PART O

NULLA
Situated between the Mesopotamian “Waters” and the Mesoamerican “Earth” of the book comes this long part deliberately named $O/\text{nulla}$ (zero), as a gesture of critiquing the theo-political concept of creatio ex nihilo (creation out of nothingness). We will see how creatio ex nihilo has had a decisive influence on colonialism and coloniality, an influence that persists in the scholarly reception of mythologies and critical theories. As Catherine Keller argues in her book Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming, the initial theological topic of creation out of nothingness became common sense and “took modern and then secular form, generating every kind of western originality, every logos creating the new as if from nothing, cutting violently, ecstatically free of the abysms of the past.”\(^2\) Creatio ex nihilo is what enabled Catholic Spain and Europe to claim their “discovery” of a pre-inhabited land later renamed as “America.” In La invención de América, Edmundo O’Gorman asserts: “the

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1 “I did not cross the border. The border crossed me.” From the song “Somos más Americanos” (1993) by the Mexican norteño band Los Tigres del Norte.

fundamental concept for well understanding the image they had of the world at the time of Columbus is that the world was created \textit{ex nihilo} by God.\footnote{Edmundo O’Gorman, \textit{La invención de América: El universalismo de la cultura occidental} (México D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1958), 72: “el concepto fundamental para entender a fondo la imagen que se tenía del universo en tiempos de Colón es el de haber sido creado \textit{ex nihilo} por dios.”} This sense of originality that creates as if from nothingness is still largely operative.

If nothing can be made out of nothing, there is always something in the so-called “nothingness.” This something might even be a lot of things, more than can be addressed in a single chapter. These somethings are what colonialism has tried, most of the time violently yet in vain, to erase and to reduce to “nothingness.” In this chapter, we will see how \textit{creatio ex nihilo} operates discursively in the many facets of modern colonialism, such as the “(re)invention of printing by Gutenberg” and the aforementioned “discovery” or “invention of America,” as well as in the persistence of coloniality in knowledge production, especially in the areas of postcolonialism and gender/queer studies. More concretely, we will look at the gender of \textit{creatio ex nihilo} in relation to the reception of Sojourner Truth’s famous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” and the broader issue of the coloniality of gender(ing).

\textbf{0.1 How to Create out of Nothingness?}

French sinologist René Étiemble’s work \textit{L’Europe chinoise} (1988) opens Chapter 1 with a case regarding the invention of printing by asserting, “the masterpiece of the Eurocentric imposture: that Gutenberg should be the inventor of printing.”\footnote{René Étiemble, \textit{L’Europe chinoise I: De l’empire romain à Leibniz} (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), ch. 1: “le chef-d’œuvre de l’imposture europénocentriste: Gutenberg serait l’inventeur de l’imprimerie.” All translations to English from non-English sources, unless stated otherwise, are mine.} Étiemble reviewed numerous scholarly works, encyclopedias, and museum introduction texts, and found that they univocally affirmed
the invention of printing in the 1450s by the German craftsman Johann Gutenberg. Many works acknowledge the existence of similar technology (movable type) already invented by the Chinese craftsman Bi Shen around 1040 and 1050, that is, some thousand years after the first books were printed, though with other methods, during the Han Dynasty (around 250 BCE). The sources reviewed by Étiemble either ignore this historical fact or assert that it was Gutenberg who invented movable type printing, or they articulate this “invention” in a peculiar way. Étiemble observes that

they would like us to admit that Gutenberg, a German, certainly, but also a European, is one of the greatest geniuses of humanity because, being so ignorant of what people then could not not know, and of which [sc. printing] many others had shown the path from China to Germany, he alone would have invented printing himself.5

One of the most curious cases Étiemble cites is from a book published in 1961, *L’ univers des livres: Étude historique des origines à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* by Albert Flocon, who argues that

all the techniques and essential materials for the multiplication of writing have been developed in the Far-East. Nothing can prove that the only [way of] manufacturing paper has followed the silk road; why wouldn’t books and printed images, like any other goods, have reached the western frontiers of the Asiatic continent, or at the very least quite precise in-

5 Ibid., 39: “ils voudraient nous faire admettre que Gutenberg, un Allemand, certes, mais oui bien un Européen, est l’un des plus grands génies de l’humanité parce que tout seul, comme un grand ignorant de tout ce que tant de gens alors ne pouvaient pas ne pas savoir, et dont plusieurs du reste avaient démontré le cheminement de la Chine vers l’Allemagne, il avait inventé l’imprimerie.”
formation about their mode of production which would have allowed, in due course, for a Western reinvention?\(^6\)

The peculiar word *reinvention* drew Étiemble’s attention. Despite Flocon’s prudent tone — he uses interrogative phrasing and the conditional tense which can be construed as leaving space for uncertainty — it was baffling to Étiemble that after a work such as *The Invention of Printing in China and its Spread Westward* by Thomas Francis Carter (1925) had already been “enthusiastically received” and “immediately became the standard work on the Chinese origins of printing,”\(^7\) Flocon could still credit Gutenberg with inventing (or more precisely *reinventing*) printing.

Suspicious of the outdatedness of Étiemble’s work, I have reviewed some more recent scholarly studies, encyclopedias, and museum introduction texts. Changes remain to be seen. For example, the website of the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz, Germany briefly mentions Bi Sheng in the section “Beweglich Lettern vor Gutenberg” under the introduction of printing in East Asia. The text nuanced and prudent yet problematic, states, “Records tell us that in c. 1040 a man called Bi Sheng began experimenting with moveable ceramic printing stamps, using them to compose and print texts.”\(^8\) In this version, Bi Sheng is said to (*so ist überliefert*) have experimented (*experimentierte*) with printing, but not necessarily to have succeeded, ones assumes, in engen-

\(^6\) Quoted in ibid., 30: “toutes les techniques et les matériaux essentiels pour la multiplication des écrits ont été mis au point en Extrême-Orient. Rien ne prouve que la seule fabrication du papier a suivi la route de la soie; pourquoi, comme d’autres marchandises, les livres et les images imprimés ne seraient-ils pas parvenus aux confins ouest du continent asiatique, ou tout au moins des renseignements assez précis sur leur mode de fabrication qui pouvait permettre une réinvention occidentale le moment venu?” Emphasis mine.

\(^7\) Quoted in ibid.

dering a “print revolution in China comparable to that usually associated with Gutenberg in the Western world.”

The entry for “Johannes Gutenberg” in the online version of the Encyclopedia Britannica credits him with having “originated a method of printing from movable type.” The same online encyclopedia has no entry for Bi Sheng. The New York Times, on January 27, 2001, published an article entitled “Has History Been Too Generous to Gutenberg?” A physicist and a rare books scholar using new technology to examine early printings credited to Gutenberg, questioned the “one, heroic discovery” of printing by Gutenberg, though the article is quite confident in noting that “the new research […] does not dislodge Gutenberg from his historic position as the inventor of the printing press.” At the end of the article, surprisingly, the author adds that

the Koreans had been using sand casting to make metal letters […] for at least 30 years, but the scholars found no direct evidence that Gutenberg had contact with them. It has also long been known that the Chinese were making movable type out of clay and mass-producing books in the 11th century A.D., although that process was unknown in Europe.

While the Koreans were “using sand casting letters to make metal letters” and the Chinese were “making movable type,” it was Gutenberg, or “someone else about 20 years after Gutenberg [who] printed his bible” and “invented” movable type printing. This is an example of “the kinds of colonial representation that, at least superficially, do not stigmatize or overtly distance the

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12 Ibid., emphasis mine.
13 Ibid.
other as a type, as a primitive or Asiatic savage.” East Asia, and especially China, were seldom considered “barbarian” or “primitive” by the Europeans, as was the fate of the Amerindian cultures. Nevertheless, the modern/colonial mind, locked in the logic of creatio ex nihilo, finds it difficult to grapple with the idea that Gutenberg might not have invented movable type printing out of nothingness. It thus invented the “reinvention.”

The troublesome suffix re- is not a singular case. Naming is renaming and populating is repopulating. In his Historia de las Indias, Bartolomé de Las Casas explains that Cristóbal Colón means poblar de nuevo (to repopulate). The Spanish expression de nuevo means doing something again, as does the re- prefix of repopulate or rename, but it contains the curious word nuevo, “new” as in Vespucchi’s nomination mundus novus. This implies an “unconscious arrogance and deep belief that what for him was not known had to be, of necessity, new; that whatever was not known to him, naturally did not exist.” But when it comes to re-populating the land with new inhabitants, de nuevo, like ex nihilo, begs the question of the old inhabitants of whose existence the colonizer is consciously aware. O’Gorman asks us to make a distinction between “invention” and “creation,” connecting the latter term with ex nihilo in a religious context. He suggests that the task is to reconstruct not a history of “discovery,” but of how the idea that America was discovered came into

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15 The Italian-born navigator’s name is written as Christopher Columbus in English and Cristoforo Colombo in Italian. However, during his life, he insisted on using the Spanish Cristóbal Colón, which has interesting theological connotations closely related to the “discovery of America,” as argued in Tzvetan Todorov, La conquête de l’Amérique: La question de l’autre (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982). I thus maintain the Spanish Cristóbal Colón throughout the text.
16 Bartolomé de Las Casas, Historia de las Indias, Tomo I (Madrid: Imprenta de Miguel Ginesta, 1875), 43.
18 O’Gorman, La invención de América, 14.
being. McClintock suggests that these “implosive anxieties […] were just as often warded off by fantastical rites of imperial violence,” by imagining the unknown-become-known as the “new,” demonizing the old-now-known through “cannibalization,” then erasing the old-made-new/barbarian people and their culture, religion, memory, and history through the rhetoric of “civilization conquers/converts barbarism.”

0.1.1 Renaming: Modern Colonialism and the Invention of America

The “(re)invention” of printing by Gutenberg and the “(re)nam-ing” of America by the Europeans are sustained by the same logic of *creatio ex nihilo*. One of the most significant functions of the West’s “sense of originality” is reflected in the act of “naming,” which is always a renaming of non-Western others. The invention of “America” is filled with this desire for and anxiety of naming-appropriating. The inhabited lands of Cemanahuac (for the Nahuas) and Tawantisuyana (for the Inca), with their highly sophisticated civilizations, are reduced to a *terra nullius* to be “discovered,” then “named,” and eventually appropriated by Christian Europeans.

