What is Decolonial Trans* Feminism and What Can It Do for Queer/Trans BIPOC Education Research? Reimagining Knowledge and Identity through the Convergence of Decolonial and Trans* Feminism

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What is Decolonial Trans* Feminism and What Can It Do for Queer/Trans BIPOC Education Research? Reimagining Knowledge and Identity through the Convergence of Decolonial and Trans* Feminism

Omi Salas-SantaCruz

Abstract: This paper introduces decolonial trans* feminism, a framework merging decolonial theory with trans* of color feminism to challenge colonial gender oppression. It reimagines knowledge, gender, power, and resistance in educational research for queer/trans BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) individuals by integrating Indigenous metaphysics, diverse self-ontologies, and spiritual dimensions. The asterisk in trans* feminism symbolizes the fluidity of gender identities, challenging rigid boundaries of thought and colonial norms. Emphasizing the Androgynous Whole, the paper explores how different configurations of knowledge inform gender and serve as sites of coalitional resistance. Engaging with Third World Feminists, it calls for a shift to nuanced, dialogic analysis and transformative pedagogies that celebrate the diversity and lived experiences of queer and trans BIPOC individuals, advocating for the inclusion of marginalized epistemologies in educational structures.

Keywords: Decolonial Theory, Trans of Color Critique, QTBIPOC, Indigenous Metaphysics, Nonbinary Epistemologies

Decolonial. Trans* Feminism

I call the possibility of overcoming the coloniality of gender “decolonial feminism.” — Maria Lugones (2014, p. 12).

Separating these terms is not merely a semantic exercise but a deliberate act to untangle the richness and complexity each term embodies. While some readers might find teasing apart these terms redundant or unnecessary, others may argue that they are inherently contradictory. This paper delves into the convergence of these seemingly disparate yet profoundly interconnected realms, exploring the essence of decolonial trans* feminism and examining why the amalgamation of these fields is crucial despite their histories of internal disagreements, conflicts, and contradictions.

At the heart of this exploration is the necessity to reimagine knowledge—how we understand reality—and how we engage with and analyze identities, power, and resistance in education. This transformative process challenges entrenched colonial frameworks, opening pathways for integrating diverse epistemologies and ontologies in our research and practices. Decolonial trans* feminism has the potential to revolutionize queer/trans BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) education research by encouraging nonbinary thinking and recognizing the life-making practices that emerge in the cracks of coloniality.

By employing the asterisk as a symbol, decolonial trans* feminism captures a cosmology of knowledge at various scalar points, integrating material and spiritual dimensions, temporal contexts, knowledge systems, ontologies, cultures, and histories. This multifaceted approach reflects the diverse repertoires of understanding that inform identity, self-conception, and infrapolitical resistance practices (Cruz, 2015). By integrating diverse epistemologies and ontologies, decolonial trans* feminism seeks to dismantle colonial frameworks and advocate for the inclusion of marginalized knowledge systems and practices. This approach re-visions queer and trans knowledge production, revitalizing Indigenous metaphysics and U.S. Women of Color coalitional politics, emphasizing multiplicity in ontologies (Lugones, 1987), and adopting relational subjectivities (Ortega, 2016; Pitts, 2021) to analyze QTBIPOC identities, politics, and practices. This framework seeks to understand the complexities of identity, power, and resistance to coloniality, countering Eurocentric, white, and Western gender knowledge systems and advocating for the recognition of Indigenous and non-Western knowledge and gender-expansive forms of existence.

These critiques and questions guide our understanding of the transformative potential embedded within decolonial trans* feminism. Central to this discussion is the critique of the geopolitics of knowledge production, which has marginalized Indigenous and non-Western knowledge, expressions, and interpretations of consciousness. Decolonial trans* feminism advocates for re-centering Indigenous metaphysics that has
been devalued in resistance studies and cultural studies in education.\(^1\)

In reimagining knowledge and identity through a decolonial trans* feminist lens, we confront several critical questions: How do we dismantle the entrenched colonial frameworks that define and constrain people’s sense of self, gender, and identity? What does it mean to embrace Indigenous metaphysics and non-Western epistemologies in a world dominated by Eurocentric thought? How can we foster inclusive dialogues that respect and integrate diverse gender expressions and cultural understandings? These questions challenge us to critically examine existing power structures in knowledge production.

**Decolonial Feminism and The Coloniality of Gender**

Aníbal Quijano’s (2000) concept of the coloniality of power explores how the global capitalist system is fundamentally organized around coloniality and modernity. Quijano argued that the coloniality of power is central to the structure of global capitalist power, which is organized along two main axes: the coloniality of power and modernity. The coloniality of power involves the social classification of the global population based on the idea of race, which replaces traditional relationships of superiority and inferiority established through domination with naturalized understandings of these hierarchies. This means that racial distinctions become seen as inherent and natural rather than constructed and imposed.

In her essay, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” Lugones (2007) extended Quijano’s analysis and introduced a systemic understanding of gender within the framework of colonial/modern power, which operates through multiple relations of power. She described a gender system with a “light” and a “dark” side that reflects deeply different relations and beings in relation to power, leading to very different patterns of violent abuse. Lugones explained that colonialism did not impose pre-existing European gender arrangements but created a new gender system. The gender system itself is a colonial construct, a violent imposition used to destroy Indigenous peoples, cosmologies, and communities, thereby laying the foundation for what is deemed “civilized” society. This system imposed different gender arrangements on colonized peoples compared to the white bourgeois colonizers, introducing a bigender system to organize relations of production, property, and knowledge through a colonial lens.

Lugones’ framework helps us understand how gender and race are intertwined in the operations of colonial power, showing that cis-heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification cannot be understood separately. Gender, as a category, was introduced and used in colonial contexts to oppress and erase existing Indigenous forms of social organization across the globe (Alexander, 2002; Anzaldúa, 1987; Oyéwùmí, 1999; Wekker, 2006). When we insist on categorical separations (race, gender, sexuality)—though sometimes necessary to highlight intersecting issues within institutional contexts—we overlook the intermeshed or interconnected effects of colonial systems in education research (Salas-SantaCruz, 2023b). Maria Lugones’ (2007) work on the colonial/modern gender system offered a nuanced understanding of how race and gender intermesh in ways that differ from traditional notions of intersectionality.

