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Cover Page Footnote

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Guilty Ethics: An Embodied Approach to Recognizing Colonial Oppression and Decolonial Projects

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Abstract

Despite decolonial thought offering many identifying features, I argue that to define decolonial philosophy as one type of action, or as merely justice, is itself an injustice. To present my argument, I first provide an understanding of how terminology can carry a colonial attitude and purview. Following this foundation, I then offer several examples wherein one will misunderstand or exclude decolonial projects through upholding one dogmatic definition of decolonial philosophy. I posit an additional identifying feature of decolonial philosophy, namely the emotion of guilt. I believe my proposal of guilt, felt by the colonizing and decolonizing agent undercuts some, if not most, colonial aspects of language. Thus, my contribution avoids placing dogmatic definitions while also allowing for new perspectives to influence and adjust the boundaries of guilt. Lastly, I address two objections. The first objection asks whether the use of a colonizer's language might be counterintuitive to the decolonial project. I argue that this objection, although valid to some extent, does not harm my argument or negate my proposal of guilt. The second objection addresses whether or not positing guilt disqualifies any previous decolonial projects: I believe guilt does not commit such an exclusion. Lastly, I urge my audience to keep an open mind to various projects and suspend judgment on the authenticity of decolonial projects.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Phenomenology, Embodiment, Emotions, Guilt, Lugones

Introduction

Decolonialism is the burgeoning field of thought which attempts to rediscover and create perspectives and ideology devoid of coloniality. That is, these studies strive to halt and reverse the disenfranchisement of indigenous populations and those wronged through colonial trauma. In this paper, I aim to inform how language, singular definitions, and other rigid categories can fail to comprehend colonial oppression and decolonial movements. For my reader, I do not require an understanding of the content of decolonial projects; instead, I focus on the evaluative framework one employs to qualify projects and their membership within decolonial thought. Thus, I do not direct my argument towards those who engage directly with decolonial thinking; instead, I inform the general philosophical audience of this phenomenon. Primarily, I will present the danger of describing decolonial thinking as justice.¹ To stake my argument, I use existing discussion(s) on the coloniality of categories through María Lugones's analysis of gender and Walter Mignolo's report on the value of Latin American Philosophy. Following this description, I then move to discuss how when language fails to comprehend colonial oppression and thus also fails to understand decoloniality. In recognition of this shortfall, I lastly propose guilt as one feature that can help identify decolonial qualities and motivate ethical projects.

Decolonization Is Not Justice

Traditional or simplified accounts broadly summarize decolonial theory as merely justice for those affected by colonialism. Although accurate in some cases where there are already

¹ This is not to say that this critique is not needed within the decolonial movement. Instead, I want this article to be accessible to the general philosophical audience as a way to motivate further decolonial work.

recognized crimes which can be solved through existing institutions, I believe justice alone is insufficient to redress colonial injustices. Consider the following ways in which justice, conceptually and institutionally, entails several conditions. First, one must be able to recognize the wrongful act/injustice which elicits justice. Second, one must consider how to manifest justice to rectify the wrongdoing. Third, following the recognition of how one enacts justice for wrongdoing, one also assumes an understanding of the particular unified group which was wronged. Fourth, justice entails an evaluative framework to measure the extent of the justice served.²

Evident across various points in US history, institutional justice is slow to recognize wrongdoing.³ Recall how slavery and other wrongful acts escaped judicial discipline, given these institutions protected colonial interest. To justify this mistreatment, state institutions excluded black peoples from the category of human, describing and treating them as property (Mills, “The Racial Contract”, 78-81). By refusing rights only to humans i.e. white people, non-whites were without means to claim protection from injustice. In the case that one did not have state rights, then similarly, institutions could not recognize wrongdoing which black people experienced. Consider the European colonizers, upon “discovering” the American continent stole indigenous land and enslaved non-white peoples. To then protect their interest on a state level, the founding documents for the US were established to protect and secure the dominance of white land-owners and colonist. Further, in that US institutions were founded in the seizure of land and the elimination of indigenous populations, then justice very blatantly was not meant to protect non-

² Although my examples will speak primarily on the inadequacy of institutional justice, I use these instances to address the concept itself. That is, behaving according to a moral or normative principle, justice remains static and is recalcitrant to the injustices of colonial/settler-colonial oppression.

³ This is, in part, tied to the third ambiguity, which I mentioned above; however, I believe it deserves its own space for recognition in that it will later contribute to my proposal.

white lives. And since institutions are slow or only partially aware of their neglect/oppression of non-white people, and US law originates from colonial oppression, then I similarly believe that justice cannot accurately describe decoloniality.