Not only was the *terra nullius* perfectly inhabited, it was also no stranger to colonialism. Non-modern types of colonialism abound. Colonization or colonialism has existed throughout human history and across the world. The Babylonian state and the Aztec empires were great colonial powers in their respective regions at certain historical moments. The Greeks, the Romans, the Chinese and the Mongols, to name but a few, were also re-

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19 Ibid., 24
21 I follow María Lugones to designate societies that are not considered “modern” as “non-modern” rather than “pre-modern.” She argues that the “modern apparatus reduces [non-modern societies] to premodern ways [while] non-modern knowledges, relations, and values, and ecological, economic, and spiritual practices are logically constituted to be at odds with a dichotomous, hierarchical, ‘categorical’ logic” (María Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 [2010]: 742–59, at 743).
regional colonizers who exerted colonial control over the lands of others. Modern colonialism started from the 16th century through the European conquest of “America,” while “[t]he colonial relations of previous periods […] were not the cornerstone of any global power.”\textsuperscript{22} The uniqueness of modern colonialism lies precisely in its intimate connection with a global capitalism that “originates and globalizes from America.”\textsuperscript{23} “America,” or, more precisely, the invention of “America,” is the threshold of our discussion of modern colonialism and coloniality, “one of the constituent and specific elements of the global matrix of capitalist power.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{0.1.1.1 From Colonialism to the Invention of America and Modern Colonialism}

The two ancient cultures we are studying can be regarded as colonial ones. The Babylonians colonized their neighbors and rose to a dominant power in the Mesopotamian region before they were brought down by the Persian Empire. The Aztecs were a nomadic group in the northern Mesoamerican region which gradually migrated to central Mexico, subjugating the indigenous inhabitants of the Mexican Valley and building up their empire with its center at the emerging metropolis Mexico-Tenochtitlan.\textsuperscript{25}

The Babylonian creation myth \textit{Enuma Elish} became important and was repeatedly recited at the “New Year’s Festival” only after the rise of the Babylonian state. Marduk consequently became the patron god not only of the Babylonians, but of the entire Mesopotamian region. Similarly, the foundation of the


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.: “uno de los elementos constitutivos y específicos del patrón mundial de poder capitalista.”

\textsuperscript{25} The name “Aztec” refers to the myth of “Aztlan,” which the Nahuatl-speaking nomadic group believe to be their place of origin. “Mexica” (the Nahua rule) refers to the people of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.
city Mexico-Tenochtitlan by the Aztecs on the island in Texcoco Lake was justified as the “divine will” of their patron god Huitzilopochtli, who is said to have guided them to the promised land where they had seen an eagle devouring a snake on top of a cactus. The expansion of the Aztec empire made Tenochtitlan its spiritual and political center. In the center of the center, at the Templo Mayor, the myth in which Huitzilopochtli defeated Coyolxauhqui (the moon goddess) and the Centzonhuitznahuac (the four hundred southern stars), was often performed. The sun god Huitzilopochtli, patron god of the Aztec tribe, thus became the patron god of the Mexican Valley. Upon a superficial reading, the myth propagates victory of the masculine power over the feminine ones, and the colonizer (Huitzilopochtli representing the Aztecs) over the colonized (Coyolxauhqui and Centzon Huiznahuac representing the conquered and feminized tribes).

Both cultures have used creation myths heavily charged with justifications for their colonial power over previous inhabitants of the conquered land. Enuma Elish was performed on multiple occasions every year, as a reiteration of Marduk’s — and thus the Babylonian’s — superiority; sacrificial rituals at the Templo Mayor served similar ends. Despite the differences between non-modern and modern forms of colonialism, creatio ex nihilo persists as a justificatory discourse. It appears in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire and the genocide of the indigenous American population, as well as in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.26

What makes modern European or Western colonialism unique in global history is its relationship to capitalism. In this sense, “America” — which was not known as such either by the inhabitants of the land, who knew it as, for example, cemanahuac (Nahuatl: “earth entirely surrounded by water”) or by its “discoverer,” who thought he had arrived in India — encapsulates both the historical event and the ideological specificity of modern Eu-

european colonialism. Starting in the 16th century with the Spanish and Portuguese, moving on to global dominance through direct political control in the 19th century, predominantly by the British and French, and in the 20th century by the United States, the legacy of modern European colonialism has been arguably passed on to neoliberal multinational corporations.  

“America” is a concept enunciated from a European, Christian perspective through the myth of the “great discovery” of a pre-habited continent with diverse populations, civilizations, empires, and even non-modern colonial powers, in order to appropriate and dominate these conquered cultures on the continent as a whole, and keep Europe as the only locus of enunciation. “America” is then used as the name appropriated by the United States to refer to the country, symbolically suggesting its neocolonial and capitalist domination over the whole American continent, which makes “‘Latin’ America […] a dependent sub-continent that is subaltern to the continental totality, America.”  

Once again, the question of naming is crucial here. In the Judeo-Christian imaginary, God speaks the world into existence and subsequently asks the human ‘adam’ to call and name the creatures so that “whatever the human called a living creature,...
that was its name” (Gen 2:19).\(^{30}\) A similar act of (re)naming, thus (re)creating, was repeated by Colón when he arrived on the continent, which he himself did not know as “America” either. Tzvetan Todorov, in his study of the “Great Discovery,” *La conquête de l’Amérique* (1982), tells us, “like Adam in the garden of Eden, Columbus is passionate about picking names for the *virgin* world before his eyes.”\(^{31}\) Cristóbal Colón is often credited as the first to “discover” America. The honor of being the “first one” was said to be already implicit in his name: Cristóbal, *Christum ferens*, the bearer of Jesus Christ: “[I]n fact, [he] was indeed the first one to open the doors of the Ocean from where he entered and took to those lands so remote and those kingdoms unknown until then, our Savior Jesus Christ.”\(^{32}\) It was the Spanish version of his family name that he insisted on using: Colón, that made him the “legitimate” colonizer. As de Las Casas points out, Colón means *poblador de nuevo*, the one who re-populates.

The sustaining logic of colonialism, that of *creatio ex nihilo*, often works discursively to eliminate the *re-* or *de nuevo* part of the renaming, reinvention, and repopulating process — i.e., to erase physically and/or discursively the preexistence of people, cultures, and languages to a zero-degree *nihil* or nothingness (although most of the time in vain). “America,” today a part of the “natural” division of the world, was not known to the “natural inhabitants” (a term used by de Las Casas) of those *tierras remotas*, nor even to Colón himself. None of them lived in “America.” Tracing the history of the renaming of the continent now known as “America,” Mignolo contends that

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30 For all biblical references to Genesis, unless otherwise noted, I will be quoting from Robert Alter’s detailed research translation *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (London: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1996).

31 Ibid., 39, emphasis mine: “comme Adam au milieu de l’Éden, Colon se passionne pour le choix des noms du monde vierge qu’il a sous les yeux.”

32 De Las Casas, *Historia*, 43: “en la verdad haya sido el primero que abrió las puertas deste mar Océano, por donde entró y él metió á estas tierras tan remotas y reinos, hasta entonces tan incógnitos, á nuestro Salvador Jesucristo.”
since Vespucci [the Italian navigator] conceptually “discovered” (in the sense of “discovering for oneself” or “realizing”) that Europeans were confronting a New World, the continent was renamed “America” after Amerigo Vespucci himself, with a slight change to the ending to make it fit with the already existing non-European continents Africa and Asia.\(^{33}\)

0.1.1.2 Critiques of Modern/Colonial/Categorical Logic

This brief account of different cultural groups and their colonial legacies, as well as the quintessential moment of modern European colonialism that is the “discovery” or invention of America, also intends to problematize the dichotomous division between the “colonizer” and the “colonized.” Homi Bhabha has criticized the fallacious self/other dichotomy through the concept of hybridity, the mixed-ness of cultures, especially in his work on colonial India. Through close reading of colonial literature, he detects an “intrinsic anxiety” of the British colonizers about the colonial project. Drawing insights from psychoanalysis, Bhabha argues that “the tension between the illusion of difference and the reality of sameness leads to anxiety.” For him, the “colonial power is anxious, and never gets what it wants—a stable, final distinction between the colonizers and the colonized.”\(^{34}\) We should be careful not to maintain such divisions that reproduce and reinforce the (wishful) colonial logic of hierarchical categorization and anti-miscegenation.

The caution against the absolute division between colonizer and colonized is an important development in postcolonial theory. It radically moves beyond the logic of insurmountable difference that underpins modern colonialism. As Bauman argues, this logic of difference, the “claim of purity, transcendence, and objectivity is exactly what the logic of domination promises, but to the detriment of the relational, contextual world in and from

\(^{33}\) Mignolo, The Idea of Latin America, 3.

\(^{34}\) David Huddart, Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 2006), 4.
which all epistemological claims are made.”

Using Bhabha’s concept of the interstice, that is, “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference,” Bauman further relates this logic to foundationalism or essentialism. He shows that the “binary ordering of the world destroys the creative ‘third space’ or ‘interstitial’ space in which self-other are mutually formed.”

Bauman frames this discussion through an analysis of the decisive role that ex nihilo theology plays in Christian orthodoxy, one that denies the “chaotic beginnings of Christianity from disparate traditions, and the borrowing from other traditions in the biblical texts.”

Put another way, the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo erases the context from which Christianity emerges and pretends that “Christianity need begin nowhere but with the story of Genesis and the reading of Genesis from the perspective of ex nihilo creation.”

Here however, we need to situate Bhabha’s analysis of “colonial anxiety” in the modern history of Western colonialism operating hand in hand with Christianity. A good example is seemingly homogenous 19th-century Victorian Britain, which is traditionally credited with highly stringent Christian morals, but was in fact undergoing great social and religious crises and changes. The development of science, especially the theory of evolution, shook the Christian attribution of the world’s origin to God; Robert L. Stevenson’s Strange Case of Doctor Jeckyll and Mr Hyde (1886) showed signs of suppressed homosexuality rising to the surface; Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) exemplified the fear of a reverse colonization; the changing role of women, “guardians” of Victorian values, culminated in a masculinist cri-

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35 Whitney Bauman, Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: From Creatio Ex Nihilo to Terra Nullius (London: Routledge, 2009), 13.
36 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.
37 Bauman, Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics, 32.
38 Ibid., 30.
39 Ibid.
sis evident in such texts as the extremely popular *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *She: A History of Adventure* (1887), both written by Henry Rider Haggard after his service in British colonial administration in South Africa. All these texts can also be read in the light of the colonial anxiety around racial degeneration through contact with other “inferior races” in the British colonies or at home.