Intersectionality, a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990), refers to the way various forms of social stratification intersect and overlap to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectional analysis emphasizes that these identities cannot be examined in isolation from one another; instead, they interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels. Lugones (2007) proposed the idea of intermeshed systems to describe how race and gender are not just intersecting but are deeply intertwined and co-constitutive within colonial power structures. This perspective argues that race and gender are mutually constitutive, meaning that the very definitions and experiences of gender are shaped by racialization processes and vice versa. This interconnectedness is crucial for understanding how various forms of oppression and exclusion operate together rather than in isolation.

The concept of intermeshed categories and oppressions implies that there is no such thing as purely “queer” or “trans research.” Instead, what we often encounter is either white trans research or colonial trans research (Salas-SantaCruz, 2023b). We cannot conduct an analysis of just one social category without recognizing that this category inherently assumes a specific racial configuration. When we discuss QTBIPOC, it means that we are engaging in an analysis of the constitutive nature of queer and trans identities in relation to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). This perspective underscores the inseparable interconnectedness of race and gender, highlighting that they co-create and shape each other within the framework of colonial power structures.

However, this does not mean that intersectionality is not a useful framework. Intersectionality is an essential part of a larger analysis, providing valuable insights into how various forms of oppression and exclusion operate together. Yet, it is crucial to recognize that intersectionality is only one component of a broader understanding of how race and gender are deeply intertwined and co-constitutive. When researching the experiences of QTBIPOC students, the intersectionality approach would analyze how their identities (queer, trans, BIPOC) intersect to create unique educational challenges and

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1 Socio-cultural studies of education often rely on neo-Marxist frameworks that emphasize material consciousness, commonly known as “consciousness raising.” This approach focuses on individual awareness in relation to material conditions, encouraging engagement with personal, social, or political issues through our relationships to material realities. While this perspective is valuable, it tends to overlook spiritual, communal, and relational (non-material) forms of consciousness. These non-material forms are crucial for a holistic understanding of education and knowledge production, as they encompass the spiritual and interconnected dimensions of human experience that materialist frameworks may neglect.
discrimination patterns. For example, a queer Black student might face homophobia in ways that are uniquely influenced by their racial identity. Applying decolonial trans* feminism frameworks using Lugones’s concept of intermeshed oppression, researchers would delve deeper into how the very definitions of gender and racial identities of QTBIPOC students are shaped by colonial histories and power structures. It would examine how educational policies, curriculum, and practices inherently marginalize these students not just through the intersection of race and gender but through the intertwined systems of knowledge and practice that define and constrain their identities and sense of self. For instance, in my previous work, it involved understanding how trans-inclusive policies and practices often erase Indigenous gender systems that fail to recognize the cultural identity practices of trans and non-binary Indigenous students (Salas-SantaCruz, 2024).

Looking at the everyday practices of oppressed and marginalized peoples often reflects a deep awareness of their conditions and offers a wellspring of resistance and collective agency. The cultural practices or repertoires of practice among QTBIPOC communities reveal numerous configurations of how they come to know and understand their sense of self and political identities. These communities draw from a diverse array of metaphysics—some familiar, some intuitive, some spiritual, some cosmological, some divinatory, and some in relation to non-human living beings. Each of these metaphysical perspectives offers unique insights and frameworks that inform how QTBIPOC individuals navigate and interpret the world, providing rich avenues for diverse research practices and methodologies. This underscores that each type of metaphysical belief or practice provides a distinct way of seeing and interacting with the world, contributing to a multifaceted understanding of identity and experience. Furthermore, these perspectives foster new modes of being and existence, expanding the possibilities for individual and collective agency (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

As an anti-elitist epistemology, decolonial trans* feminism recognizes that theory is not the sole province of academics; it is alive in the lived experiences—including the erotic, spiritual, and dreams—and in the practices of resistance of people outside the Ivory tower. To decolonize and Indigenize research on QTBIPOC populations, we must first acknowledge the coloniality of gender in our research practices. Recognizing the divergent analytical frameworks of intersectionality and intermeshed oppression, along with their conceptual implications and historical and structural contexts, is essential for imagining liberatory and just education systems. Decolonial trans* feminism challenges the hegemony of European philosophy and reevaluates what constitutes legitimate philosophical inquiry. This challenge is not merely academic but deeply political, aiming to dismantle colonial structures that privilege European thought while systematically indigenizing knowledge production (Smith, 1999).

**Decolonial Feminism and the Coloniality of Nature/ The Coloniality of Life/Existence**

Indigenous (Allen, 2012; Diaz, 2019; Vaughn & Ambo, 2022) and decolonial feminists have extended discussions on coloniality and settler colonialism to include the systems of thought that do not consider what Walsh (2022) described as the coloniality of Nature. This concept examines the colonial impacts on our understanding and interaction with the natural world and the organization and production of Gender. The distinction between “nature” (lowercase) and “Nature” (uppercase) in Western paradigms highlights how colonial thought views nature as a resource for exploitation, reflecting a biocentric and anthropocentric worldview that prioritizes human needs over ecological balance. Decolonial trans* feminism thus examines how colonial frameworks have commodified and objectified the natural world, treating it as a resource to be exploited rather than as a network of living, interconnected beings. This perspective calls for a re-evaluation of how we interact with the environment, advocating for sustainable and respectful relationships with non-human entities.

