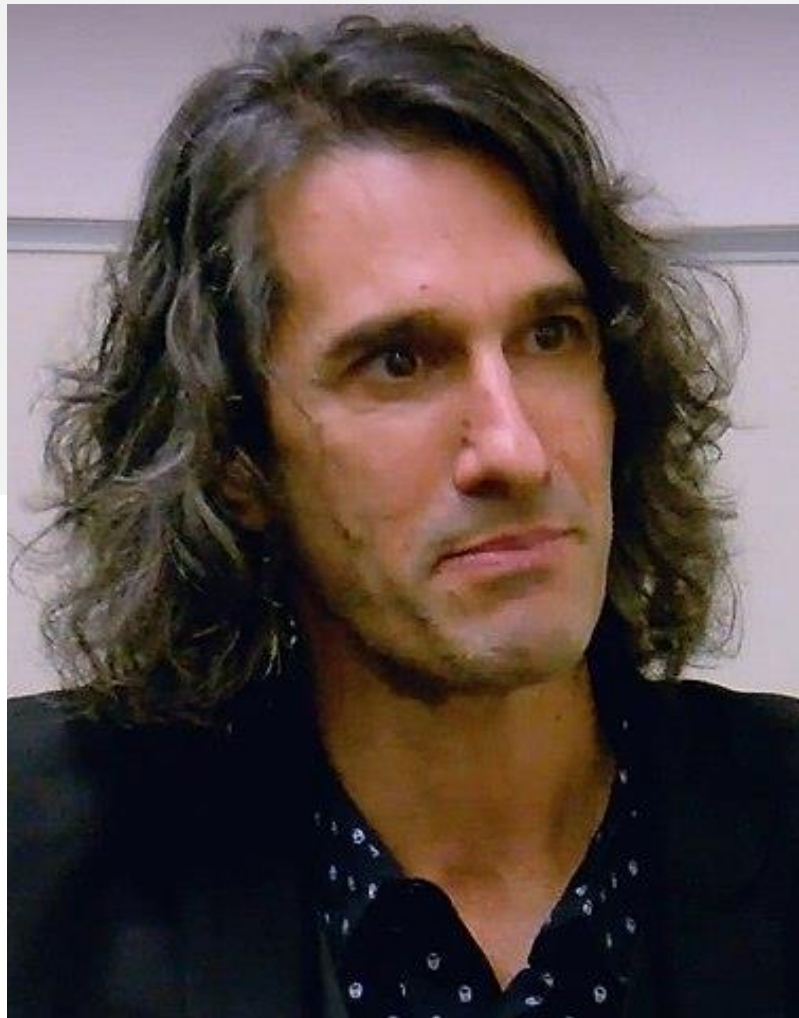
— Audre Lorde, 1984, *Sister Outsider*



“Biological science
rejects the sex
binary, and that’s
good for humanity”

Man/woman and
masculine/feminine
are neither
biological terms
nor rooted
exclusively in
biology.

Agustín Fuentes, 2022, *Sapiens.org*



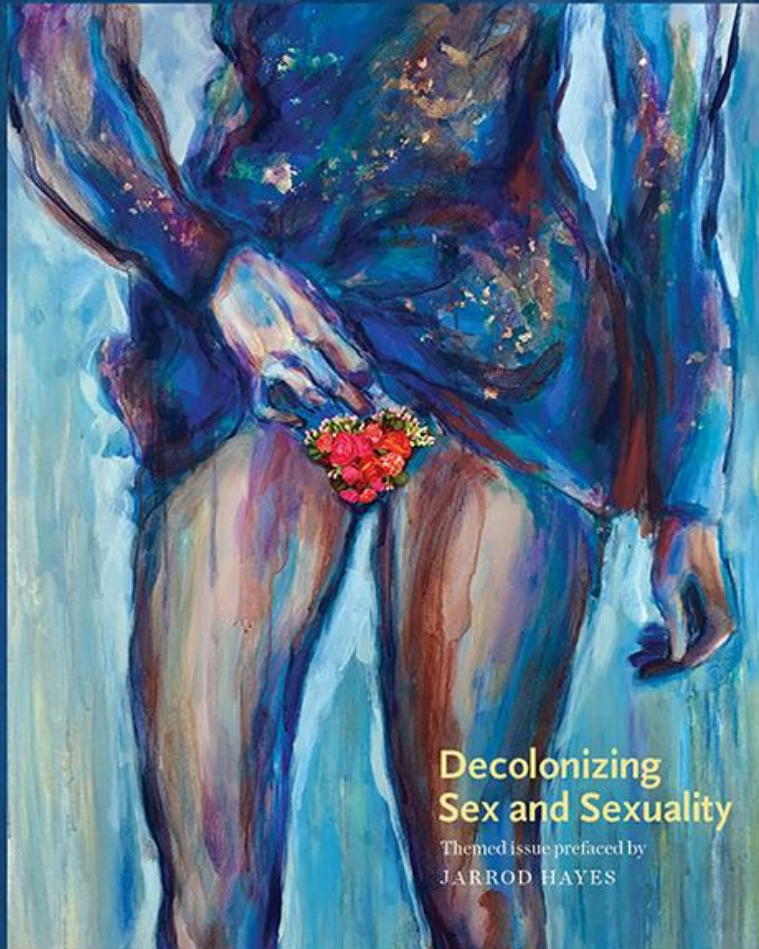


AWID 2021: Rights at Risk

<https://www.awid.org/ours-2021>

JMEWS ♦ Journal of
Middle East Women's Studies

Volume 14 • Number 2 • July 2018



**Decolonizing
Sex and Sexuality**

Themed issue prefaced by
JARROD HAYES

Decolonization as Deconstruction


“The image illustrates as only art can how
at the heart of decolonization are
imagination, joy, and affirmation of life.
Editors note on cover art, 2018

