

# Categorically Unfriendly Towards Essentialism

## An Intersectional Approach and a Supplement

TINE DAVIDS & FRANCIO GUADELOUPE

An anniversary intrinsically invites one to look back and inwards, and so that is also the purpose of this short essay. Not to navel-gaze or look back in nostalgia, but to reflect on the approaches and conceptualizations that were developed over the years on gender, subjectivity, intersectionality and change, at what is now called the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies (CAOS), and what these produced in terms of contributing to problematizing the colonialities of 'gender' and 'race'.

These conceptualizations were the outcome of research and teaching by Tine Davids and Francien van Driel but developed in conjunction with other teacher-researchers in and outside the department such as, among others,<sup>1</sup> Karin Willemse at the Erasmus University, Bibi Straatman at the Minerva Hanze University of Applied Sciences, Marianne Marchand at the Universidad de las Americas, Mexico, and student-mentees who later became colleagues such as the co-author of this piece, Francio Guadeloupe. If part of decoloniality is about sharing without ownership, with the goal of transforming the world in a way in which it will be indescribably better than it currently is, it is important to recognize others outside Nijmegen with whom we, the authors of this essay, continue to develop concepts that seek to undo coloniality.

---

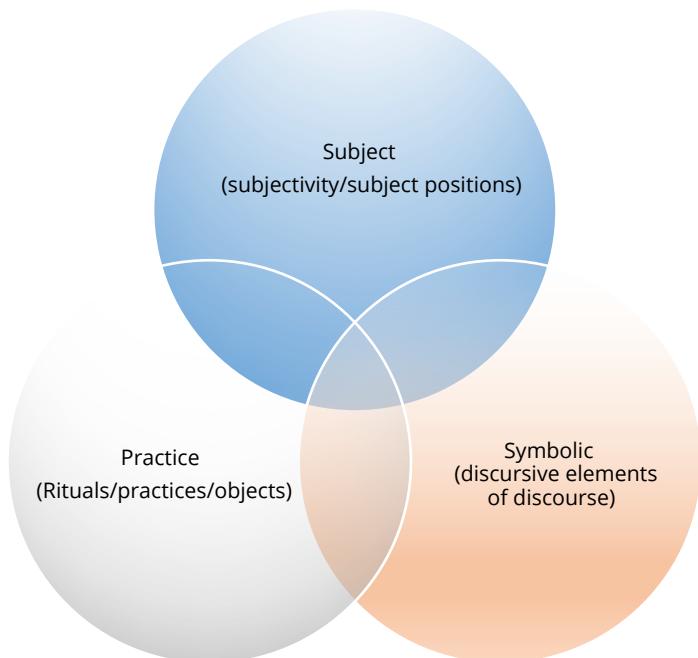
<sup>1</sup> We cannot do justice to all the ones who inspired us and on whose input we have built our ideas, but we do want to mention here also LOVA (Netherlands Association for Gender Studies and Feminist Ethnography), as a support network. All of those who inspired us directly or indirectly implicitly form part of this essay.

Looking back at the early 1990s, when Tine Davids started the course on feminist ethnography, Radboud University used to be known as the Catholic University of Nijmegen [Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen (KUN)]. Anthropology and development studies were still separate sections or departments at that time. Interesting to know in that respect is that, while universities are positioned at the top or center of the academic knowledge power structure, up until recently the history of Catholics and Catholic institutions in the Netherlands was one of working in the margins and of marginalization (Van Rooden 1995). No wonder, then, that the university placed a high value on emancipation and liberation as part of its mission statement. Liberation, which etymologically stems from the 15th century French term ‘liberation’, and further back the Latin *liberationem*, referring to the “act of setting free from restraint or confinement,” or “a setting or becoming free” was also what we as the aforementioned teacher-researchers were after. Not that Tine Davids in anthropology and Francien van Driel in development studies were working at setting others free, or training gullible minds primarily with ‘pink skins’ to do so. Enacting a White Savior complex (Bandyopadhyay 2019) or being social philosophers with their unenlightened poor (Rancière 2004) was not what they, and later Francio Guadeloupe who taught courses with them, were about. What we did search for with Francien van Driel was to undo hierarchical research relations and the integration of a gender and ‘race’ perspective as part of a quest for feminist research and education.