Walsh’s examination of the ‘coloniality of Nature’ revealed how the control and domination of nature are central to the colonial project, facilitating the exploitation of people considered to be less-than-human or part of the natural landscape to be dominated. The same logic that enforces rigid gender binaries and hierarchies underpins the domination of nature, illustrating the interconnectedness of gender oppression and environmental degradation. Decolonial trans* feminism, therefore, emphasizes the fluidity and interconnectedness of all life forms, advocating for perspectives that honor the diversity of ways of being and relating to the natural world. It emphasizes the importance of reconnecting with the land in ways that honor its life-giving properties and its role in cultural and spiritual practices. This reconnection challenges the colonial view of land as property or commodity and insists on its educative capacities and life-giving possibilities. In education research, this can be reflected in place-based learning approaches that respect and integrate the histories and cultures tied to specific lands and that recognize the land as a source of knowledge. This perspective aligns with Indigenous and non-Western ways of knowing, which often emphasize relationality and the interconnectedness of all beings. In educational contexts, decolonial trans* feminism invites transformative pedagogies that engage with relational, intertextual dialogues to foreground the complexities of QTBIPOC experiences. It recognizes the foundational role of coloniality in shaping gender and identity, advocating for analytical frameworks that deconstruct colonial impositions and promote justice through...

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2 For other examples on different ways of knowing/being/reality in relation to nature, see Tāvāism symbiotic co-existence, Maya cosmovision, Andean cosmovision’s, to name a few.

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visions that celebrate non-recognizable categories and collective capabilities.

The Androgynous Whole

Decolonial trans* feminism as a framework is designed to examine the life and resistant practices that exist within the cracks of gender (coloniality). This locus of enunciation is vital for recognizing the distinctive insights QTBIPOC populations bring to the ongoing discussions surrounding “genders,” resistance, and the abolition of colonial logics. In its material engagement, decolonial trans* feminism interrogates how people in the colonial difference reclaim or engage with the systems of knowledge that have historically been exploited and dominated by colonial and settler colonial administration. These forms of knowing include non-human entities such as land, animals, plants, and multiple ecosystems that inform how QTBIPOC communities use diverse repertoires of knowledge to counteract coloniality. Decolonial trans* feminism is interested in the concept of androgyny or nonbinary epistemologies that transcend traditional colonial frameworks to understand social categories and the impact of coloniality on peoples’ lives (Salas-SantaCruz, 2023b).

“The Androgyrous Whole” by Catherine Walsh (2022) explored the concept of androgyrun as a fusion of masculine and feminine qualities, suggesting a holistic approach to identity that transcends traditional gender binaries. This concept is examined within the context of decolonial theory, feminist thought, and Global Southern perspectives, highlighting the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression and the potential for transformative practices. This concept transcends Western (thought) binaries, embracing a more fluid understanding of existence. The Androgynous Whole integrates multiple identities within various systems of knowledge—gender, cultural, and spiritual—to form a holistic sense of self that goes beyond binary oppositions.

In this context, the Androgynous Whole suggests a transformative way of understanding identity that embraces fluidity and multiplicity. By rejecting rigid gender binaries, it promotes a holistic integration of various aspects of self—gender, cultural, and spiritual—into a cohesive whole. This approach challenges Western-centric views and highlights the interconnectedness of different forms of knowledge and identity. It emphasizes the potential for personal and societal transformation through a more inclusive and fluid understanding of existence, fostering greater acceptance and harmony within diverse communities. This concept promotes fluid, integrated identities across gender, cultural, and spiritual realms, challenging Western-centric views. Within decolonial thought, the Androgynous Whole serves as a metaphor for epistemic and ontological integration, symbolized by the asterisk in decolonial trans* scholarship. It moves from fragmented views to a relational understanding, seeing intermeshing and multiplicity as strengths and understanding “genders” beyond binary thinking as part of broader relational and resistant practices (Salas-SantaCruz, 2023b).

Trans* of Color Critique, or Trans* Feminism

Trans* of Color critique, or simply trans* feminism symbolized by the asterisk, challenges the rigid binary constructs of trans man and trans woman enforced by colonial systems. In some contexts, including colonial forms of knowledge production, the asterisk represents the fluidity and diversity of Gender, acknowledging a spectrum that extends beyond traditional gender binaries. Colonial gender constructs establish “Man” and “Woman” as the primary binary categories, embodying the dominant dichotomy imposed by colonial systems. These categories are not merely descriptive but serve as markers of a colonial hierarchy that defines and maintains the boundaries of what is considered human (Lugones, 2007; Spillers, 2022). Within this framework, being categorized as either “Man” or “Woman” confers a status aligned with colonial power and privilege. This binary classification was integral to the colonial project, as it imposed rigid, Eurocentric norms onto diverse populations, erasing or marginalizing non-Western understandings of gender (Lugones, 2007).

For those subjected to colonization, achieving the status of “Man” or “Woman” is often unattainable (Fanon, 1952). According to DiPietro (2019), gender allocations mark the exclusion of colonized peoples from fully inhabiting these categories. The colonial system positions People of Color as inherently “other,” perpetually falling short of the colonial ideals of “Man” or “Woman.” This exclusion reinforces People of Color subjugation and highlights the systemic denial of their humanity and identity within the colonial framework. In other words, the coloniality of gender stresses that colonized people are always/already seen as fundamentally different and inferior, unable to achieve the dominant gender norms established by colonial standards, and “trans People of Color” is an oxymoron within the colonial system. This is because the system’s rigid gender norms do not recognize the possibility of People of Color as inhabiting gender identities, further marginalizing them.

Trans* Latine scholar P.J. DiPietro (2020a) explored the concept of decolonizing transgender embodiments by examining how coloniality has historically shaped and constrained understandings of gender and sexuality. The framework of the coloniality of transgender is central to discussions about trans* materialisms and how colonialism conflates near-human and infra-human bodies, leading to a need for decolonizing approaches that recognize and honor Indigenous and non-Western cosmologies and practices. DiPietro further explained that the colonial conquest led to the corruption of Indigenous understandings of bodily vitality, or how, in many Indigenous cultures, bodily practices are deeply intertwined with spiritual, social, and communal significance. In other words, certain trans* materialities maintained balance and harmony within the individual and the community, as well as with the natural and spiritual worlds. When colonial powers encountered these Indigenous practices, they misinterpreted and devalued them through a lens of Western norms and prejudices. The colonial mindset often could not comprehend
the spiritual and communal significance of such practices. Instead, they viewed them through a narrow, materialistic, and moralistic perspective, leading to severe misinterpretations. Practices like anal permeability, which were culturally significant and vital, were recast by colonial powers as acts of socio-bodily destitution. In other words, what was once a respected and important practice was now seen as something degraded, perverse, or inferior. This transformation in perception contributed to the categorization of Indigenous bodies as “infra-human” (less than fully human). Colonial ideology often positioned Indigenous people as fundamentally different from and inferior to Europeans. By devaluing and pathologizing Indigenous bodily practices, colonizers reinforced this ideology, justifying their dominance and control.

