



bordes, resistencias

rainy season/ April 2021

CANDELA REVIEW

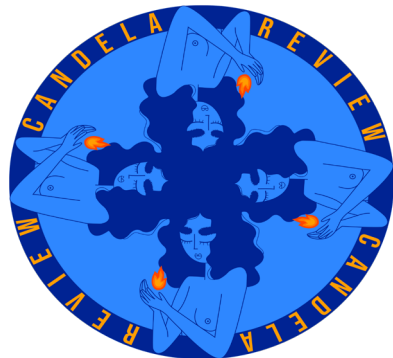
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*Feminism, in giving you somewhere to go, allows you to revisit
where you have been.*

SARA AHMED

*I am incomplete and unreal without other women. I am profoundly
dependent on others without having to be their subordinate, their slave,
their servant.*

MARÍA LUGONES

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The Sanctuary and Good Trouble of Decolonial Feminisms

I write this essay from my mother's home. My mother's home is in Omaha, where the Omaha peoples stewarded and continue to live in relation with this living landforce for millenia, related to other peoples, known as the Woodlands peoples.

This home, in a mid-sized city in the plains, is where I lived my teen years and have returned regularly to visit and then turned more to care for my parents in their elder years. In the colonial amnesia (Saranillio 2018), people in this area often refer to it as 'the heartland.' I remember, as a teenager who was one of the only non-white youth in my thousand-plus middle school and early high school years, wondering then and more incisively now "whose heart? And whose land?" I am certain that transferring to an older, 'struggling' school with Black and Latinx students shook me out of misconception of this area being white. Many years later I would encounter the language that helped me to distinguish between the subtle yet deeply connected ways in which a claim to 'color-blindness' was taken up as a source of pride in this land-turned-property many call Nebraska, blissfully skirting the ableism in the term (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrision 2017) as well as the re-instantiating white dominance by refusing to acknowledge the apparatus through which the dominance asserts itself. I would also learn the language of feminism that, from Black, Native, and Third World women refuse the ranking of whitestream feminism (Grande 2003) that colludes too neatly with colonial logics of stratification.

Eldercare as Decolonial Womanism

As I write this essay, I have been living with and caring for my mother since COVID-19 first started hooking into existing inequities on Turtle Island, with Black, Indigenous, and people of color, often termed 'essential workers' became sick and by the thousands, died. This place that is called the United States has earned the infamous ranking of the

world's number one incarcerator as well 'leading' the world in terms of numbers of people infected and who have died from this airborne virus.

In my mother's house, these facts are both true and insufficient to sketch the contours of the rhythms of our days and nights, our laughter, our worries, our grieving, all in the patterns of days that include the tasks of cooking, eating together, cleaning, medical appointments, zoom meetings for me and hours when my mother sits in another room, by herself but with a bit of ease with the knowledge that one her children is with her. I am one of the millions of people in this society who provide eldercare, often unrecognized in the codification of caregiving as a privatized endeavour. Sandy Grande's (2015) articulation of caregiving pierces through the thin reverence of caregiving as sacrificial:

Through the frames of settler logic, caregiving is often constructed as a subtractive experience, 'self-less' work riddled with material and spiritual costs for the giver and receiver. But there was nothing about my experience that felt like an evisceration or lessening of self. Most of the time, I felt only that I was gripping tightly to a share experience of *mutuality*, a life of togetherness that I was unwilling to trade for its absence, its void. (xvi)

My mother suffered a stroke that stays with her to the time of this writing through persistent dizziness and headaches. One month after her stroke, my father had a fall, one of many, but one that would be his last. The fall led to overall kidney failure, and he transitioned from this life two months after that fall. While eldercare had been a part of my life for a good ten years before that season of deep changes, it would come to be central in my life—encircling decisions, career moves, growing closer to friends who could relate to my experiences, and less frequent interactions with friends who had not touched this part of life yet. It encircled everything. And as Grande noted, I join in this turn with my mother, embracing, often clinging to a mutuality of relation in the daily patterns and destabilizing moments in the lives of two brown women in the 'heartland' who are thankful for every day we are able to be together.