Although Marion den Uyl, Thea Campagne and José van Santen came before us at the KUN, for us, the authors of this essay, it all started with a course, taught by Tine Davids, for which the initiative was taken by Tchambuli, then a very active group of students that rallied to get attention for gender and an intersectional gender analysis into the curriculum of anthropology. In this course, theorizing gender was connected to epistemological questions on how to be a feminist researcher and how to consequently do fieldwork, but also in relation to the representation of the ones who participated in the research, in our writings. Paradigmatic change was in the air (see also Davids and Van Driel 2002). Kimberley Crenshaw (1989), one of our inspirators, had just coined the term intersectionality. Feminist-inspired scholarship was here to stay, and so too in Nijmegen. As such, it did not stop at this one course though. Soon after, Tine Davids started working at the Department of Development Studies where she developed and taught together with Francien van Driel courses on gender, power and representation. And also, in particular after the merger of the two departments, courses on gender studies became part of the compulsory curriculum, also taught by Prof. Willy Jansen (see also the essay by Jansen in this volume).

Despite the fact that both anthropology and development studies had and have their separate debates and literature regarding the study of gender, they also share a common focus on gender as part of power relations and ideals on feminist ethnography. From this focus, and as an outcome of research and educational experiences a multidimensional approach on gender was developed, which was coined as the gender lens, that serves as an analytical tool or approach to conceptualize the multidimensional power dynamics of gender (e.g. Davids 2011; Davids and Van Driel 2005, 2009).

The gender lens approach departs from the idea that gender is a shifting signifier that only acquires meaning in a particular context, and encompasses simultaneously the subjectivity and embodiment as well as the representations of femininity and masculinity, when enacted and 'performed' (Butler 1990) by people in particular practices or in social reality. Although these dimensions coexist and are simultaneously at work in reality – without prioritizing one of these – in order to explore one's room to maneuver and agency *vis-à-vis* different discourses, these dimensions can be taken apart analytically to obtain insight into the articulation of the more structural aspects as well as the subjective aspects – as depicted graphically below.



This is not meant as a rigid methodology or ‘tool’, but to be used ‘loosely’ and adapted analytically to different ends, types of research and contexts. This may result in a kind of open-endedness, since how these dimensions interact depends on the specific contexts. At the same time, this open-endedness or vagueness and ambiguity can be interpreted, rather than as ‘bad theory’, as a strength, much as Kathy Davis (2008) interpreted the relative vagueness of the concept of intersectionality, to avoid ethnocentric and pre-given interpretations of gender.

At a minimum, the gender lens can function as a strong and stubborn reminder<sup>2</sup> that gender encompasses both the body, and thus also sex and sexuality, as well as representations, regulations and practices; both structure as well as agency and subjectivity. It is also a reminder that we are all carriers of power structures and relations, which work on and through the subject. Change is best conceptualized as slow change (Davids et al. 2014) in the sense that it does not take place outside of power relations but in and through them, and so change cannot take place outside the subject; rather, we have to work through it. It is the messiness of everyday life – where dimensions simultaneously work on each other – that discourses get deconstructed.

Moreover, the gender lens is also meant to facilitate not only the exploration of research subjects, but also, as part of feminist ethnography, how the agency of the researched is at stake. Agency is not just knowledge in and of itself that should be represented, but is part of the intersubjective relation between researcher and researched (see also Davids and Willemse 2014). What was sought also with this approach to gender was to undo as much as possible the authoritarian relationships that characterize academic research.