This colonial anxiety of influence should be thought within modernity as a “categorical, dichotomous, hierarchical logic,” and as one that is “central to modern, colonial capitalist thinking about race, gender and sexuality.” If we change the context of 19th-century Britain to that of the pre-conquest colonial Aztecs — i.e., a non-modern culture operating differently from the same modern categorical hierarchy — it is not clear how the Aztec colonial authorities would experience the same “colonial anxiety.”

In his book about the urban complexity of Mexico City from the Aztec period to the post-Independence era, Louis Panabiére suggests that cultural shock was frequent in Mexico, but asks, “has it provoked crises or enabled fertile enrichment?” He reviews different historical periods under different cosmologies and political rules in order to answer this question. Tenochtitlan, under the rule of the Aztecs, is the center of the empire. He contends, “the Aztec empire is not a center that imposes itself to the periphery by destroying the values, but it is a[n] [imperial] body that is nourished by contacts and relations with the peoples and cultures it has encountered.” According to Panabiére, therefore, non-Aztec cultures were able to survive and integrated into the new empire.

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42 See McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.
43 Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 742.
44 Louis Panabiére, *Cité aigle, ville serpent* (Perpignan: Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 1993), 12: “est-ce qu’il a provoqué des crises ou est-ce qu’il a donné lieu à de féconds enrichissements?”
45 Ibid., 17: “l’empire aztèque […] n’est pas un centre qui s’impose à la périphérie en en détruisant les valeurs, mais c’est un corps qui se nourrit des contacts et des relations avec les populations et les cultures rencontrées.”
For example, despite the privileged position of Huitzilopochtli in Aztec politics, pre-Aztec deities such as Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc were incorporated and remained in prestigious positions to continue their worship.\(^46\) This is shown in the structure of Templo Mayor, the twin pyramid that is believed to be in the center of the universe and is dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, patron god and also god of sun and fire, as well as to the older, pre-Aztec deity Tlaloc, god of rain. In front of the twin pyramid of Templo Mayor, we find a separate altar dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, an ancient god present throughout the Mesoamerican region.\(^47\)

Panabière explains that, as opposed to Spanish monotheism, which “tends to reduce the individual to the unique essence,”\(^48\) the Aztec religion proposes plurality, participation, and coherence, for which “the internal contradictions do not take away the coherence and the unity.”\(^49\) In Part II, I will analyze in detail the strange case of Tlaltecuhtli, the Aztec earth deity, and argue that the combination of Aztec religious thought, the particularity of its writing system, and its philosophical plurality gave greater freedom to representations of Tlaltecuhtli, who appeared in feminine, masculine, and zoomorphic guises, as well as in the guise of other deities who shared a similar physiognomy to Tlaloc. While Panabière might be right to point out the contradiction-in-coherence, his observation might be too generous to the Aztec colonizers, who were actually also haunted by a certain anxiety towards their colonial project and the encountered “others.”

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\(^47\) Among the Mayans, Quetzalcoatl appears under the guise of Kukulcan, depicted on the famous pyramid of Chichen Itza; in Teotihuacan, one of the three major pyramids is dedicated to him; finally, he was worshipped in Tula, the capital of the Toltecs.

\(^48\) Panabière, *Cité aigle*, 18: “tend à ramener l’individu à une essence unique.”

\(^49\) Ibid., 20: “les contradictions internes n’enlevaient rien à la cohésion et à l’unité.”
The Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, for example, believes that “the incessant theological speculation that combined, systematized and unified scattered beliefs, of themselves or of the others,” performed not by the proletarians at a popular level but by certain castes and theocrats at the top of the social hierarchy, was superficial. He asserts that “the religious unification only affected the consciousness superficially while the primitive beliefs were left intact.” As opposed to Panabière, Paz regards the religious and cultural incorporation of the non-Aztec ones as a superficial unification or even imposition, which he believes laid the ground for the introduction of Catholicism: “[I]t is also a religion superimposed onto an original and always living religious background […] and therefore laid the ground for the Spanish domination whose arrival seems like a liberation for the people submitted to the Aztecs.”

The analogy Paz draws between the Aztec religion and Catholicism ignores that monotheism marks the fundamental difference between the two. The superimposition of Catholicism works from within its orthodox theological dictum, where there is no space for negotiation. The conquered people of the Americas had two options regarding their “demonic beliefs”: conversion to Christianity or death. In his fanatical Requerimiento (1513), Juan López de Palacios speaks to the indigenous

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51 Ibid.: “la unificación religiosa solamente afectaba a la superficie de la conciencia, dejando intactas las creencias primitivas.”

52 Ibid.: “también es una religión superpuesta a un fondo religioso original y siempre viviente […] entonces preparaba la dominación española [y su] llegada […] parece una liberación a los pueblos sometidos por los aztecas.”

53 Laiou traces this religious impulse underpinning the conquest of the Americas to a previous period of European expansion, the Crusades, and argues that the “Second Crusade, preached against the Slavs as much as against the Muslims in the Holy Land, produced an unequivocal and powerful ideological conceptualization, precisely that of conversion or annihilation” (Angeliki E. Laiou, “Many Faces of Medieval Colonization,” in *Native Traditions in the Postconquest World*, eds. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Tom Cummins [Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998], 13–30, at 21).
people of the Americas in the name of the Spanish Crown, whom he defines as the *domadores de pueblos bárbaros* (tamers of barbarians):

And if you would not do this or viciously make delay in it [conversion to Christianity and subjection to the Castilian Monarchs], I assure you that, with the help of our God, we shall powerfully enter (your land) to oppose you and wage war everywhere in all ways we can; and we will subject you to the yoke and obedience to the Church and Their Majesties; we will take you, your wives and children and make them slaves, who we will sell and dispose them as Their Majesties would command; and we will possess your goods and do all the bad things and damages that we can, as to the vassals who do not obey, refuse to receive their lord, resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and damages caused by this are your fault but nor that of Their Majesties, nor ours, nor these gentlemen who come with us.⁵⁴

The attitude as shown in the above quote is fundamentally different from that of the Aztec theocrats. Theo-political monotheism intersects with the categorical logic of modernity/coloniality. A critique of the modern form of colonialism should be very careful not to fall into the same categorical and linear logic, for instance, believing that the colonial project has successfully

⁵⁴ Juan López de Palacios, *Requerimiento* (1513): “Y si así no lo hiciésem o en ello [conversión al Cristianismo y sometimiento a los Reyes de Castillas] maliciosamente pusieseis dilación, os certifico que con la ayuda de Dios nosotros entraremos poderosamente contra vosotros, y os haremos guerra por todas las partes y maneras que pudiéramos, y os sujetaremos al yugo y obediencia de la Iglesia y de Sus Majestades, y tomaremos vuestras personas y de vuestras mujeres e hijos y los haremos esclavos, y como tales los venderemos y dispondremos de ellos como Sus Majestades mandaren, y os tomaremos vuestros bienes, y os haremos todos los males y daños que pudiéramos, como a vasallos que no obedecen ni quieren recibir a su señor y le resisten y contradicen; y protestamos que las muertes y daños que de ello se siguiessen sea a vuestra culpa y no de Sus Majestades, ni nuestra, ni de estos caballeros que con nosotros vienen.”
eliminated the indigenous knowledges, cosmologies, and beings to the level of *nihil*. Or even worse, assuming that colonialism only started (as if *ex nihilo*) in the 19th century.

This global, capitalist, colonial system that seeks to pave its way through the conquered worlds is “continually resisted and being resisted today.”\(^55\) In the case of the Christianization and colonization of the Nahuas, research shows that “the dualistic categories of ‘Christian’ and ‘pagan’ […] were highly meaningful to Europeans but foreign to indigenous self-conceptions.”\(^56\)

It was the Nahuas who “manipulated their friars into presiding over a church founded not upon abstract Christian theological or moral tenets but upon an exuberant pageantry; [a phenomenon which] tended to mask a slower and more subtle process by which world view and philosophy were renegotiated by the Nahuas without there being any abrupt rupture with the past.”\(^57\)

In Ang Lee’s film *Life of Pi* (2012), the young protagonist Piscine Patel from the former French colony Pondicherry in India went home one day after a symbolic encounter with a Christian priest, who gave him a cup of water and brought him the gospel of Jesus Christ. Before sleep that night, he touched his Vishnu statuette and prayed, “Thank you Vishnu, for introducing me to Christ.” We learn later that the young boy had no problem believing and practicing piously and simultaneously in Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Put differently:

> [C]olonial authority thus produces ironic, split identifications; these threatening expressions of hybridity disrupt and subvert colonial hegemony, in the sense that they exclude the possibility of total epistemic mastery, and because they constitute “a variously positioned native who by (mis)appro-

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\(^{55}\) Lugones, “‘Toward a Decolonial Feminism,’” 748.


\(^{57}\) Ibid., 363.
priating the terms of the dominant ideology” is able to resist colonial typification.\textsuperscript{58}

The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter is an excerpt from a song called “Somos más Americanos” (“We are more American”) by the Mexican \textit{norteño} band Los Tigres del Norte. “I did not cross the border. The border crossed me” acutely summarizes the violent imposition of categorization (the drawing of borders) through colonialism, which cuts across the organic living experience, memories, and intersubjective relationships, and causes enduring problems at borders of all kinds. Needless to say, one of the most prominent, artificially constructed borders that violently cut across both epistemological (symbolical) and material (physical) bodies is that of sex and gender, the central focus of this book. Most noticeable in that context is the practice of coercive “sex assignment” for pathologized intersex people.\textsuperscript{59}

\subsection*{0.1.2 Colonialism ex Nihilo: The Problem of Postcolonialism}

After heated debates on colonialism and postcolonialism by preeminent scholars such as Edward Said, whose \textit{Orientalism} (1979) is a foundational text of postcolonial studies, and Gayatri Spivak, whose article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) has been widely cited and criticized, the \textit{Columbia Encyclopedia} presents to its reader a definition of “colonization” in 1993. This publication comes from the same university where Said and Spivak produced their influential works, works that are credited as foundational of what later came to be known as postcolonial studies:

Colonization: Extension of political and economic control over an area by a state whose nationals have occupied the area and usually possess organizational or technological su-

\textsuperscript{58} Thomas, \textit{Colonialism’s Culture}, 40.

periority over the native population. [...] IMPERIALISM, more or less aggressive humanitarianism, and a desire for adventure or individual improvement are also causes. [...] Modern colonization, frequently preceded by an era in which missionaries and traders were active, has been largely exploitative. Moreover, it has not in the long run proved directly lucrative to the colonial power [...] Colonization in its classical form is rarely practiced today and is widely considered to be immoral.60