As for the second condition, one must come to terms with how to manifest this justice. Political and economic action may grant some form of reparations for settler-colonial oppression. Yet, systems of power could perpetuate oppression in more subversive ways. For instance, consider the color-blind position in which people reject racism along the lines that we are *all* people and *all* deserve equal rights. Charles W. Mills refers to this phenomenon as racial liberalism. Mills writes, “[s]ince most contemporary white liberals would disavow any explicitly racist sentiments, it is important to convey to them that the liberalism they are endorsing is still racialized, even if it ostensibly repudiates any racist representations of people of color,” (Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 31). So, although racial liberalism intends to endorse equal rights politically, it overextends its claim to a degree which then ignores how race remains contingent in subtly racist political/economic action. So, although justice suggest economic or political action to redress colonialism, these methods are limited within existing institutions. Compare this to other claims which intend to broadly undo colonialism very broadly by “giving indigenous land back,” which would undercut the American legal system and dismantle the entire colonial entity(Tuck & Yang 1-40).

Third, justice demands that there is an identifiable entity which was wronged. In that settler-colonial oppression extends across a variety of populations and affects these people in a myriad of ways, one particular victim-entity excludes the existing oppression experienced by another marginalized group. For instance, colonial oppression currently does not function as the direct seizure of land and labor, yet we can recognize that this act wronged indigenous

populations. Although indigenous peoples are readily identified for this trauma, the evolution of settler-colonial oppression beyond direct seizure of land and people can often escape identification. And further, if one cannot recognize the wrongdoing, then they might also fail to recognize the victim of settler-colonial oppression.

Glen Sean Coulthard, a Dene First Nation philosopher and activist, defines settler-colonialism as the relationship of ongoing domination through economic, gendered, racial, and state-power. These power dynamics then establish hierarchical social relations which facilitate the dispossession of indigenous, and non-white populations (Coulthard 6-7). In that most people in the US inhabit social institutions founded on colonial oppression, I believe the groups and categories of oppressor and oppressed have become muddled over time.

To better understand the haziness of the colonizer and colonized categories under settler-colonialism, consider someone who is embodied in a marginalized identity, i.e., a person of color or a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Although they are marginalized in one or several aspects, they can also dominate others through other social relations. For instance, despite one So, it is possible that one can inhabit the position of the oppressor and the oppressed simultaneously. And, inasmuch that justice requires denotation of a particular group, it cannot accurately refer to one social group as colonizers since anyone with the potential to dominate others can fill this role. Likewise, although one might be a colonizer they might also fulfill the role of the colonized.

Fourth and lastly, do these decolonial projects bring about justice? Can one project really settle the debt of colonialism, or root out the subtle strains of colonialism in language and culture? I am hesitant to think that one project can. Since I believe one cannot recognize colonial oppression through justice, then believing Decolonialism as justice then fails to comprehend

decolonial projects. Recall, as evident through the four conditions justice entails, I believe this analysis of justice then leads me to address the restraint of linguistic and ontological categories. By acknowledging how the concept of justice does not recognize settler-colonial oppression and likewise not recognize decolonial projects, I wish to move away from them and instead provide one of the many possible, identifying features of colonial oppression and thus indicate decolonial thinking.

Colonialism and Categorical Thinking

To further demonstrate how categories fail to grasp colonial oppression, consider Walter Mignolo's attempt to diagnose the ongoing institutional neglect of Latin American philosophy in the western canon. He theorizes that the philosophical discipline only values philosophical projects insofar that it matches up to Western conceptions of philosophical value. He argues that Western values create a double-bind that Latin American philosophy must linger within the boundaries to qualify as genuine productive philosophical content. The concept of the double-bind describes two issues that Latin American philosophy faces, and similarly, I believe decolonial theory encounters them as well. The first "bind" requires Latin American philosophy's content to be original inasmuch as it adds to the western conversation. Second, Latin American philosophy cannot be too unique or else it fails to earn recognition according to traditional Western standards (Mignolo 80-86). Decolonial philosophy faces a similar problem in categorical thinking. Categorical concepts like justice hold decolonial projects in limbo between needing to play into a form recognizable to the Western audiences while also needing to escape the categories which restrict decolonial progress. So, in discussing the value of thought through a western lens, one must be cautious and mindful of the criterion one uses to judge decolonial value.

Additionally, Lugones recognizes the coloniality of gender as it recreates a Eurocentric conception of femininity. She analyzes that the genders, *man* and *woman*, were never meant to apply to colonized individuals. Instead, to discuss people of color and those affected by colonization, the dichotomy of settlers/colonizers describes them through the anatomic language of *male* and *female*. In observance of this difference between the language used to discuss European and non-white people, Lugones believes that gender inherits cultural meaning. Although we might use similar language and describe a person as a *woman of color* in feminist projects, the term *woman* categorically disagrees with the non-white subject. And, in that we want to address “colonized women” in feminism, this category is entirely empty since there are no women that are colonized (Lugones 745-6). This move imposes a Eurocentric notion of femininity and gender, which is inaccessible to non-white peoples. Thus, Lugones concludes that, in the discussion of intersectionality, feminist theorists fail to recognize the colonial dimension to their most key designator. Additionally, to maintain this implicit cultural understanding of femininity within the category of *woman* places non-white peoples into a position where they must abide by yet another form of colonial oppression and control (746-7).