In “Hallucinating Knowing,” DiPietro (2020b) explained various distinctions in definitions of gender, particularly in the context of coloniality and Latinx feminist theories. Capitalized “Gender” refers to the colonial imposition of a binary system where “Man” and “Woman” are seen as the primary categories. This imposition is part of coloniality’s attempt to categorize and control bodies. Lowercase genders refer to the always unattainable statuses of being men or women, highlighting the constructed and enforced nature of these categories within colonial frameworks. Finally, “genders” (with quotation marks) pertains to embodied differences that are neither men nor women, existing in a state of betwixt and between, and often marginalized or invisible within the dominant discourse. These identities resist the colonial imposition of binary gender norms and represent forms of being that coloniality cannot fully categorize or control.

In educational contexts, QTBIPOC students often face institutional and societal pressures to conform to the system of Gender to access services or gain recognition and belonging. However, QTBIPOC students frequently inhabit liminal spaces within educational institutions where they challenge and redefine expectations around queer and trans identity through distinct “genders.” Understanding and acknowledging “genders” can help create more inclusive and supportive environments that recognize the complexity and fluidity of people’s sense of self. Moreover, recognizing the continuous resistance of QTBIPOC students to colonial gender norms is essential for their well-being, as the constant negotiation of genders within the Gender system produces forms of colonial dysphoria (Salas-SantaCruz, 2024).

Decolonial trans* feminism interrogates the assumptions of our scholarly inquiries, recognizing if our frameworks insist on Gender and genders at the expense of the world-making possibilities in “genders” as trans* embodied difference. This includes practices and identities that challenge and go beyond traditional gender binaries, incorporating the experiences of non-Western and non-white trans individuals who navigate colonial and heteronormative impositions. For queer, trans-BIPOC communities, the challenge lies in shifting the focus from analyzing how these communities shape identities within colonial constraints to understanding how they use mediums like aesthetics, art, language practices, or forms of joy to deconstruct and resist these ideologies. This reflective inquiry underpins the essence of decolonial trans* feminism, fostering a coalition of politics that transcends traditional boundaries. It leverages diverse experiences and identities within trans* communities to build a unified resistance against oppression, acknowledging the complexity of power dynamics. This approach reshapes social narratives and creates new spaces for visibility and recognition, forging pathways that honor the full spectrum of human and more-than-human experiences.

The Importance of Bridging Decolonial and Trans* Feminisms

Integrating trans* perspectives into the framework of decolonial feminism introduces a nuanced and enriching dimension to our understanding of identity, resistance, and knowledge production. This integration might initially appear contradictory to some interpretations of decolonial feminism, particularly those that see “trans” as implying a universalist assumption about gender identity. However, within this context, trans* serves as an analytic tool that transcends simplistic gender categorizations, offering a profound critique and reimagining of knowledge and existence that looks at the co-productions of gender coloniality and co-constructions of QTBIPOC people in resistance to coloniality. Combining decolonial and trans* feminism creates a robust framework for addressing the complexities of gender, power, and identity.

The importance of decolonial trans* feminism is rooted in Third World Feminist tactics for transforming social relations and fostering oppositional consciousness. In “Mestizaje as Method: Feminists-of-Color Challenge the Canon,” Sandoval (1998) dove into the evolution and significance of Chicana feminism, particularly through the lens of mestizaje. This term, popularized by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) in “Borderlands/La Frontera,” represents a syncretic consciousness that bridges various identities and cultural divides. Sandoval argued that mestizaje feminism offers a powerful framework for understanding and resisting colonial and patriarchal structures. Sandoval outlined five modes of Chicana feminism: Chicana liberalism, Chicana insurgency, cultural nationalism, Chicana separatism, and Chicana mestizaje. The mestizaje mode is highlighted as particularly influential and integrative, offering a transnational and cross-disciplinary approach. Sandoval positioned Chicana mestizaje as a “mobile crossing” between races, genders, cultures, and nations. This framework fosters polymodal forms of poetics, ethics, identities, and politics, challenging traditional academic and social boundaries. Sandoval advocated for a differential consciousness that transcends binary thinking. This involves adopting a flexible, adaptive approach to identity and resistance, embodying la conciencia de la mestiza, or mestiza consciousness. This consciousness allows for a strategic and ethical engagement with various forms of power and oppression. This is particularly relevant for trans* and non-binary individuals whose identities do not conform to traditional gender binaries. Sandoval’s approach encouraged the exploration of identities beyond rigid categories, allowing for a more inclusive and
accurate representation of QTBIPOC experiences in educational research. Central to Sandoval’s argument is the notion that mestizaje feminism is not merely an academic exercise but a politically engaged practice aimed at achieving social justice. This involves a commitment to egalitarian social relations and the continuous negotiation of identity and power dynamics. Decolonial trans* feminism is not just an academic pursuit but a political commitment to social justice. Researchers are encouraged to engage in methodologies that are not only reflective but also transformative, aiming to dismantle oppressive structures and support the liberation of QTBIPOC individuals. Sandoval highlighted the importance of coalitional politics, where different marginalized groups come together to resist common forms of oppression. This is vital for QTBIPOC educational research, which benefits from alliances across diverse communities. Such coalitions can strengthen the collective fight against intersecting systems of oppression and enhance the impact of the research.