The entry perpetuates the colonial myth of “superiority” of the colonizer over the “native” population, a distinction that already carries the colonial linear logic that is reflected by the very concepts of modern (“state”) and traditional (“native”), with the latter locked “in the lower scale of a chronological order driving towards ‘civilization’.”61 Positing the “superiority” of the colonizer comes close to suggesting that colonization is inevitable or at least in most cases (“usually”) justifiable. It quickly explains colonization as caused by “more or less aggressive humanitarianism” and a desire “for adventure or individual improvement,” which is usually regarded as positive, especially in Western and Westernized societies (the potential readers of the Encyclopedia). A long recapitulation of examples of colonization throughout ancient and modern history follows. All examples are European, except for the Phoenicians, who are loosely related to Europe, and the Japanese, whose colonial history in Asia followed its Westernization during the Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century.62

According to this definition, therefore, colonization is usually undertaken by Western “states” at the expense of organization-

62 See, for example, Yan Lu, Re-Understanding Japan: Chinese Perspectives, 1895–1945 (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), 228–29.
ally and technologically inferior populations (whose inferiority is already woven into the text through the opposition between the modern/advanced “state” and traditional/backward “native”). It is caused, at least sometimes, by individualism manifesting as the desire for personal adventure and improvement, or by some form of “humanitarianism” that can be “more or less aggressive.” One wonders if the enslavement and genocide of indigenous Amerindian and African human beings, or the environmental disaster that continues and intensifies today through globalized capitalist expansion, would qualify as the more aggressive forms of such “humanitarianism.” But the degree of aggression is probably irrelevant after all, since colonialism, we are told, is not entirely profitable for the colonial power. The entry ends with an observation on the immorality of colonization, not as a matter of fact, but of reception (“considered to be”).

Certainly, one encyclopedia entry published about twenty-five years ago might not have so decisive an influence to be considered too seriously. This entry serves, however, as an example of how colonial discourse can survive political and scholarly efforts to disavow it and make its way into a prestigious university-published encyclopedia, under the guise of a scientific, truth-claiming, carefully fabricated language that at brief glance does not appear overtly colonialist. Colonial discourse, in its modern logic, posits the colonizer as the white man and his culture as the superior center, the “measure of all things,” while the other—men, women, cultures—are considered inferior and thus colonizable. From “inferiority” to “colonizability,” the modern linear logic of progression provides persistent theories. This linearity, for example, might take the form of biblical salvation from sin, or as a transition from the old world toward the new “America.” In short, it is believed that “Europe and the Europe-

63 Western women play an ambiguous role in colonialism. The question of women and colonialism is a good example of the problem of assuming that race and gender can be treated as issues independent from each other. As I have repeated throughout this text, they are already intersected. See also Indira Ghose, Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
queer ancient ways

ans were (at) the most advanced moment and level in the lineal, unidirectional and continuing path of the species.64

The ongoing global dominance of European colonial expansion is maintained through coloniality and the control of knowledge. Critique of the “colonizing epistemological strategy” of subordinating differences to transcultural notions should be consistent and kept alive.65 This is equally true to the field of postcolonial studies. I have emphasized that Bhabha’s theorization of colonial anxiety should be contextualized in 19th-century British colonialism, by using a counterexample from non-modern forms of colonialism. Scholars of postcolonialism, whose main historical focus is on the 19th century, consciously or inadvertently ascribe a uniqueness to these imperial powers to the extent that the British and French invasion of the world becomes presented as, precisely, creatio ex nihilo in the 19th century. Fernando Coronil, for example, enumerates the systematic exclusion of Latin America from several anthologies of postcolonial studies, including classics such as The Post-Colonial Studies Reader edited by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin from 2006.66 The brutal genocide of Amerindians and the continuous colonial policy toward indigenous populations in the form of so-called internal colonialism, still pervasive in Latin American countries, have been largely disregarded.

The exclusion or ignorance of Latin American anti-colonialist endeavors on the global map of decolonization is tellingly present in a dialogue between John Comaroff and Homi Bhabha, who divide postcoloniality into two periods: “the decolonization of the Third World marked by India’s independence in

64 Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social,” 344: “Europa y los europeos eran el momento y el nivel más avanzados en el camino lineal, unidireccional y continuo de la especie.”
65 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London: Routledge, 1999), 46.
1947; and the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism signaled by the end of the Cold War in 1989.”

No wonder Spivak has claimed that “Latin America has not participated in decolonization!”

In this sense, as I will discuss further in a moment, not only did 19th-century colonialism posit itself as creatio ex nihilo, but so did its astute critic, “postcolonialism.”

More than a disciplinary “attack” on postcolonialism per se, what we understand from this critique is the tendency of postcolonialism to claim universality by neglecting other political and intellectual endeavors that aim at decolonization parallel to or even much earlier than postcolonial studies. There is also the danger that postcolonial studies “would become an imperial design as any other […] that it] would compete with Marxism for global dominance.”

“Global dominance” almost always goes hand in hand with universal claims. Nicholas Thomas for example, says of Bhabha that

[although] most of his [Homi Bhabha’s] other references are to 19th century texts […] the limits and conditions of possibility of colonial discourse remain unspecified; it is as though the brute fact of the significance of imperialism in modern history exempts the critic from the need to locate its enunciations and reiterations.

Joseba Gabilondo points out that, being blind to his own locality, Bhabha turns his discussion about postcoloniality “not into

67 Quoted in ibid., 402.
69 Ibid.
70 Thomas, Colonialism’s Culture, 43. Nicolas Thomas’s critique of Bhabha’s failure to take into consideration other forms of colonialism, however, differs from decolonial critics’ insistence that “modernity” started in the Americas. He argues that Bhabha’s focus on the 19th century “suggests either that colonial discourse is understood to be peculiarly modern — and hence did not exist, for example, in the period of the conquest of America — or that it is assumed that the logic identified is equally applicable in that case, and in others.”
a particular position, but a negative and thus universal position defined by modernity,” which for Bhabha is “no longer particularly Western, but rather hegemonically universal.”

Sara Castro-Kláren investigates the polemic reception in Latin America of Edward Said’s influential book Orientalism, often credited with having generated the school of “postcolonial studies.” She recounts that students in Latin American studies have experienced “the shock of recognition” when reading Orientalism precisely because the previously mentioned Mexican writer Edmundo O’Gorman has already analyzed, in a line of argument similar to that in Said’s book, the “invention of America.” Rather than trying to undermine the importance and influence of Said’s work, that “sweeping inquiry [that] was a brilliant investigation of Europe’s invention of the Orient as its 19th-century other,” Castro-Kláren opens up a question that Mignolo later picks up: how come O’Gorman’s thesis was only popularized through Said’s work twenty years after he first proposed it? He argues that the reason lies in the “geopolitical ranking of knowledge, [in which] both the history and the scholarship of core imperial languages (English, French, and German) are more visible.”

“Visibility,” when it comes to decolonial thoughts and struggle however, is a tricky issue. On the back cover of the English translation of the Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel’s Politics of Liberation: A Critical World History, Ivan Petrella contends: “[I]f Enrique Dussel had been born in the United States, France or Germany he would be an intellectual celebrity. Author of dozens of books in Spanish, few have been translated into

72 O’Gorman, La invención de América.
74 Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity, 56.
English. This book seeks to begin to remedy this injustice.” Let us not forget first that Enrique Dussel writes in Spanish, one of the major colonial languages most spoken in the world as a consequence of the Conquista, but not in Nahuatl, Tagalog, or Slovene. Petrella’s comment falls into the trap of a strange logic that if one is not considered a “celebrity” (of any kind) by the English-speaking audience, one suffers from “injustice.” Injustice for whom and by whom? Enrique Dussel is widely read in the Spanish-speaking world and native Spanish speakers make up the second largest linguistic group after Chinese and before English. Is their readership countable to render some “justice” for Dussel’s works?

Here we come to two important points. First, the “locus of enunciation” of globally validated knowledge is still largely rooted in the West, that is, in the United States and Europe, written in English (of which this book plays a part), French, or German. From the self-avowed epistemic “zero point” of the West, knowledges from the “rest” of the world are not fully legitimate ones. Second, 18th-century “orientalism” did not happen ex nihilo. Indeed it would have been impossible without 16th-century colonial competition over the Americas, through which Occidentalism, the self-fashioning of the West as the embodiment of modernity, was shaped. The foundational theo-political ideology of creatio ex nihilo is to be found, and criticized, not only in colonialism, but also in metropolitan postcolonialism.

Thus the critique of the blindness of postcolonial studies to America and the focus on anti-colonial thought theorized from the Americas should not be understood as promoting a “new” theoretical field (as if created ex nihilo) to claim dominance over the previous ones. Thus, “decoloniality” is not a new field, let alone a new “turn,” but points to all theoretical and political en-

deavors throughout the history of colonization in order to make sense of the colonial experience and to resist colonialism.

In recent years, the research on decolonization across the “non-West” and the call for further decolonization (within and beyond the academia) by a handful of contemporary thinkers have been gradually received and turned into another “school of thought,” alternatively named “decolonial option” or “decolonial theory.” It seems sufficient to just quote Mignolo (or Quijano, for that matter) in order to “decolonize something.” The local variants of political resistance, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles, and non-heterosexualist cultural practices that “decolonial theorists” urge us to learn from, remain overshadowed by this allegedly new theoretical trend. This is a rather worrisome phenomenon for decolonization, because decolonial struggles have always existed, since day one of colonization in different localities, languages, and ways. If, as the now widely cited (including in this book) decolonial thinker Mignolo points out: “The colonial experience in South America and the Caribbean did not have to wait until the word postcolonialism entered the U.S. academy in the early 1980s, after the word postmodernism was introduced in France,”77 decolonial endeavors have preceded and will surpass the conveniently named “decolonial theory.”

Supersessionism, a temporal cousin of creatio ex nihilo, produced by the incessant theoretical “turns,” manifests itself in the above quotation in which Mignolo reproduces the myth of postmodernism’s French origin. The strong advocate of studying decoloniality from Latin America has, in his repudiation of postcolonialism, overlooked that both modernism and postmodernism “were born in a distant periphery rather than at the center of the cultural system of the time: they come not from Europe or the United States, but from Hispanic America.”78

The “decolonial turn,” as it has been more and more frequently used, should not be taken as an overarching proper name for a supposedly newly emergent school of thought. It is, however, an

77 Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity, 57.
invitation to learn to learn from decolonial struggles, theories, and practices that abound in the colonized world.