My Proposal

Next, to incorporate an understanding of ongoing movements, which I believe decolonial philosophy entails, I will use Alain Badiou’s notion of fidelity or faith to the *event* (Badiou 40). In his project to keep one faithful to social movements and ethical behavior, Badiou proposes that the human subject only forms in the presence of an *event* that moves someone from the mortal plane of selfish opinions into the universal/immortal realm of ethics (40-44). This event can be a political, artistic, or romantic experience, wherein the unethical “some-one” is called forth by the *event*. After the life-changing experience of the *event*, a subject operates

disinterested in her selfish behavior and remains interested in life to affirm the universal truth of the *event*. In this shift, a subject participates in ethics to consistently reaffirm the ethical principles that the *event* uncovers (Badiou 44-52). A subject may be deterred from remaining faithful to the *event*, but in this, Badiou encourages one to “[k]eep going... [and] never forget what you’ve encountered,” (52). Similar to how one would behave faithfully to her lover, then one should also maintain faith in ethical projects. Thus, to maintain fidelity and affirm the ethical project of decolonial thinking, I want to propose an embodied approach to recognize decolonial projects and motivate active ongoing participation.

Rather than define decolonial thinking as justice, I motion instead for a method wherein one can feel as to whether their project recognizes colonial oppression and thus represents decolonial themes. Recall, although the content of decolonial projects can vary, I maintain that they hold a central goal to fight settler-colonial oppression and create perspectives or ideologies devoid of dominating power dynamics founded in settler-colonial disenfranchisement. To hone into whether projects hold potential or demonstrate decolonial uses, I propose *guilt* as an identifying feature. Guilt performs not only as a motivating force, but it can also indicate a clear ethical path to where one ought to implement decolonial projects. By supplying one with an expansive definition of decolonial thinking, I maintain a goal-driven movement that doesn’t disqualify progress or decolonial projects.

The guilt I have in mind strongly resembles the guilt we may feel when someone accuses us of doing something wrong or when we feel guilty for having wronged someone. Additionally, the guilt I describe captures the notion of “I have not done enough,” or the gut-feeling that “there is still more work to be done.” In this degree, I want to move for an expanded and ever-changing horizon for decolonial thinking and reconceptualize decolonial projects as the focus of decolonial

discussion. However, this does not also then suggest that progress is unimportant. Instead, I believe Badiou's notion of disinterest/interest highlights that one can operate disinterested with her current project while also recognizing her primary interest to achieve the yet-to-be-achieved decolonial goal. I want to encourage one to think "I may not, and have not done enough; but, I can still do more." This is *not* to promote pessimism about one's projects. But, it *is* an encouragement to remain guilty and to use guilt as motivation to view potential in projects which I have yet to recognize.

One might argue that colonialism and other oppressive projects might implement guilt as a means of control, and so, by encouraging guilt, I only support subservience. I accept that yes, oppressive institutions can use guilt in this way. Capitalism, as it develops out of colonialism, often times works contrary to the decolonial project. I might feel guilty for not being productive at work, yet I can contest that this is not so much my personal guilt, rather it is an institution making me feel guilty. As another rebuttal, one can feel guilty for a variety of things which many others, and hegemonic institutions, do not recognize as guilt-inspiring. Consider how a portion of the population upholds vegan or vegetarian diets despite millions of others rejecting the source or reason of guilt in part or entirely. Given this lack of consensus on the inspirations for guilt, I believe it can be employed beyond a method of control and used as a means of resistance.

Additionally, one could object that it is morally wrong to recommend that everyone should feel guilty. It seems reasonable to state that an oppressor should feel guilty for their oppressive acts, but why should the oppressed feel culpable for their oppression? By encouraging guilt, and one's sensitivity to it, I strive to recognize the exact way one can enact colonial oppression in modern times. As I alluded to earlier in my criticism of justice, under the current model of settler-colonial domination, the categories of the oppressor and oppressed are not as

clear cut as they were initially in the colonial incursion. We can enact aspects of political, economic, and ideological oppression on others, and since we adopt varying dimensions of domination, one can be complicit to the settler-colonial project. So, rather than place one group as central to the colonizer/de-colonizer identity, I want to view ourselves as an active site of (de)colonialism. Also, as reminiscent of the first criticism of justice I mentioned earlier, guilt can motivate one to be more aware of the types of actions and ideas which are harmful or morally wrong.

Conclusion

In recognition of how categories fail to do justice to the field of decolonial thinking, I want to conclude with a related note. As a final call, I encourage one to reconsider the territories of categories themselves. Consider how such categories restrict the value of Latin American Philosophy according to western values. Secondly, recall how gender inherits a Eurocentric view of femininity and masculinity, and further how such categories interact with non-white people. In the reception of my proposal of guilt, I also encourage one to remain skeptical of categories overall since they might not do justice to the objects, people, and concepts.

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