Sandoval’s framework highlighted the importance of flexible, context-specific strategies for resistance and social transformation. By understanding technologies of power as transformable narratives, U.S. third-world feminists—and, by extension, decolonial trans* feminists—can effectively navigate and challenge oppressive systems. The differential mode, with its tactical use of various resistance strategies and the coalitional identity of “Women of Color” or “QTBIPOC” emphasizes the importance of adaptability and coalition-building in the fight against oppression. This approach ultimately supports a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of identity and resistance.

Decolonial trans* feminism leverages tactical essentialism to navigate and challenge rigid gender binaries and normative identity categories. This strategic use of identity categories as tools rather than fixed labels fosters a more inclusive feminist praxis that recognizes the fluidity and multiplicity of QTBIPOC identities. Oppositional consciousness is not just a survival tactic but a form of resistance. This praxis underscores the importance of flexibility in identity, enabling individuals to resist and adapt within a postmodern global context marked by neocolonial forces (Alcoff & Mohanty, 2006). Moreover, leveraging creative expressions of resistance further disrupts dominant narratives and creates new spaces for visibility and recognition of other forms of knowing.

Anzaldúa’s work, much like Sandoval’s, invites us to question the limitations of Western knowledge (desconocimiento/unknowing) and embrace a more expansive, interconnected view of the cosmos. Engaging with the reality of dreams (ensueños), Anzaldúa challenges dominant epistemological frameworks that prioritize the tangible and material. She proposes a multilayered reality, consisting of both the seen and unseen, known and unknowable. Moving from ordinary to extraordinary reality involves recognizing and embracing the multiple layers of knowledge, acknowledging that our everyday perceptions are just one aspect of a much larger, interconnected cosmos. In her contributions in “This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,” Anzaldúa (1981) discussed the concept of Nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning “in-between space.” She described Nepantla as a state of being that exists between different worlds or realities, where one can access multiple layers of understanding and existence.

In “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers,” Anzaldúa (1981) encouraged women of Color to draw on their unique cultural experiences and spiritual practices as sources of strength and knowledge. She urges them to move beyond the ordinary, everyday reality imposed by colonial and patriarchal systems and embrace a more extraordinary, interconnected understanding of the world. Anzaldúa’s concept of conocimiento, or deep knowing, is central to engaging with forms of extraordinary reality. This profound, intuitive connection with the universe and its many dimensions goes beyond intellectual understanding, arising from navigating Nepantla and leading to expanded awareness.

Anzaldúa challenged us to move beyond the material and empirical, to trust our knowing bodies, spirits, intuitions, and guiding voices and messages from our ancestors. This requires engaging with the world in ways that defy conventional logic and recognizing the validity of dreams, visions, and other non-ordinary experiences as sources of knowledge. Engaging with extraordinary reality becomes an act of imagination and creativity, acknowledging the complexity and mystery of existence. Nepantla exemplifies Anzaldúa’s vision of a multilayered reality. This idea challenges the Western preference for linear, hierarchical structures of knowledge by presenting a more fluid, interconnected view of the cosmos. Nepantla, for Anzaldúa, is a liminal space where transformation and growth occur. It is characterized by discomfort and uncertainty but also a place of possibility where rigid categories dissolve and new understandings emerge. Engaging with reality from Nepantla allows for a fluid, non-binary approach to relational identity, knowledge, and existence, facilitating a transition from ordinary social constructs to the expansive realms of the extraordinary. Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of Nepantla provides a space where these identities can explore extraordinary aspects of reality, moving beyond rigid social constructs. Her interpretation of Coyolxauhqui and the concept of conocimiento (knowing) deepens our understanding of how engaging with reality through oppositional consciousness can lead to personal and social transformation.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Chela Sandoval’s theoretical contributions are essential for understanding and advancing decolonial trans* feminism and research on QTBIPOC communities. The asterisk symbol in decolonial trans* feminism represents the integration of diverse epistemologies, ontologies, histories, and times. It signifies the multiple and overlapping repertoires of knowledge that individuals use to make sense of their identities and experiences. Sandoval’s differential mode, which involves strategically switching between different modes of resistance, aligns with the asterisk’s representation of flexibility and adaptability. The asterisk captures the essence of using various approaches as

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needed, reflecting a dynamic and context-sensitive strategy. The asterisk also symbolizes the strategic use of identity categories. Just as tactical essentialism involves temporarily adopting simplified identities for political purposes, the asterisk indicates that identities are not fixed but can be employed as tools for empowerment and resistance. Anzaldúa’s concept of mestiza consciousness, which embraces hybridity and the blending of cultures and identities, resonates with the asterisk’s depiction of multiple overlapping layers of knowledge and being. The state of Nepantla, or being in between spaces, aligns with the asterisk’s representation of liminality and the ability to navigate different realities and perspectives. The asterisk indicates a space where multiple identities and ways of knowing coexist and interact. The dialogue between Anzaldúa’s metaphysics and the asterisk in trans* connects philosophical engagement with extraordinary realities to the tangible experiences of those navigating trans* identities and decolonial struggles. The use of the asterisk in “trans*” signifies the recognition of both ordinary and extraordinary knowledge systems to construct genders in resistance.

The Asterisk as Symbol of Epistemic Plurality

Initially, within trans (colonial/white/Western) subcultures, the asterisk symbolized the fluidity of gender identity, acknowledging a broad spectrum of gender expressions beyond traditional binaries (Halberstam, 2018; Salas-SantaCruz, 2023b) or the idea of genders within Gender. Trans* feminist or Trans* of Color Critique articulated by trans scholars of Color has developed into a potent method for remembering and affirming the pluriversality of knowledge production related to “genders” and the trans* identities they engender. Black feminisms, Chicana/Latina feminisms, and Indigenous feminisms had historically critiqued the category of “woman,” questioning its ability to encompass the experiences of Women of Color. Trans* BIPOC scholars have crafted an intricate analytical framework that positions the trans-body and racialized gender as co-constitutive of coloniality and settler colonialism and its various systems of economic oppression and exploitation (Green, 2016; Bey, 2017; DiPietro, 2019).