0.1.3 The Gender of Creatio ex Nihilo

Nothingness, produced through the reduction and erasure of preexisting realities in colonial history and imaginaries, is directly linked with the image of the feminine body as a void, an empty place, a womb waiting for masculine inscription or insemination. This is an issue I touched upon in Part I and will be the central focus of the next section and Part II.

The feminization of the colonized is an old story. In her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* from 1995, Ann McClintock captures the “doubling in male imperial discourse” represented in Jan van der Straet’s painting *America* (c. 1575). The painting represents “America” as a naked woman in a position of lust, luring the European discoverer Vespucci as a fully clothed, technologically equipped “man of letters,” who, with his “godlike arrival, is destined to inseminate her with the male seeds of civilization, fructify the wilderness and quell the riotous scene of cannibalism in the background.”

The dichotomous coupling is easily discernible as “earth–sky; sea–land; male–female; clothed–unclothed; active–passive; vertical–horizontal; raw–cooked,” yet McClintock sharply points out the colonial/masculine anxiety present in the representation of the cannibalistic scene between Amerigo and America on the background amidst the natural landscape, with the dismembered body, a (phallic) leg, being grilled by a group of female cannibals. She concludes that the scene “is a document both of paranoia and of megalomania.” What is more, the supposedly “passive” feminine figure in the foreground is “riotously violent and cannibalistic” in the background, ready to engulf the lonely erected “civilization.” The passivity and cannibalism contradicting each other, yet projected onto the “feminized” land, trouble the impulse of dichotomization and hierarchiza-

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80 Ibid., 26–27.
tion: It becomes uncertain whether the correlation femininity/passivity/colonized, or masculinity/activity/colonizer, for that matter, is clearly maintained.81

Naming, and therefore controlling, the unknown is vividly shown in the Amerigo–America connection. The inscription of the painting reads in Latin, “Americen Americus rexit & Semel vocauit inde Semper excitam.”82 McClintock interprets the “rediscovery” as a way for Amerigo Vespucci to assert himself as being the first man to “discover” the “New World,” despite being aware of his belatedness. What is more important, she argues, is that this was an act similar to patronymy and patri-mon, “an insistence on marking ‘the product of copulation with his own name’ stems from the uncertainty of the male’s relation to origins.”83 In fact, “America” was not thus named in situ by the Italian navigator, who by doing so supposedly resolved his excitement of sexual possession and fear of emasculation. McClintock might have ascribed too much power to Vespucci. Although his collection of letters in which he proposed the idea of a “New World” is entitled Mundus Novus (1503), he did not go so far as naming the mundus novus after his own name. Historically, it was Martin Waldseemüller who suggested such a name, in honor of Amerigo Vespucci, not Vespucci himself.

McClintock’s swift interpretation unintentionally erects Vespucci as a heroric “discoverer” who colonizes the “feminized” other, probably out of his “desire of adventure and individual improvement,” which, as the Columbia Encyclopedia wanted us to believe, is often the cause of such endeavors. Since the renaming and the invention of America is a gradual process, from Novus Orbis to Terra Nova, and then to America,84 the misreading of Amerigo–America, which turns the historical

81 Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social,” has analyzed that the categorization of the world in European modernity conveys a hierarchy which keeps Europe and European men at the highest level.
82 “Americus rediscover America. He called her but once and thenceforth she was always awake.”
83 McClintock, Imperial Leather, 29.
84 Mignolo, The Darker Side of the Renaissance, 269.
process into a *fiat lux* instance, can be seen as still under the spell of *creatio ex nihilo*.

### 0.2 Gendering *Creatio ex Nihilo*

At the Akron Woman’s Rights Convention in 1851, Sojourner Truth, an antislavery activist addressed the public with the question, “Arn’t I a woman?” She also pointed to her physical strength to challenge the stereotype of women being feeble, as well as other gender stereotypes. This speech has been read as a manifesto demanding the recognition of her membership in the “woman party.” Sojourner Truth has been represented either distortedly as an angry black woman embodying the “fervor of Ethiopia, wild, savage, hunted of all nations but burning after God in her tropic heart” by her contemporary biographer, or coercively as the *black* feminist challenging the universal assumption of “sisterhood” actually dominated by her white counterparts. “Arn’t I a woman” has often been (mis)read as “Ain’t I also a woman?” Truth’s interrogative pronouncement, predating the social-constructivist account of gender by 20th-century “second wave” feminism, is therefore still not read as a general question. Her sound critique of gender stereotypes is consistently misplaced as an outcry against racial prejudice in the United States.

#### 0.2.1 A Brief Review of the Debates on “Gender”

One of the central issues discussed and theorized in feminist and gender studies is the concept of gender, its usefulness or uselessness and (in)applicability in different contexts. As soon as the concept of gender was introduced in feminist theorization of “sex,” it could be said, critics already began to problematize it. Critiques likely take two forms: reconstructing gender or refusing it. The former does not question the concept of “gender”

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itself, but hopes to correct the problems of its blindness to racial and class difference, or to its heteronormative assumptions.

Black feminist theory, theorizing black women’s experience as being at the same time racialized and gendered, perceives that “some ideas that Africanist scholars identify as characteristically ‘Black’ often bear remarkable resemblance to similar ideas claimed by feminist scholars as characteristically ‘female.’” Black feminists insist on the intersectional oppressions of gender and race rather than an additive account of oppressions often expressed as “further repressed by.” That is to say white women are not exempted from the issue of race. Gender always already intersects with race, sexuality, class, ability, religion, and other categories.

Elizabeth Spelman challenges in particular the tendency of those feminist theorists who use the “additive method,” assuming that “gender is indeed a variable of human identity independent of other variables such as race and class, that whether one is a woman is unaffected by what class or race one is.” The danger of such theoretical separatism is that it reproduces “all the women are white, all the blacks are men,” which renders visible the racism of the women’s movement and sexism of the civil rights movement in the context of the United States. Additive methods, in short, assume that “identities” are separate and separable entities, that one is either only a woman or only a black. In this categorical logic of modernity/coloniality, María Lugones contends, “black woman” becomes an impossible concept. Put in Spelman’s words, “additive analyses” still have

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89 Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 742.
“the effect of obscuring the racial and class identity of those described as ‘women,’ [and] make it hard to see how women not of a particular race and class can be included in the description.”

Black feminists’ emphasis on individual and particular experience “fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift […] by] embracing a paradigm of intersecting oppression of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation.” It promotes a situated and contextualized truth, and consequently criticizes prevailing knowledge, representative of a universalist claim for truth. This implied universalism is often found in white, middle-class feminism, which habitually speaks for all and as if from nowhere (ex nihilo). Adrienne Rich calls it “white solipsism,” that is, “to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world.”

The blindness to race relative to the formation of gender hierarchy replicates what Hélène Cixous calls “patriarchal binary thought.” Cixous follows Jacques Derrida’s critique of the Western metaphysical tradition to emphasize that hierarchical binary oppositions always regard the male/masculine as superior to the female/feminine and all the terms associated with it, for example, in the typical opposition between the (masculinized) Culture and (feminized) Nature.

“Patriarchal binary thought” can be summed up as phallogocentrism, a combination of “logocentrism,” a philosophy that privileges the logos, the presence in speech/truth, especially in the Western metaphysics criticized by Derrida, and “phallo-
centrism,” a system “that privileges the phallus as the symbol or source of power.”95 However, Hélène Cixous here seems to have forgotten that this hierarchical binarism infinitely intersects with race, or, more precisely, with racial categorization and hierarchization, an invention of Western modern “rational thought” as part of its colonial legacy. Aníbal Quijano relates the coloniality of (rational) knowledge to a “fundamental presupposition” that regards “knowledge as a product of a subject-object relation.”96 Needless to say, in this paradigm of rational knowledge, the White male takes up the position of the “subject,” preparing himself to conquer by appropriating, occupying, naming, or even “reinventing” the “objects.” Toril Moi is right to point out, following Cixous, that the masculine value system is an “economy of the proper,” meaning “property—appropriate: signaling an emphasis on self-identity, self-aggrandizement and arrogative dominance.”97 Yet one should remember that the masculine “economy of the proper” is constructive of the logic of colonialism.

If Hélène Cixous and the écriture feminine seek to undo this hierarchical binarism by asserting the other-than-masculine spectrum while typically ignoring the question of race, black feminists have theorized the intersectionality of gender and race as a more radical criticism of the system of domination through an emphasis based on experience, “defin[ing] our own realities on our own terms.”98 If “being Black is a source of pride, as well as an occasion for being oppressed,”99 blackness or femininity for that matter should not be understood only in terms of oppression. The additive method of analysis that adds “blackness”

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95 Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, 191n5.
98 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 274.
99 Spelman, Inessential Woman, 124.
or “color” as a form of further, *additional* burden to the universalist “all women” who are said to be already oppressed by the “patriarchal binary opposition,” operates on a strong conviction of those identities’ separability.

What is more, the additive method conceals “racism pure and simple”¹⁰⁰ by assuming that “there is nothing positive about having a Black history and identity,” as if the elimination of “blackness” also eliminated the “extra burden” for black women. At the same time, both the additive method and the color-blind *écriture feminine* have not only generalized the issue of “patriarchy,” which decolonial feminists and feminists of color have shown to be a historico-culturally specific concept universally projected,¹⁰¹ but they have also overlooked the historical contingency of what is accounted for or accountable as “woman.” We will see, through the two ancient cases this book studies, that both cosmologies belie the “additive method,” particularly in the case of Nahua cosmology and its writing/painting system *tlacuilolli*, discussed in Part II.

We should not forget that historically black women were violently thrown out of the category of “woman” by European scientists. Sarah Baartman, the South African Khoikhoi woman brought to be exhibited in London in 1810 and some years later, in 1814, sold to Réaux, a businessman who was involved in animal trade with the Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris. Against her will, she was closely examined, especially her supposedly “abnormal” genitalia, after her death by the professors of the museum, Henri de Lainville and Georges Cuvier. Cuvier published an article, “Extraits d’observations faites sur le cadavre d’une femme connue à Paris et à Londres sous le nom de Vénus Hottentot” (1817), asserting his thesis that Sarah Baartman represents “a living missing link connecting animals and humankind.”¹⁰² This abhorrently racist “scientific truth,” in the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.
¹⁰¹ I shall draw on the decolonial feminist critique of the first issue of the complicity between gender and colonialism later.
form of a plaster cast of Baartman’s body parts, continued to be shown in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1976. It was only in 2002 that her bodely remains, stored in the museum, were returned and buried in South Africa. The case of Sarah Baartman “has become synonymous with the pain and sufferings of a black woman of a colonized people” and “a prime example of the creation of the ‘Other.’”