My mother and I have long joked that we are twins, similar facial features, both with short haircuts. And yet, we've come to know each other in transformative ways over a series of months of being together every day, moving through the everyday patterns and the punctuations

marks of medical visits, news about the profound and entirely predictable failure of this settler colony to be in right relationship with any entity's health, and frustration with our differential relations with our family. In short, we are in a mother-daughter relationship that has been redefined through elder care conjoined with motherly care, through the attempted but incomplete American assimilation of a brown migrant family, through a biopolitics of healthcare, insurance, and bills profoundly shaped by extraction for the accumulation of wealth of a few. Even in the heartland, the large state university's medical center looms large, offering a brand and expert medical care. Omaha is, like Pittsburgh, Boston, and many other cities, a great place to be sick and in need of healthcare, unless you are a Black, Indigenous or elderly migrant woman with medicare. We both shake our fists at the commercials of smiling medical corporations, and in sometimes that moment right after, we remind each other of the calls we need to make to schedule this or that appointment, or follow-up on a bill that is larger than it should be. Somehow, within these daily patterns, our time together has also called us to revisit stories, with a depth and resonance radically different simply because of the expanse of time we have with each other.

We have traveled through time to share stories from the past and bring them forward with our respective, different, overlapping and intertwined present and presence. Our birthdays are both in August, my mother's in early August, and mine later in the month. My mother was ambivalent about her 85th birthday, sighing through breath and words that she didn't see much reason in celebrating what often simply felt like aging and contending with both profound losses of intimate people in her life and undesired transformations through bodily changes. With weeks marked more by physical and occupational therapy sessions that helped a bit but did not substantively change the lingering conditions of a stroke more than a year ago, her birthday was not a coming event that she counted down to. Still, with dozens of flowers coming her way, and a birthday brunch with my brother and I, she enjoyed her day. As I approached my 50th birthday, like so many who cancelled long-made plans due to pandemic restrictions, I wanted mostly nothing. No parties, no gifts; I wanted quiet. I wanted a brief refuge from the busiest season of my life, career-wise, being on panel after panel to speak about the pandemic and the global uprising against anti-Black racism. I sought refuge from emails from administrators that somehow always started with congratulatory notes

for two paragraphs and then informed of us of the campus conditions for re-opening and virtual learning. I painted a wall in the kitchen, replanted some plants, fertilized our vegetable garden. I was able to remember that plants and animals are our most powerful teachers. And I looked at my computer screen zero times on my birthday. It was perfect for me and profoundly frustrating for my mother. While I was painting the kitchen wall, singing loudly and off-key to Motown classics, my mother stood on the side, furrowed brow, insisting that I shouldn't work on my birthday. Even though I kept asking her to look at my face and see my smile – evidence of my glee to not be staring at a green light on my computer, her discomfort that as a girl, I should not be doing tasks like painting walls, was persistent. This, from a woman who taught herself English, taught herself the craft and business of sewing, then designing and making curtains. Her basement is half futon guest-space and half factory grade sewing machines purchased slowly over years from money she made and saved through doing seamstress work. And still, this woman, who made herself, as Lucille Clifton (1993) might tell us, out of starshine and clay, with no model, only seeing to be herself, was pained to watch her daughter paint a wall. Patriarchy is still a bitch.

As children, my mother would make us a yellow cake with chocolate frosting and use an icing pipe to write Happy (Number) Birthday and our names. She would spell this out in a language that she had to learn, by herself, as a migrant woman who came to the United States well before the larger sanctioned migration of South Asians began in the mid-1960's. My mother journeyed to the United States on her birthday, entering a world she knew little about, a world with a different language, snow, and all manner of new experiences. Her first step on snow led to an immediate slip and fall. Unlike many young migrants today, my mother had little pre-migration knowledge of the United States. When I asked her what she knew of this place before she came, she said emphatically, "Nothing! I had no idea at all what is this country, how do they talk? Nothing. Some people [in her rural area of India] had radios, but not TVs or anything like that. And who had time for radio?" What she did know about, though, was patriarchy. And she came to know my father's deep desire to be accepted into the white corporate world, she also came to know the toxicity of desiring whiteness. This is not what she called it then or calls it now. These days, she calls the structure of patriarchal power sometimes 'that's just how it was,' or 'men have it much easier.

Woman had to do all the work. Always.' In both cases, she is telling her story of the labor involved in running a house, fielding questions from children straddling two often incompatible cultures, subordinating herself to her volatile husband while also being the steadiest, most reliable adult in the home. My siblings and I are able to love ourselves and receive love because my mother was an unwavering source of love for us. She wanted us to be well, always. One sure way that she could try to manifest that was to be a source of consistency in an otherwise unpredictable home.

It took me a long time to figure out, that I was raised by a feminist mother in the midst of strongly patriarchal family system and society. As a teenager and the youngest, I was exasperated often. "Why don't we leave?" I would ask, apprehending very little of what it would take to break with traditions in this woman's body long before she was born let alone how to make enough money to start a brand new life that would carry lifelong guilt of not following through on what she had learned to be her work in life: mothering and being a wife. Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Arundhati Roy helped me to understand her staying and the actions in that staying as a possible feminism within impossible patriarchal conditions.