Bey (2017) suggested that trans*-ness and blackness precede and provide the foundational conditions for the identities that modern society labels as black or transgender. These identities challenge the rigid boundaries of race and gender imposed by colonial constructs. Both blackness and trans*-ness are described as fugitive, constantly escaping and disrupting the imposed order of modern racial and gender systems. This fugitive nature is a form of resistance against the normative constraints of the colonial and modern world. Bey emphasizes the refusal to be fixed into categories, highlighting the fluidity and instability inherent in black and trans* identities. This refusal challenges the stability and legibility of ontological categories defined by coloniality. Bey’s description of trans*-ness and blackness as fugitive, poetic forces align with the asterisk symbol, as both emphasize the non-fixed, expansive nature of these identities.

Afro-Indigenous and Latinx scholar Alan Pelaez Lopez similarly argues on the fugitivity of the asterisk in trans*. They wrote (and I cite the poem in length),

The asterisk is a portal and a pause.

The asterisk is not a signifier of a destination.

A destination, here, is a form of violence.

The asterisk is an invitation to meditate on a material condition with legal, social, and cultural consequences in the hopes that one can depart from that reality.

The asterisk is not a star; it is not a burning rock, but some might argue that it is a rock that burns.

The asterisk feels. It is a feeling of stillness and prolonged puncture.

The asterisk is alive, but one cannot insist life onto it.

The asterisk is not a person or an identity.

The asterisk has been attended to; perhaps, it does not want to exist anymore. This is why the asterisk is a portal and a pause. . .

A trans* future necessitates the undoing of mastery. (Pelaez Lopez, 2023, p. 233–234, emphasis added)

Pelaez Lopez’s poem portrayed the asterisk as more than a mere symbol; it is an active, living entity that embodies profound meanings related to identity, resistance, and transformation. The asterisk as portal and pause suggests that the asterisk serves as both an entry point and a moment of reflection. As a portal, it opens possibilities for exploring new dimensions of existence, inviting us to step into spaces that transcend conventional boundaries of knowledge. As a pause, it offers a moment of contemplation, allowing for a reconsideration of our current understandings and the structures that define and inform genders. In decolonial trans* feminism, the asterisk becomes a site where colonial gender knowledge is suspended, creating room for more fluid and dynamic interpretations of being.

“The asterisk is not a signifier of a destination. A destination, here, is a form of violence” (Pelaez Lopez, 2023, p. 233). In this line, Pelaez Lopez critiqued the notion of fixed endpoints or definitive conclusions in the journey of identity. The idea of a destination implies a finality that can be inherently violent, as it imposes static boundaries on the fluid and evolving nature of human existence. In trans* and decolonial contexts, enforcing such finalities can limit personal and collective expressions, forcing people into predefined molds that do not accommodate their full complexity as people. The asterisk, therefore, resists the notion of an ultimate destination,
advocating instead for continuous transformation and the ongoing reimagining of identity through the various sources of ordinary and extraordinary knowledge.

“The asterisk is not a star; it is not a burning rock, but some might argue that it is a rock that burns” (Pelaez Lopez, 2023, p. 233). This metaphor highlights the paradoxical nature of the asterisk. It is not a fixed celestial object nor a lifeless stone but rather something imbued with potential energy and transformative power. The phrase “a rock that burns” suggests an element of active, living resistance. In decolonial trans* feminism, the asterisk symbolizes the spark of resistance and change, igniting new possibilities for understanding and living gender and identity beyond colonial constraints. It embodies the dynamic interplay between stability and transformation, reflecting the ongoing struggle against static and oppressive categorizations.

“...feels.” Pelaez Lopez (2023) wrote, “It is a feeling of stillness and prolonged puncture” (p. 233). This line personifies the asterisk, imbuing it with a sense of emotional and experiential depth. It represents both a moment of calm and a persistent impact, much like the enduring violence of anti-Blackness, settlement, and colonization. The idea of “prolonged puncture” speaks to the enduring nature of colonial and patriarchal violence but also to the sustained resistance against it. The asterisk as a feeling captures the ongoing tension between these forces and the resilience required to persist in the face of systemic oppression.

While the asterisk signifies the complexities of identity, it is not representative of a single person or identity. Instead, it serves as a tool for exploring and understanding the multiplicity of knowledge that exists beyond binary notions of being. The asterisk symbolizes the fluidity and diversity inherent in human existence, resisting attempts to confine identities within narrow, predefined categories. In this powerful closing statement, Pelaez Lopez asserted that a trans* future requires the dismantling of oppressive power structures that seek to define and limit identities. This future is grounded in trans* perspectives that emerge from the extraordinary and imaginative realm. Mastery, in this context, refers to these oppressive power structures that confine identities within the limits of ordinary knowledge.

Alan Pelaez Lopez’s evocative portrayal of the asterisk as a portal and a pause powerfully encapsulates the transformative potential of engaging with both ordinary and extraordinary knowledge systems. The recontextualization of the asterisk in trans* extends beyond linguistic innovation to encapsulate a profound critique of historical injustices and a vision for healing and resistance. This vision requires us to enter the extra-ordinary knowledge systems and challenge us to engage with terms such as QTBIPOC not merely as markers of racialized gender or sexuality but as profound symbols that mark the struggles for knowledge, resilience, and diverse realities of those in the colonial difference.

Through a decolonial trans* feminist lens, symbols like the asterisk in “trans*” and the “x” in “Latinx” become tools for transcending androcentrism and anthropocentrism. These symbols enable a reimagining of relational identity and practice, allowing us to move beyond the realities shaped by coloniality. For instance, the “x” in Latinx, as Pelaez Lopez articulated (2018), captures the intersectionality of settlement, anti-Blackness, feminicides, and the profound wounds left by these historical traumas. These symbols serve as points of resistance to Western knowledge systems that have sought to define and confine identities through colonialism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. They represent active subjectivity, where individuals and communities acknowledge their historical wounds and assert control over their narratives. In this context, Latinx is not merely a gender-inclusive term but a symbol of intersectional resistance that encapsulates a complex matrix of historical traumas and resilience. This perspective shifts the conversation from questioning the validity or usage of terms like Latinx and trans* to understanding them as vehicles for expressing deep-seated colonial knowledge and the active resistance against it. Trying to appropriate them as symbols of Gender/genders or trying to get rid of these symbols because people do not identify with them undermines their power and significance in the valorization of “genders.” These acts in colonial research are the “dirty” aspects of research that perpetuate the very colonial and patriarchal structures these terms seek to resist, silencing the voices of those who do use these symbols to assert their active subjectivity and resist erasure.