Monique Wittig, in “One Is Not Born a Woman” provocatively claims that a lesbian is not and cannot be a woman, and that “a lesbian has to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature.” She further argues that “women are a class […] and] the category ‘woman’ as well as the category ‘man’ are political and economic categories not eternal ones.” Wittig questions not only the “gendered” aspect of “woman,” but also the supposedly unquestionable biological predisposition of the category: “[I]t is civilization as a whole that produces this creature [i.e., the human female], intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.” She rejects the kind of feminist theorization which is based on biological explanation, “since it assumes that the basis of society or the beginning of society lies in heterosexuality.” Furthermore, she correlates the category of “sex” and the category of “race.” Following Colette Guillaumin, who shows that “race” was a concept directly linked to “the socioeconomic reality of black slavery” before which it did not exist, Wittig argues that “sex,” like “race,” is later “taken as an ‘immediate given’ […] ‘physical features’, belonging to a natural order.” This brings us back to the case of Sarah Baartman. It is not difficult to discern the complicity between scientific knowledge production in the West

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103 Ibid., 155.
105 Ibid., 10.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid., 11.
and its global colonial/capitalist interests through the regulation of heteronormative gendering.

Similar to Wittig’s critique of the binary division of the human population — be it along gender or sex lines — into male and female, Judith Butler, in her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble*, attacks the heteronormative assumption that sustains such a division. Butler argues that given the historicity of sex, that is to say, the understanding that this supposedly immutable, anatomic, and natural “given” is not always the same, but changes over time and across different geographies, we must ask if “the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses [are] in the service of other political and social interests.”108 The answer is a definite “yes,” and the most direct of those “political and social interests” is heteronormativity, or as Wittig ironically puts it, “when thought by the straight mind, homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality.”109

In the preface to the reprint of *Gender Trouble* from 1999, Butler recounts her reasons for writing the book back in the 1980s, namely “to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory.”110 She reads this heterosexual assumption, or what she terms “heterosexual matrix,” as a discursive or epistemic hegemony through which bodies, genders, and desires are dualistically, oppositionally, and hierarchically naturalized into male/masculine/man and female/feminine/woman.

Butler also criticizes the “radical disjunction” between heterosexuality and homosexuality inherent in Wittig’s account, which is based on the problematic assumption of a “systematic integrity of heterosexuality,” as it “replicates the kind of disjunctive binarism that she herself characterizes as the divisive philosophical gesture of the straight mind.”111 We should add here that this is not only a gesture of the “straight mind” or heteronormativity, but also that of modern/colonial categorical logic. Butler

111 Ibid., 154–55.
further complicates the critique of heteronormativity by pointing out the contingent psychic boundaries between seemingly coherent groupings, and proposes we understand heterosexuality as “both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself, as an alternative gay/lesbian perspective.”

Butler and Wittig criticize the gender/sex division primarily from the point of view of a concern for sexuality, which has been overlooked or simply presumed to be heterosexual. They likewise have shown that sexuality is intrinsically linked to how we understand sex, which itself is already a gendered category. In her influential “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” published in 1984, Gayle Rubin demonstrates the complex social reality of sexuality, especially when it is considered to be “perverse,” for example, such as lesbian sadomasochism, gay leather fetishism, and pornography. Though sharing similar concerns as Wittig and Butler with sexuality, Rubin proposes to establish an autonomous field that studies sexuality “against the grain of much contemporary feminist thought, which treats sexuality as a derivation of gender.” She argues that “feminist conceptual tools [which] were developed to detect and analyze gender-based hierarchies […] become irrelevant and often misleading […] for assessing] critical power relations in the area of sexuality.”

This call for independent research on sexuality, however, has been misread as a call for the repudiation of gender and the separation of feminism from the field of lesbian/gay studies, who “restrict the proper object of feminism to gender, and […] appropriate sexuality as the proper object of [lesbian/gay studies].” Judith Butler criticizes lesbian/gay studies’ decontextualization of Gayle Rubin’s article. She also warns that

112 Ibid., 155.
114 Ibid., 309.
lesbian/gay studies should not ignore the important contribution of feminist scholarship on sexuality by reducing feminist theorizations to gender only. We should also not overlook the diversity of debates and voices within feminism, notably feminists of color who theorize the intersection of gender and race; working-class feminists who think class and gender together; or continental European feminist studies of “sexual difference” as irreducible “neither to a biological difference nor to a sociological notion of gender.”

0.2.1.2 Localizing and Decolonializing Gender
If Gayle Rubin opens a way of thinking beyond the concept of gender, while at the same time preserving its validity within Anglo-American feminism, other groups of feminists tend to question the very usefulness of gender as an analytical term for their locally embedded experiences. For example, some continental European feminists of “sexual difference” reject the usefulness of gender in the linguistic context of Romance languages. Decolonial feminists writing from the experiences of colonized cultures, notably in Africa and the Americas, argue that the imposition of the (heteronormative) gender system is constitutive of modern colonialism. These theorizations emphasize the coloniality of gender and see heteronormative gendering as a modern/colonial design imposed on colonized cultures.

Écriture féminine pays special attention to the role played by language, the semiotic and symbolic aspects that structure sexual differences. Allied with the French feminists’ emphasis on sexual differences, Toril Moi criticizes the opposition of “gender” to “sex,” which, for her, results in “women [being] divorced from their bodies, and […] ‘woman’ [being] turned into a discursive and performative effect.” She is especially critical of the performative account of “gender” proposed by Judith Butler and believes that avoiding essentialism should not lead to claiming “that there are no women, or that the category ‘woman’

116 Ibid., 16.
117 Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, 178.
in itself is ideologically suspect.”118 Moi unjustly accuses Butler’s critique of the heterosexual assumption sustaining feminism, which is reflected in the question of “woman,” of discarding or suspending “woman.” In this sense, Moi treats “woman” as an ahistorical concept exempted from cultural differences and the workings of race and sexuality. She clearly does not agree that “the creation of ‘women’ as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state” in post-colonial Africa.119 She would not appreciate either what Wittig calls “our first task [as radical lesbian feminists, which] is to always thoroughly dissociate ‘women’ (the class within which we fight) and ‘woman’, the myth.”120 We see another example of “the historical and the theoretico-practical exclusion of nonwhite [and non-heterosexual] women from liberatory struggles in the name of women.”121

Rosi Braidotti takes distance from the concept of “gender” as a useful concept mainly out of two concerns. First, “as a vicsitude of the English language, [...gender] bears little or no relevance to theoretical traditions in the Romance languages” like French, Spanish, or Italian. Second, adopting “gender studies” instead of “feminist studies” or “women’s studies” in universities “has resulted in a shift of focus away from the feminist agenda toward a more generalized attention to the social construction of differences between the sexes,” which broadens but also narrows down the political agenda, to the extent that “gender studies” promote the illusion of symmetry between the sexes whose difference should be regarded “as a powerful factor of dissymmetry.”122 Braidotti argues that “this binary way of thinking is in keeping with Beauvoir’s Cartesian assumptions, which

118 Ibid.
119 Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 124.
121 Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” 188–89.
lead her to separate mind from body and build the gender/sex distinction on a binary foundation.”123

María Lugones follows those who have become known as “decolonial feminists,” suggesting that gender is inseparable from coloniality and needs to be engaged critically. First, she counterintuitively points out that the colonial answer to Sojourner Truth’s question “ain’t I a woman?” is an emphatic “no,” because “the semantic consequence of the coloniality of gender is that ‘colonized woman’ is an empty category: no women are colonized; no colonized females are women.”124 She draws this conclusion from a close reading of the categorical logic of modernity and argues, “if woman and black are terms for homogenous atomic and separable categories, then their intersection shows us the absence of black women rather than their presence.”125

Lugones advocates a radical reading of the modern categorization of gender/sex alongside the distinction of human/non-human and heteronormativity. She emphasizes that “turning the colonized into human beings was not a colonial goal,” and that attaining gendering would be a way of transforming from non-human to human. As a consequence, “sex was made to stand alone in the characterization [i.e., bestialization] of the colonized.”126 Without rejecting “gender” as a relevant concept, Lugones cautions against its blind application without an acknowledgment that imposing a hierarchical gender dichotomy is part of the colonial project of subjugating and dehumanizing the colonized. She suggests that we should carefully use “the terms woman and man and bracket them when necessary.”127 In her excellent account of the way gendered identities customarily assumed to be universal were formed through European colo-

123 Ibid., 262.
124 Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 745. Lugones here refers to Sojourner Truth’s question, “Ar’n’t I a woman?” which we encountered earlier and will discuss further below.
125 Ibid., 742.
126 Ibid., 743–44.
127 Ibid., 749.
nization in Yorùbáland, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí contends that “in precolonial Yorùbá society, body-type was not the basis of social hierarchy [...] there were no women — defined in strictly gendered terms — in that society.”

Besides analyzing colonial formation and the imposition of Western gender binaries, decolonial feminisms engage with the resisting strategies of the colonized, whose proper cosmologies and ways of organizing the world, including human “genders” incompatible with the modern man/woman dichotomy, have survived and been woven into an oppression-resistant relationship with modernity/coloniality. This active engagement with resistance, “the tension between subjectification (the forming/informing of the subject) and active subjectivity” is to be understood as a process of adaptation, rejection, adoption, ignoring, and integrating [which] are never just modes of isolation of resistance as they are always performed by an active subject thickly constructed by inhabiting the colonial difference with a fractured locus [...] the multiplicity in the fracture of the locus [is] both the enactment of the coloniality of gender and the resistant response from a subaltern sense of self, of the social, of the self-in-relation, of the cosmos, all grounded in a peopled memory.