Cover Art, *Flowers*, by Suhair Sibai





Cultural Humility



“Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.”

— Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*



Practicing critical self-reflection

- What are my attitudes about gender diverse people becoming pregnant, breastfeeding, and parenting?
- What are my attitudes about cultural differences and people who have different world views than I do?
- What will I do when I do not understand other's experiences or have a difficult time accepting differences?
- How do my attitudes shape my ability to relate to others with compassion and respect?



Practicing critical self-reflection

- What questions do I have about what I don't understand?
- How can I find reputable resources to enrich my self-directed learning or create a create community with others who also want to learn more?
- What actions can I take to learn more about topics, issues, or lived experiences that I do not understand?
- What opportunities are there for me to stand together with people experiencing sex- and gender-based oppression?



Resources



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Global Health Resources

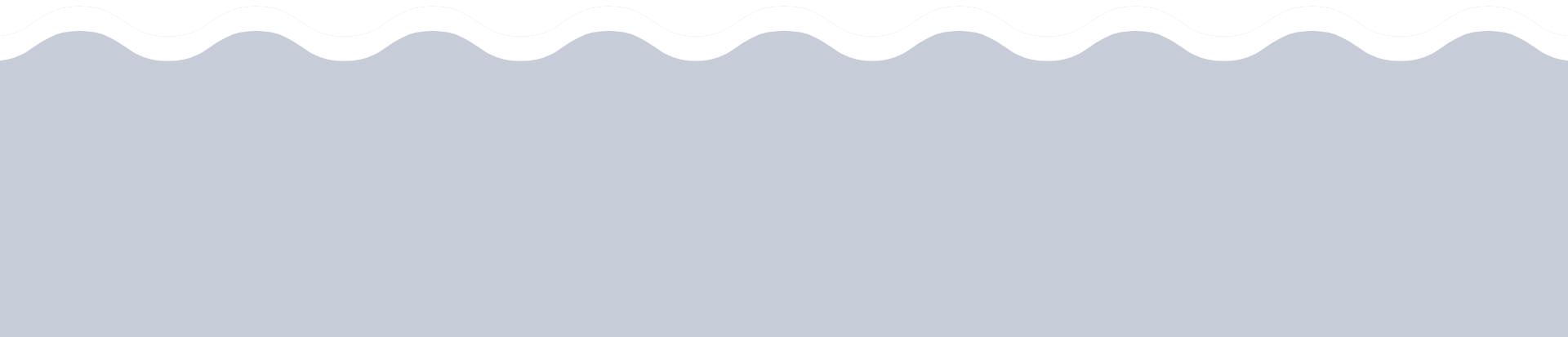
- United Nations LGBTI Rights:
 - <https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/lgbtqi-plus>
- UNHCR: *Born Equal and Free: Sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics in International Human Rights Law*
- SAGER (Sex and Gender Equity in Research) guidelines
- WHO *Gender mainstreaming for health professionals: a practical approach* [currently being updated, TBA 2022]



Resources

- Journal of Human Lactation
- ABM statement on language
- Communities of practice, people with lived experiences

It's not simply about words, and words are not enough to undo sex- and gender-based oppression in medicine and public health.





Rioux et al., 2022, Gender inclusive writing for epidemiological research on pregnancy

“The erasure of gender-diverse people in the rhetoric of research about pregnant people can be addressed immediately, including in the dissemination of results from ongoing studies that did not take gender diversity into consideration. This makes gender-inclusive language a crucial first step towards the inclusion of gender-diverse people in epidemiological research on pregnant people and other health research more globally.”

In Conclusion:

- Current definitions of human sex, gender, sexuality, and kinship reflect deep history of colonialism, racism, and sexual and reproductive oppression
- Scientific understandings of human biology, sex characteristics, sexuality, and gender must be reflected in communication about sexual and reproductive health
- Critiques of inclusive language are connected discursively to broader political movements that threaten gender equity, health, and human rights globally



A call to action

"...I mean to begin a conversation and a project of collaborative, participatory, research and popular education to begin to see in its details the long sense of the processes of the colonial/gender system enmeshed in the coloniality of power into the present, to uncover collaboration, and to call each other to reject it in its various guises as we recommit to communal integrity in a liberatory direction. We need to understand the organization of the social so as to make visible our collaboration with systemic racialized gender violence, so as to come to an inevitable recognition of it in our maps of reality."

Maria Lugones, 2008, *The coloniality of gender*



Thank You

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