Non-Binary Knowledge

As a trans* Latinx scholar, I allow my imagination to take over when I read through the pages of las maestras. As I read Anzaldúa’s “Flights of Imagination,” I was invited to pick which voice. I immediately thought of my friend and trans Afro Latinx scholar Alan Pelaez Lopez, who wrote that “Latinx” is not merely a trend but a critical intervention addressing deep-seated wounds in the Latin American community, including settlement, anti-Blackness, feminicides, and inarticulation. Lopez asserted that “Latinx” highlights the ongoing colonization and violence faced by queer, trans,

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3 The term femicide traditionally refers to the killing of women based on their gender. However, in international contexts, the term femicide is increasingly used to better capture the gender-based motivations and the social constructions underlying these acts. Femicide goes beyond the biological aspects, encompassing the broader societal and cultural factors that contribute to these gender-based killings. Additionally, femicide is inclusive of trans women, recognizing that gender-based violence affects all individuals who identify and live as women. For further reading, see Chappell, Louise. The Politics of Gender Justice at the International Criminal Court: Legacies and Legitimacy. Oxford University Press, 2016.
Black, and Indigenous Latin Americans. The “X” symbolizes the complexities and intersections of these identities and challenges the community to confront and address these systemic issues for true liberation. As I continued to read, I imagined the X as the “cicatrix, the scar that can become a bridge linking people split apart” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 21).

Embedded within the asterisk, I find the X. I began to note the historical wounds of Latinidad shared with those in the colonial difference. Together, wounds, knowledges, and strategic tactics form the asterisk (*) as a symbol that encapsulates the convergence of multiple dimensions of knowledge and histories. It symbolizes a journey beyond ordinary perceptions of gender, inviting a more expansive view of existence and resistance. It suggests that identities are shaped by a multitude of intersecting knowledge systems, including cultural practices, history, and time, which cannot be fully understood through a single category such as race, gender, or sexuality.

**Figure 1**

*Author’s Notes*

As I read through the pages, I began to trace the equation (Figure 1) (X + vertical plane, or extraordinary knowledge, + horizontal plane, or ordinary knowledge, equals the asterisk). This star illustrates the pluriversality of knowledge systems that can produce QTBIPOC social and political identities and is the reminder that this is one star in the constellations of “genders” and trans* embodiments.

I created a “cleaner version” of how I imagine the convergence of knowledges, culture, time, and history that informs the co-productions and co-formations of trans- or the multiple sources that can inform the Androgynous Whole. Here, in Figure 2, horizontal knowledge refers to the linear, empirical, and often Eurocentric ways of understanding the world. It encompasses the chronological and sequential acquisition of information, typically associated with Western scientific and rational thought. This dimension of knowledge emphasizes the tangible and observable aspects of reality, often focusing on measurable outcomes and objective truths. In educational research, horizontal knowledge is reflected in traditional curricula and methodologies that prioritize standardized, objective learning and often marginalize non-Western and Indigenous knowledge systems.

**Figure 2**

*The Asterisk as Representation of the Androgynous Whole*

Vertical knowledge, in contrast, represents cyclical, spiritual, and transcendent ways of knowing. It connects past, present, and future in a more integrated and holistic manner, acknowledging the influence of ancestral knowledge, cultural traditions, and spiritual practices. Vertical knowledge is deeply rooted in Indigenous and non-Western epistemologies that value relationality and interconnectedness. This dimension of knowledge embraces the non-linear, intuitive, and mystical aspects of existence, recognizing the importance of relational connections and the continuity of life across generations. In education, vertical knowledge encourages the inclusion of storytelling, rituals, and other cultural practices that provide a more profound connection to one’s heritage and community.

The concept of anti-Blackness within the asterisk figure highlights the persistent structures of racial discrimination and marginalization faced by Black individuals within colonial frameworks. In the context of queer/trans BIPOC education...
research, recognizing anti-Blackness is crucial for understanding how educational institutions perpetuate racial hierarchies and exclusion. Decolonial trans* feminism calls for the dismantling of these oppressive systems and the creation of educational spaces that honor and uplift Black experiences and identities. This requires actively confronting and addressing the ways in which curricula, pedagogical practices, and institutional policies may perpetuate anti-Blackness.

Femicides refer to the gender-based killings of women and gender non-conforming individuals, often rooted in misogyny and patriarchal violence. The asterisk in trans* feminism draws attention to the intersections of gender-based violence with colonial and patriarchal structures. In educational research, this perspective demands a critical examination of how gender-based violence is addressed within educational settings and how these institutions can be sites of both harm and resistance. Educators and researchers must advocate for safer, more inclusive environments that actively work against the violence and discrimination faced by gender-diverse individuals. Settlement refers to the colonial process of occupying and claiming Indigenous lands and the ongoing impact of settler colonialism. The asterisk symbolizes the need to acknowledge and challenge the continued effects of colonial settlement on Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems.

As a symbol, the asterisk marks the co-production of knowledge and the co-formation of identities working in symbiotic relations. This convergence challenges the dominance of any single way of knowing and highlights the pluriversality of knowledge systems that people use to craft their sense of self and practices of resistance. The asterisk represents the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives that come together to form a more complete and inclusive understanding of reality. For queer/trans BIPOC education research, this means recognizing and valuing multiple epistemologies and perspectives that contribute to a richer, more inclusive understanding of QTBIPOC experiences and practices. For communities, especially QTBIPOC communities, trans* research is a way to heal from the deep wounds inflicted by coloniality and settler colonialism. It serves as a symbol of QTBIPOC resistance and marks the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice.