In a broader sense, colonial modern history, for those whom Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui calls “oppressed but not defeated,” is “simultaneously an arena of resistance and conflict, a site for the development of sweeping counter-hegemonic strategies, and a space for the creation of new indigenous languages and projects of modernity.” The point of decolonial feminism is neither suggesting to go back to a precolonial, “original” system of embodi-

128 Oyèwùmí, The Invention of Women, xii–xiii.
129 Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 753–54.
ment, nor proposing a generalizable remedy or another universalized truth. It urges us first and foremost to unlearn modern/colonial categories with which we operate seemingly inevitably by learning to learn from the diverse experiences of resistance (as sites of continuous repression), which rely on cosmologies and gender systems that do not always presume the universal validity of “binary opposition,” “hierarchical categorization,” “sexual difference found in language,” or “patriarchy.”\textsuperscript{131} The importance of the postmodern and postcolonial critique of “origin” notwithstanding, it is extremely problematic and dubious when any attempts to look at the “precolonial” are deemed to be an impossible task, or worse, a nativist nostalgia. In other words, Judith Butler’s caution of the “feminist recourse to an imaginary past […] in order] not to promote a politically problematic reification of women’s experience in the course of debunking the self-reifying claims of masculinist power”\textsuperscript{132} needs a decolonial twist through which the seemingly self-evident notions of “feminist,” “women,” and “masculinist” need to be qualified within the realm of modern/colonial West and perhaps its aftermath.

0.2.2 Against Proper Objects and Against Coercive Mimeticism
The “pluralist turn” in critical theory, acknowledging localized, gendered, racialized, culturally specific differences, has been a great achievement in the humanities. However, these positionings, both from within and without different “identitarian groups,” run the risk of becoming part of a property economy. This risk involves at least two issues, that of insisting on the “proper objects of study,” in Judith Butler’s words, and that of ghettoizing the “ethnic” enunciation in the form of “coercive


\textsuperscript{132} Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, 48.
mimeticism,” to use Rey Chow’s term. In the first case, it suggests a cultural relativism that works discreetly, with essentialism requiring, for example, that in order to be a genuine feminist, one has to be a lesbian or that one has to be “of color” in order to speak about the issue of race. This kind of theoretical position perpetuates the police system of discipline and punishment. What is more, it suggests that whatever a supposedly “minority” or “ethnic” group theorizes is only valid within that identity group, while those who habitually speak for all retain the right and ability to be universally applicable.

The debates over gender from different standpoints within feminism and gender studies have invaluably complicated our understanding of the issue. However, problematic receptions of these different positions, particularly those “other positions,” are also prevalent. Going back to the case of Sojourner Truth, “Ar’n’t I a woman?” would make a 20th-century reader experience *déjà vu*. Speaking at the women’s convention in Ohio in 1851, Sojourner Truth asks the audience to question their assumptions about women:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man — when I could get it — and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?  

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134 Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech delivered in December 1851 at the Women’s Convention, Akron, Ohio. See “Sojourner Truth: ‘Ain’t I a
In a nutshell, it sums up the social construction theory of gender said to have begun only during the “second wave” feminism of the 1960s. For example, in her classical introduction to feminist theories, Rosemarie Tong introduces the sex/gender system under the rubric of radical-libertarian feminism, quoting from Herster Eisenstein’s *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (1983):

[R]adical-libertarian feminists rejected patriarchal society’s assumption there is a necessary connection between one’s sex (male or female) and one’s gender (masculine or feminine) […] they claimed that gender is separable from sex and that patriarchal society uses rigid gender roles to keep women passive […] and men active.\(^\text{135}\)

Truth’s compelling questioning is often read as a black feminist’s contestation of the colorblind fake sisterhood of white feminists. As such, it has been interpreted consistently as “Arn’t I also a woman?” Her statement is very sharp in terms of its denunciation of the gender/sex fallacy, “exposing a concept [e.g. “woman”] as ideological or culturally constructed rather than as natural or a simple reflection of reality.”\(^\text{136}\)

Despite this, Truth has almost always been read as part of the negotiation or critique of white feminists’ blindness towards black women in the suffrage and abolition movement. Tong introduces Sojourner Truth in the rubric of the suffrage and abolition movement and affirms at the outset that “working-class white women and black women did contribute to the 19th-century women’s rights movement,”\(^\text{137}\) against a common idea that 19th-century suffragists were a white middle-class-women-only movement. However, Tong automatically racializes Truth’s

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137 Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 22.
statement by visualizing and focalizing on Truth’s skin color in her problematic representation of the event:

Demanding the audience look at her black body, Sojourner Truth proclaimed that her “womanhood,” her “female nature,” had never prevented her from working, acting, and yes, speaking like a man.138

Truth asks, “look at me!” She didn’t say, “look at me, who is black!” Nor did she say “as a black woman.” The fictive account of the event in which Truth demands the scrutiny of her “black body” perpetuates a colonial gaze obsessed with the “skin color,” as well as a racist idea that equates black femininity with a different female nature that needs to be contained in scare quotes.

Nell Painter, who has written a biography of Sojourner Truth (1994), has shown the extremely problematic reception history of Truth, in which her own words and photographic portraits were often “shadowed” (a word used by Truth herself). Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, wrote a biography entitled Libyan Sibyl (1863) in which Truth is portrayed as embodying the “fervor of Ethiopia, wild, savage, hunted of all nations but burning after God in her tropic heart.”139 Truth’s representation of herself as a middle-class, educated woman with eyeglasses who “does not look as though she would speak in dialect”140 in her photographic portrait utterly contrasts the “fictive, hybrid cameo of […] an angry Sojourner Truth, who snarls, ‘And ain’t I a woman?’ then defiantly exhibits her breast.”141

This unfortunate reading of Truth is not an isolated case. Her words are continuously viewed as having “commented ironi-

138 Ibid., emphasis mine.
140 The then presiding officer of the Women’s Rights Convention Frances Dane Gage rewrote Sojourner Truth’s speech fully in dialect. To compare the different versions of the speech, see “Compare the Two Speeches,” The Sojourner Truth Project, https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches/.
cally, and pointedly, on the failed sisterhood that sought to si-
ence her within and exclude her from the very movement that
women like her inspired, enabled, and initiated.”142 Certainly,
as an abolitionist activist and feminist, her political agenda is
indeed intersectionally conscious, embracing the complexity
of race, class, and gender (as well as religion). She opens her
speech by stating “I think that ‘twixt the negroes of the South
and the women at the North, all talking about rights,” and later
she asks, “What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negroes’
rights?”143 However, she is not being “intersectional” here in
her critique: “Intersectionality is important when showing the
failures of institutions to include discrimination or oppression
against women of color.”144 The demand that Sojourner Truth
speaks of black woman (only) shows what “intersectional analy-
sis” often goes wrong: that of demanding people of color and
them only to account for intersectionality.145 It is striking to
notice that throughout reception history, Sojourner Truth has
been primarily presented as a black woman who only speaks (or
can only speak) in terms of her blackness, not because her re-
corded speech has directly addressed the question of race, but
because her blackness automatically prevents (white) audiences
(those in the conventions where she spoke and those who read
and represented her afterwards) from allowing her to be heard
as speaking about “the women issue,” and therefore claiming the
universalist position of white feminists. Consequently, her con-
tribution to the contestation of gender essentialism “in general”
is denied.

Literary Studies,” in The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory,
37.
143 “Sojourner Truth: ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ December 1851.”
144 Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 757–58n9.
145 For an astute critique of intersectionality, see Jasbir K. Puar, “‘I Would Rath-
er Be a Cyborg than a Goddess’: Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Afiec-
tive Politics,” Transversal Texts by EIPCP — European Institute for Progressive
It is interesting to recall here an anecdote from a feminist conference that took place a century later, in the 1980s, as Michael Kimmel retells it. The story goes that a black woman responded to a white woman who “asserted that the fact that they [the black woman and the white woman] were both women bonded them.” She points out that in the morning, looking in the mirror, instead of seeing “a woman” as her white interlocutor reportedly did, “I see a black woman. To me, race is visible every day, because race is how I am not privileged in our culture. Race is invisible to you, because it’s how you are privileged.” The readings of “Ar’n’t I a woman?” that change it to “Ain’t I also a woman,” resonate with this anecdote in the sense that Sojourner Truth, or any other woman of color, or lesbian/queer woman, or disabled woman, or working-class woman, or any one with an “extra,” can be seen in the mirror/eyes of others only in terms of their differences. Whatever they may have to say can only be read through the lens of these identities, which are socially constructed, historically contingent, and ultimately abstractions.

I find it useful to further examine the reception history of Sojourner Truth through the concept of “coercive mimeticism” as theorized by Rey Chow, a kind of mimeticism in which “the original that is supposed to be replicated is no longer the white man or his culture but rather an image [of the ethnic subject].” This mimeticism is different from the imperialist and imperative one that urges the colonized to be judged against or to imitate the white man, even though they will never reach the standard, or, as Homi Bhabha argues, to be “almost the same but not quite.” Chow criticizes Bhabha and cultural theorists alike for

147 Nell I. Painter, “Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth’s Knowing and Becoming Known,” *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (1994): 461–92, at 464, points out that the phrase “Ar’n’t I a woman?” “is sometimes rendered more authentically Negro as ‘Ain’t I a woman?’”
149 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.
having neglected the fact that “the ethnic person is expected to come to resemble what is recognizably ethnic [...] ‘Asianness,’ ‘Africanness,’ ‘Arabness,’ and other similar kinds of [stereotyped] nativenesses” and that this expectation is what “coercive mimeticism” denotes:

[A] process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected [...] to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imaginings of them as ethnics.150

Truth’s case, if I may conclude with Chow’s words, is that “ethnic subjects and texts, even when they are not necessarily speaking about their so-called ethnic difference per se, are habitually solicited in this manner by the public in the West and the world at large.”151 The predominant readings of Sojourner Truth are distorted in a way that places her “natively” in her place as the black feminist and simultaneously excludes her contribution from speaking to the woman question “in general,” which can only be enunciated from the position of the white, straight, able-bodied, middle-class woman, even when it is a critique of that universalist positioning.152

In the conclusion of her article “Against Proper Objects,” Judith Butler proposes a “queer strategy” that I find useful to emphasize, because it exposes all the different perspectives and positions on the question of “gender(ing)” that seem too overwhelming and almost cacophonous. She argues that

151 Ibid., 116.
152 For example, is it possible to allege Sojourner Truth’s (universal) question on the stereotype of women to be universalist? Or is it possible to read “one is not born a woman” as speaking about White women only?
it is that complexity and complicity that call to be thought most urgently, which means thinking against the institutional separatisms which work effectively to keep thought narrow, sectarian, and self-serving [...], resisting the institutional domestication of queer thinking.¹⁵³

Feminists of color have long shown that identities produced intersectionally exceed modern categorical logic, which “organizes the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogenous, separable categories.”¹⁵⁴ Nurturing ways of thinking that embrace transversal and pluriversal queer non-fixities would provide us a way out of the theo-political, monotheistic *creatio ex nihilo*. Monotheism, universalism, fixity, truth all seem to depart from a conviction summarized by Keller as “truth is either One, or None;”¹⁵⁵ a capitalized Truth miraculously exempted from any contamination of history, location, perspective, language, gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, and so on.