I have also learned that her feminism is, of course, particular because of the socialization that she experienced. This statement seems exceedingly banal, but within it, resides a cosmos of both how whitemain feminism has and continues to ride roughshod over the unique social locations of Indigenous, Black and Third World women. Whiteness continues to insist on its ability to be nuanced and somehow speak for all others. Coming to know my mother's praxes of feminism has been accessible because of how our time together has involved space and time travel, all while we sit in the living room or together at the kitchen table. We revisit experiences decades ago, and I learn more about the ways in which she was quite explicitly to serve her husband and his family for years. Before she was married, as she has told me, she never rose before 7am in the morning. After moving into her husband's family's home, while he was away in school and the United States, she was up at 4 a.m. It was her duty to cook, clean, and literally serve her in-laws. I've listened to this story, with much detail, from my mother many times. Her tone shifts from the more typical softness and giggle to a firmness, a righteous resentment. And yet, within these histories of her life in India, there are also stories of people who would come and clean homes of those in the merchant,

soldier or Brahmin castes. These Indian women would come in and out of homes quietly, cast outside of the caste system altogether. In these details, we reckon with the important distinctions and relations between the subject of the imperial master settler and the relative positions of Indigenous women, arrivants, and Black women (Patel 2016). I aim to read across and understand the pluriversities, as this journal calls us to do, as well as pay attention to the refusals, joys, and intimacies that exist in fugitivity in moments of otherwise and imagination that are quite literally beyond of the vision of coloniality (Crawley 2019).

Diaspora Feminist Companionship

As a Non-Black woman of color employed by the academy, I am not fungible as a Black woman might be. I am an almond-toned woman whose skin shade appeals to the optics the diversity desires that exacts specific violences upon, including denial of the epistemologies that raised me long before I learned the word epistemologies. When I advise graduate students to ‘cite your mother,’ it is often met with a resounding expression of gratitude. Mother might mean literally their mothers, or of other relations. Fundamentally it is an invitation to adults that they need not exclude the knowledge systems in their life, simply because they have not been codified and authored by others in journals that reside behind paywalls. It invites them to both understand the ways that their people may have been written about, how they might be treated as without knowledge in their initial doctoral studies, and that these acts can be cordoned off even as they experience epistemic violence.

In a recent exchange with a close friend/sister, Dr. Patricia Krueger-Henny, we were deep into a text exchange about what we were reading. We share an insatiable love of and for books. Books that lead us to other worlds, books that help us to annotate our worlds and visit each others’. Books are part of how we do world traveling. As Lugones (1987) articulates, world traveling is not about tourism but about the creation of “an incomplete visionary non-utopian construction of life” (10). Lugones’ world traveling refutes that these creations will provide definitive boundaries of what counts a category, racial, gender, any category.

In our brief texting that day but a long and ongoing conversation about all the books we love and can’t wait to read, Patricia texted, responding to my love of desire to take it “all” in, never wanting to miss

anything, “Always all. Clearly not good at putting it all away without getting harmed [she named a medical condition that is in constant dynamic with contexts]. Ugh. This is the risk I will always take.” I responded, “I blame the world and its oppressions for your [medical dynamics]. You should be able to be your wilding self.” Patricia put a heart emoji on that sentiment and responded, “Love this ‘our wilding selves.’ Love you for this and so much more.”

As women, we will always be asked to do labor in the academy that is bureaucratic, essential to how higher education understands itself as a corporation, but we are not likely to reap institutional rewards, such as promotion and increases in salary. As diasporic women, our community-informed and collaborative knowledge building that is answerable to various communities is far less likely to garner millions in grants, reinforcing the labor the institutions decide we should do for it. This is neither true for all women from diasporic culture coordinates, but it is true for far too many to be ignored. Nzinga provides a right on time analysis of the work that neoliberal higher education does on and to women of color, with a particular focus on Black women academics. From a colonial analysis, these acts are further iterations of extraction, invisibilizing women (Vaught), and ongoing attempts to ‘settle’ women through thin windows for their lives but thick practices for their enclosure.

Feminist decoloniality offers companionship. The kind of companionship that seeks engagement, that does not rely on “the diverse woman” to interrupt such psycho-babble and try to explain its nonsense, while it does its work on her. It is a form of sanctuary, a mutuality that is created through visiting each other others’ worlds and creating worlds through relation. This companionship also makes good trouble. I am convinced, both through the literal reactions and practices I’ve seen from academics, that a group of decolonizing women makes all kinds of trouble for the shaky ground that whitestream feminism borne of patriarchy constantly seeks to settle.

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