Language also shapes how we perceive and interact with the world (Lorde, 1977/2001). Decolonial trans* feminism calls for a critical examination of how scholars use language that either challenges or reinforces colonial and anthropocentric worldviews. Decolonial trans* feminism encourages the inclusion of multispecies perspectives that recognize the interdependence of all life forms, including the non-human, across material, affective, and discursive realms. This approach challenges human-centered discourses and promotes a more comprehensive understanding of ecosystems and the roles that various species play in trans* knowledge.

By exploring these connections, we can note how the asterisk in decolonial trans* feminism functions as a nexus for addressing various forms of oppression and envisioning transformative educational practices. The asterisk calls for a critical interrogation of colonial narratives that dominate educational content and practices. Understanding the intermeshing of anti-Blackness, femicides, and settler colonialism within the framework of decolonial trans* feminism encourages the development of pedagogies that are responsive to the multiple and overlapping needs of QTBIPOC students.

**What Can Decolonial Trans* Feminism Do for Queer/Trans BIPOC Education Research?**

Decolonial trans* feminism is fundamentally rooted in action and the collective struggles of marginalized communities against the lasting effects of colonial oppression. This approach goes beyond academic discourse, engaging directly with the lived realities and sites of resistance where communities deconstruct and reimagine knowledge and existence to challenge colonial legacies. Unlike philosophical traditions that may confine discussions of liberation to theoretical realms, decolonial trans* feminism integrates thought and action, ensuring that theory emerges from and contributes back to the communities it serves.

In both education and broader societal contexts, decolonial trans* feminism provides a powerful framework for challenging and dismantling systemic oppressions within academic and social structures. It insists on the unity of theory and practice, advocating for a praxis that is intimately connected to the material realities of the communities it aims to empower. This integration underscores the necessity of grounding theoretical concepts in the real-world struggles against colonial, racial, and hetero-patriarchal oppressions, aligning with the insights and life-sustaining practices within BIPOC communities.

Fúnez-Flores (2024) and scholars like Wynter (2003) emphasized that theories can either reinforce the modern/colonial order or drive significant social change. They argue that theories become problematic when disconnected from the conditions that birthed them. In the educational realm, decolonial trans* feminist approaches must utilize strategies deeply embedded in community practices to challenge colonial narratives. These strategies are evident in how QTBIPOC communities revive and transform diverse ways of knowing and cultivate a vision for a world free from colonial and capitalist constraints.

In educational contexts, decolonial trans* feminism advocates for transformative pedagogies that engage with relational, intertextual dialogues to foreground the complexities of QTBIPOC experiences. It recognizes the foundational role of coloniality in shaping gender and identity, promoting analytical frameworks that deconstruct these colonial impositions and foster justice through visions that celebrate
non-recognizable categories and collective capabilities. Decolonial trans* feminism urges us to critically reflect on our research’s implications. It compels us to ask whether our work reinforces colonial power dynamics or contributes to broader efforts of liberation and change (Simpson, 2020). By interrogating the colonial underpinnings of our research questions, we pave the way for new forms of understanding and collaboration that break free from normative and colonial academic discourse constraints. This approach enriches our scholarly practices and aligns them with broader commitments to justice, equity, and dismantling oppressive power systems.

First, decolonial trans* feminism encourages researchers to engage with both ordinary and extraordinary knowledge systems, valuing lived experiences, cultural practices, and spiritual insights that often fall outside conventional academic paradigms. This expanded view acknowledges the rich, multifaceted ways in which QTBIPOC individuals understand and navigate their worlds, promoting a deeper, more inclusive approach to educational inquiry. Secondly, decolonial trans* feminism’s emphasis on tactical essentialism and flexible identity categories provides a robust framework for understanding and supporting the fluid and intersecting identities within QTBIPOC communities. Central to this analytical endeavor is recognizing the complex web of coloniality—of power, knowledge, gender, being, and nature—as foundational to the epistemic structuring of gender, identity, and knowledge. This structuring not only shapes the normative landscapes within which QTBIPOC students navigate schools but also influences their visions of “genders” and gender-related justice. A decolonial trans* analytical framework is instrumental in deconstructing these colonial impositions and advocating for justice through frameworks that celebrate non-recognizable categories of being and political identities in process, filled with world-making practices.

Decolonial trans* feminism forges coalitional alliances through the wounds and scars of Gender coloniality, uplifting new practices of being that emerge in its resistance. It underscores the necessity of reimagining identity, knowledge, and belonging through a decolonial lens, encouraging a shift from Western epistemologies to embrace the diversity and fluidity in QTBIPOC experiences. It encourages us to engage with art, culture, and the Spirit, including our dreams and gut feelings as sources of theorizing and healing, bridging the gaps between different realms of existence and opening new pathways for consciousness and transformation.

In educational practice, decolonial trans* feminism calls for methodologies and practices that are attuned to the evolving needs and experiences of queer/trans BIPOC communities. Rather than confining these communities to static or reductive identity labels, this perspective emphasizes the importance of approaches that honor their fluid and dynamic nature. The asterisk in trans* signifies a broad spectrum of gender identities, experiences, knowledge systems, and histories that co-produce and co-construct queer & trans identity and practice. This approach fosters a more dynamic and adaptable practice environment capable of addressing the complex and changing realities of QTBIPOC individuals. Finally, the focus on oppositional consciousness and coalitional politics inherent in decolonial trans* feminism can transform how educational systems approach equity and justice. By prioritizing ethics of care, love, and mutual respect, educational research can develop strategies and interventions that not only resist existing inequities but also build alliances and foster solidarity across different marginalized groups. This coalition-building is crucial for creating educational spaces that are not only inclusive but also actively supportive of QTBIPOC students, educators, and researchers.

Lastly, the symbolic use of the asterisk in trans* within decolonial trans* feminism provides a powerful tool “as a portal and a pause” that challenges and reimagines the structures of knowledge and identity imposed by the coloniality of hegemonic queer and trans research. These symbols serve as reminders, markers of wounds, and articulations that invite researchers to critically examine and dismantle the colonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative frameworks that have historically marginalized QTBIPOC communities.

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