Rejecting one ultimate truth in a linear logic of progression is linked to a so-called postmodern nihilism as a negative response to modernity. Despite the fact that such an accusation is helplessly conservative, it is also extremely ethnocentric (again), because so-called “nihilism” is to be found in Buddhism, Daoism, Nahua philosophy, Zapatista political theory, Judaic Midrash hermeneutics, or even the Bible, especially the Elohist Genesis. The position of rejecting pluriversal as postmodern nihilism is Eurocentric in the sense that it assumes the epistemic zero point along a linear logic, in which the West is the only conceivable center of legitimate knowledge and its critique. That is to say, even as a critique and despite the existence of previous or parallel non-Western philosophies with similar concerns and arguments, Europe still believes itself to have created those similar pronouncements as if out of nothingness. The continuity of the

¹⁵³ Butler, “Against Proper Objects,” 16.
¹⁵⁴ Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 742.
theo-political doctrine of creatio ex nihilo in its colonial guise works especially well in the realm of knowledge production.

0.2.3 Decolonizing Gender(ing) or Advancing the Decolonial with the Queer

Engaging the queer strategy of constantly bringing down conventional boundaries and the decolonial insistence on pluriversal truths (rather than truth in the singular as an abstract universalism), this section will deal with the issue of gender/sex to the specific contexts this book has set out to examine. First, I ask what we mean by the “historicity of sex.” Then I proceed to ask how thinking about gender might influence or change our interpretations of the two myths and, above all, their modern/colonial reception.

First let us go back to the feminist debates on the gender/sex system and focus on the historicity of sex and gender in the context of Western culture. Historians have shown that “female” was not always understood as being in ontological opposition to “male” throughout Western history. Indeed, as Thomas Laqueur famously argues, from ancient Greece to the 18th century, sex was understood through the “one sex model,” in which the male body was considered to be the norm while the female body was seen as the less-male, the inversion or deformation. That is to say, for a long time “woman didn’t exist,” to paraphrase Jacques Lacan.

In her 1993 article “The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough,” feminist biologist Ann Fausto-Sterling asks a similar question to the one posed by Michel Foucault in his discussion of “the true sex.” She shows the existence of bodies that cannot be reduced to male or female and further points out that “hermaphrodites,” or “intersex” people as they are usually called, can be divided further into at least three different

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156 Laqueur, Making Sex.
groups. As she observes, medical interventions that claim to “correct” the intersex bodies to fit into the rigid binary male/female are very common, which is also the reason why intersex bodies are largely unknown to normative society. She relates this coercive disciplining of “unruly” bodies to “a cultural need to maintain clear distinctions between the sexes, […] the great divide [… and also because] they raise the specter of homosexuality.”

Fausto-Sterling’s research brings together gender and sexuality into a mutually constructive relation underwritten by the “straight mind” (Wittig) or the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler) underlying the coercive separation of the human population into only two sexes, male and female. That is to say, the human body is not “naturally” divided into two sexes, rather, it is the imperative of gender roles coerced through heterosexist hegemony that regulates our understanding of it, at least from the 18th century onwards in the Western context.

The above-cited studies are primarily concerned with the understanding of sex/gender/sexuality in modern Western society. It is reasonable to suspect that in the two ancient cultures studied in this book, Babylonian and Nahua, sex/gender was understood in very different ways. Once one looks carefully into the myths, the common division of deities into either god or goddess seems too simplistic, to say the least.

In Part I, we witnessed the ambiguous and ever-changing genders of the primordial waters and their divine personifications through the deep history of the region. In the Sumerian myth of Enki and Ninmah (ancestral to the Babylonian Enuma Elish), Nammu, the primordial mother personifies the abzu, where human beings are said to be first formed. While Nammu, originally a facet of the primordial water Apsu, “reappears” later in Enuma Elish and becomes Tiamat, Apsu (now Tiamat’s “husband”) retains its semantic connection to the primordial sea as the fresh-water ocean and the watery womb-like birth place of

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158 Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes.”
159 Ibid., 24.
Marduk, the rival god who later kills Tiamat, who in that very battle resumes the masculine gender. The rigidly gendered deities—Apsu/god/husband and Tiamat/goddess/wife—only appear in the modern/colonial reception of the myth. Their extremely fluid and “confusing” ways that queerly commingle inside the epic and throughout history, while at the same time easily separating and merging with clearly demarcated “identities” in the cosmic battles, are enough to defy modern/colonial categorization and even questions like, “who is Apsu and what is ‘his’ gender?”

In Part II, we will explore the creation myths of the Nahua in Central America. We will investigate the “strange case of Tlaltecuhtli.” Often translated as “goddess of the earth,” Tlaltecuhtli in fact literally means “lord of the earth” in Nahuatl, as tlay(l)li means “earth” and tecuhtli “lord.” The mother-of-all, Coatlicue, from a sheer grammatical point of view, has no gender, since Nahuatl does not have grammatical gender for nouns. Coatlicue is often translated as “she who has the serpent skirt” or “snakes-her-skirt.”160 Although some argue that the Nahua “gender system” uses sartorial differences to indicate differences of gender/sex, suggesting that, in this case, cueitl “skirt” might refer to femaleness,161 the complexity (or, in fact, the simplicity) of its Nahua enunciation is lost (or silenced) in translations that rigidly gender “it” as “she.” The issue becomes even clearer when we introduce Coatlicue Mayor, believed to be an artistic representation of Coatlicue, which does not convey exclusive association with the feminine. While Coatlicue, a genderless word, is feminized, Tlaltecuhtli, a clearly marked masculine title of the earth deity that appears on the underside of Coatlicue Mayor, is also feminized to fit into the imaginary of a “universal archetype” of the earth as the vagina dentata.

It is not surprising to notice a similar colonial logic in the two creation myths under consideration. Marduk is said to have created the world, despite generations of gods being born to Tiamat and Apsu, the drama of Apsu’s murder, the revolt of Tiamat, and all the battles that ensue. Although the Enuma Elish account does not deliberately neglect the role that Tiamat (now reduced to pure, primordial chaos) plays in the creation credited to Marduk, it nevertheless makes an effort to erase the importance of that which did exist before Marduk’s creation, so much so that it becomes chaos-qua-nihil. Creatio ex nihilo is deliberately conflated with creatio ex materia.

In the Nahua creation myth, we can find two similar accounts that resemble creatio ex nihilo or the attempt to do so. One is the creation of the world by the “brother-gods” Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca by killing the so-called “goddess” Tlaltecuhtli, who dwells in the primordial ocean after the end of the fourth cosmic era. The other one is the creation of the universe by Huitzilopochtli, the patron god of the Aztecs, who has guided them to the promised land of Tenochtitlan, a place already inhabited by various indigenous tribes. Huitzilopochtli is the one credited with having created the universe by killing his sister Coyolxauhqui, whose head becomes the moon and whose allies become the “four hundred southern stars.” While this does not qualify as creatio ex nihilo, similar to Marduk’s “creation,” the worlds that existed before or parallel to their “creations” do not seem to matter.

Besides the strategy of complete erasure, i.e., reduction to nothingness, the reduction of the conquered world to a feminized materia allegedly void of meaning, a terra nullius without inhabitants, is also a common tactic. It is the cosmic womb, the

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162 In Chapter 3 I will contest the association of Tlaltecuhtli with “goddess,” a “strange issue” in scholarship that seems to ignore the semantic meaning of the Nahua name Tlaltecuhtli, the literal meaning of which is “Earth Lord” (tlal, earth; tecuhtli, lord). For the moment, I will use scare quotes to remind the reader to dissociate Tlaltecuhtli from “goddess of the earth.”

penetrable void of the feminine body from a heteronormative and sexist imagery. Not surprisingly, read in the light of contemporary critical, especially feminist theories, the creation myths become typical phallocentrism, with the familiar scenario of a masculine/colonial power penetrating the feminine/colonized space. When analyzing the conflated colonial and masculine control of the feminized/colonized bodies/spaces, I find it more useful to problematize the clear-cut dichotomy between the colonial/masculine and colonized/feminine.

While we need to retain the useful arguments that critiques of phallocentrism and modern colonialism have to offer, we should also read the non-modern cosmologies and complexities from which these creation myths have emerged as being in tension with their modern/colonial receptions which have inevitably simplified and essentialized the “genders” of these mythical beings.

Is the critique of phallocentric violence penetrating the feminine “body” really useful or even relevant in the case of the Nahu creation myth about the killing of the “goddess” Tlaltecuthli by the “brothers” Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, when we acknowledge the gender complementarity of Nahu cosmology, but also, more strikingly, when we know that Tlatecuhtli is the lord (tecuhtli) of the earth (tlal) and that both Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca have rather ambiguous genders—to the extent that Tezcatlipoca has even been called an effeminate faggot (or puto in Spanish) by the Franciscan friar Sahagún?

Will a critique that assumes the ontological separability of the gendered “rivals,” the masculine hero and the feminine monster (or victim, depending on where one stands), be too reductive and restrictive once we read Enuma Elish closely, and realize that Marduk, who kills Tiamat, the once benevolent “mother” (so that the “monster” rendering of Tiamat can at best be a “monstrification”), was never been born out of her omnipresent “stomach?” Tiamat’s stomach, the pervasive watery space, min-

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gles with another personified and masculinized watery space/deity, Apsu, her “husband,” killed earlier by Marduk’s father Ea, but remains as an “unanimated” watery dwelling inside which Marduk is said to have been born.

Although it is extremely unlikely that anyone would naively believe that we could return to a place of the “origin” or “essence” of non-modern cultures, a conceptual cousin of the one untainted Truth, it is a quite a different thing to question the usefulness of modern/colonial gender/sexuality categories by highlighting the complementary and often fluid modes of embodiment, especially in the mythical realm, in non-modern cultural texts and imaginaries, in a way that is below the logic of either/or, as we have seen in Part I and will discuss further in Part II.

We need to insist, however, that this so-called fluidity does not automatically assure less violence (both in ancient Babylonia, especially during its regional dominance, and in 14th–16th-century Cemanahuac, especially during the Aztec’s expansion). This is itself a caution against the facile celebration of terms such as “fluidity” in contemporary critical discourses. The non-dichotomous systems have different nuances and power relations, as we have learned and shall continue to learn from the following chapters with and against their modern/colonial receptions.