

María Lugones, 1944-2020

Françoise Vergès

The task of remembering one's many selves is a difficult liberatory task.¹

María Lugones, a feminist philosopher, sociologist, activist and Professor of Comparative Literature and Women's Studies at Binghamton University in New York State, died on July 14 2020. Sadly, she did not live to see the victory of feminists in her country of birth, Argentina, who have won a decades-long battle to legalise abortion, and the replacement of the once popular hashtag *#SeráLey* [*#ItWillBeLaw*] with *#EsLey* [*#ItIsLaw*]. But she has left an important legacy in philosophy and decolonial feminism with her theory of 'multiple selves' and concept of the 'coloniality of gender'.

Born in 1944 in Morón, near Buenos Aires, to parents who had migrated from Catalonia – part of the large migrations from Europe to Argentina between 1880 and 1940 which contributed to the fiction of a 'white' society and erased the presence of indigenous peoples and Afro-Argentines – María Lugones grew up in a country governed by the military since 1930. Inspired by the ideology of Mussolini, they imposed a nationalist, corporatist, conservative, racist and sexist regime with the help of the Catholic Church. Thus, when Lugones at 17 said to her parents that she wished to have sexual relations, her father put her in a psychiatric hospital where she was given electroshock therapy and forced into a straitjacket. 'They will not tame me', she repeated to herself throughout the ordeal.² Once released, Lugones decided to escape Argentina and left for California, writing her PhD on moralism and interpersonal and institutional relations at the University of Wisconsin in the 1970s.

Her interest in race and gender, which developed during her studies and was anchored in her rejection of heteropatriarchy (for which she had paid a heavy price), led her to join the growing group of feminists of colour

who were critical of a white feminism that made women into a unified, homogenous and fixed category. Race was a modality in which patriarchy was lived, they argued, and the racialisation of patriarchy meant that all men did not belong to the dominant group and all women did not experience patriarchal oppression in the same way. Along with Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde and the authors of the Combahee River Collective, Lugones looked at the ways in which slavery, colonialism and racism had impacted genders, affecting the ways in which heterosexuality, masculinity and femininity were conceived, and in which lesbian, trans, gay and queer sexualities were criminalised.

'The creation of "women" as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state', Lugones wrote in 2007. It was an important argument that added to the critique that Black, racialised and colonised women had historically made by insisting on the role and place of slavery and colonialism in the making of genders, sexualities, social classes, races, the division between culture and nature, of the cartography of the world, in the erasure or appropriation of non-European epistemologies, knowledges and techniques. To develop her argument on the coloniality of gender, she drew from the work of sociologist Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí, who had argued that the binary organisation of society (man/woman) was imposed on Yoruba society during colonisation and that the dichotomy of gender went along with racial domination and sexual subordination of the colonised, and from Paula Gunn Allen's work on indigenous peoples of North America.

'Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonised. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonised males and females than for white bourgeois colonisers. Thus, it introduced many genders

and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organisation of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing', she wrote.³ Indeed, the differences that gender binarism created – complementarity of men and women, different 'natural' inborn qualities, biological maternal attachment – have never been universal. Under colonial slavery, Black people, and under colonisation, indigenous peoples, were gendered differently from whites. When white women were seen as fragile, sweet and delicate, enslaved women were seen as devoid of maternal sentiment, were worked as hard as enslaved men, punished as harshly as men, were raped, abused, killed, as men were tortured, trafficked, killed. Both were worked to death, were forbidden to create a family or kinship, were denied rights. Men were deprived of paternity rights, and if a non-white man could be a domestic tyrant, once in the street, he was a Black, brown, Asian, Arab man, in other words not quite a 'Man'. Colonised women were not women but 'females' and colonised men were not men but 'boys' or 'males'.

With her essay on the coloniality of gender, Lugones considerably enriched decolonial theory. To her, Anibal Quijano, the leading theorist of decoloniality, had made a mistake in his account of the coloniality of power by assuming that gender and even sex share the same organisation in all human societies. With this assumption, he had accepted without hesitation the patriarchal, heterosexist and Eurocentric understanding of gender. Lugones disagreed with his radical replacement of class by race as the central notion to understand modernity and cited the work of Black feminists who had demonstrated the entanglement of different forms of oppression, what came to be known with Kimberlé Crenshaw as intersectionality. Lugones' analysis of 'the modern/colonial gender system' showed that 'colonisation was a twofold process of racial inferiorisation and gender subordination' that had ultimately benefited colonised men whose machismo in social and revolutionary movements had been denounced by women. White feminism, blind to its own racial history, has also benefited from the Eurocentred conception of gender, family, sexualities and patriarchy. Yet, to Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Dominican feminists, Lugones had minimised the heterosexual and patriarchal elements in Afro communities which had to be fought against alongside the fight against western global modernity. Decolonial indigenous feminists have also challenged the idealisation of 'pre-Hispanic' communit-

ies and the invention of patriarchal oppression as tradition.⁴ No decolonisation without de-patriarchalisation.

In recent years, the theory of decolonial feminism, to which María Lugones brought so much, has informed political practices that are deeply transformative. Her focus on collective thinking, on the fact that the self is always multiple and cannot be framed into narrow categories, her attention to the coloniality of gender and to the intersections of race, class, genders, sexualities and spiritualities, produced enlightened work and contributed to the conversation on a feminism that seeks the liberation of all. The convergent and massive struggles worldwide against femicides, extractivism, anti-migrant policies, the construction of walls, the expansion of surveillance and control by the neoliberal state, racism, Islamophobia, capitalism and imperialism, show what decolonial feminism brings to thought and practice: a committed intersectionality, a rejection of dominant hierarchy, and a practice that does not ban joy, desire, pleasure and love. Lugones wrote beautifully about the practice of 'playfulness, "world" travelling and loving perception' that advocated cross-cultural and cross-racial loving, the need to embrace the plurality among women: 'We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are *open to self-construction*. We may have no rules, and when we do have rules, *there no rules that are to us sacred*.'⁵

Françoise Vergès is a decolonial feminist activist, political theorist and co-founder of the collective Decolonize the Arts (Paris). Publications include Une théorie féministe de la violence: Pour politique antiraciste de la protection (2020).

Notes

1. María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorising Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
2. Claudia Acuña, 'Maestra: María Lugones, teórica feminista', *Lavaca*, 19 August 2019, <https://www.lavaca.org/mu138/maestra-maria-lugones-teorica-feminista/>
3. María Lugones, 'Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System', *Hypatia* 22 (2007), 186–209.
4. Aura Cumes, "'Sufrimos vergüenza": mujeres k'iche frente a la justicia comunitaria en Guatemala', *Desacatos* 31 (Sept-Dec 2009), 99–114; 'La "india" como "sirvienta": servi dumbre doméstica, colonialismo y patriarcado en Guatemala', Doctoral thesis in Anthropology, (Mexico: CIESAS, 2014).
5. María Lugones, 'Playfulness, World Travelling and Loving Perception', *Hypatia* 2:2 (1987), 3–19.