Of course, gender is not only a shifting signifier because of its situated character, but also because it cannot be separated from other ascriptive identity markers and corresponding power relations. Therefore, this approach also forms a stubborn reminder that gender is radically intersectional. Not in a way that different identities are piled up in endless etcetera’s, but as intrinsically linked. As in the way in which one says, “I am a ‘pinked skinned’ woman, or a ‘Black’ man”, and of which it is impossible to say what comes first, or to say the one without the other, while it depends on the context and the person, of course, how this acquires a particular ‘performativity’. A radical intersectionality that is categorially unfriendly to essentialism and, as such, invites students to radically rethink our human condition.

The rethinking of our human condition was of course not exclusive for gender studies, or ‘kept’ exclusively for and within intersectional gender studies courses,

---

<sup>2</sup> With thanks to Cesar Merlin Escorza.

but also informed the teaching in other courses, such as the course on *Culture, Development and Globalization*, originally designed by the late Prof. Frans Hüsken and Tine Davids, and later also taught by us, the authors of this essay. In these courses, we centered not only the de-essentialization of gender but also that of ethnicity and race. If decoloniality is about problematizing and substituting the colonialities of 'race', 'gender', 'land', and political economy, for an eco-engaged humanism integral to and positively integrating with the multiple 'becoming' of the world, then what we taught at that time was, with hindsight, a start to that end, as the term was being coined by Latin American thinkers.

A common ground was formed for what Guadeloupe later made intelligible in his book, *Black Man in the Netherlands: An Afro-Antillean Anthropology* (2022), that it is in particular instances of conviviality where the essentialism of race gets undone. And from a radical intersectional point of view, we would like to add also gender. The messiness and ambiguity of everyday life that Davids and Van Driel pointed at in relation to gender does come close to the conviviality to which Guadeloupe refers in his recent book. Even more so if we take 'performativity' into account, as Judith Butler's theory based on the observation of travesties performing 'traditional femininity' and thus crossing and destabilizing gender norms. Guadeloupe shows in his book how youngsters in those convivial spaces can 'perform' cultural stereotypes of each other's background in a playful manner, thus destabilizing these stereotypes. It is in these border crossings that racialized cultural differences are de-essentialized. It is the 'iterability' of gender and race that enables the process of destabilizing these very categories. This de-essentializing is our goal and, as such, an integral part of our academic practice. Implying not only undoing/decolonizing categories of gender and race, but also for instance black and white, migrants and sedentary people (see also Dahinden 2016, on demigrantization).

Decoloniality is often referred to as theorizing from the South. As important as this displacing of the geopolitics of knowledge is, it runs the risk of reinforcing the ideationally hegemonic North-South, East-West, and West versus the Rest divide, which cannot be part of the outernational project of decolonizing the planet. By outernationality we are referring to those counter-reactionary place-making activities in peripheries outside and inside centers of power in the so-called North and South that connect and make common cause. They have to do so, if in other words they think as Maria Lugones (2007) thought us to think coalitionally, because too many people across the globe cannot breathe, eat, and become in a dignified way.

The old West versus non-West divide will not do, for as Anibal Quijano (2007: 168) long ago averred, Western Imperialism is not Eurocentered colonialism.

*A relation of direct, political, social and cultural domination was established by the Europeans over the conquered of all continents. This domination is known as a specific Eurocentered colonialism. In its political, above all the formal and explicit aspect, this colonial domination has been defeated in the large majority of the cases. America was the first stage of that defeat, and afterwards, since the Second World War, Asia and Africa. Thus, the Eurocentered colonialism, in the sense of a formal system of political domination by Western European societies over others seems a question of the past. Its successor, Western imperialism, is an association of social interests between the dominant groups ('social classes' and/or 'ethnies') of countries with unequally articulated power, rather than an imposition from the outside.*

Such an analysis that foregrounds the multidimensionality of powers calls for a supplement to intersectionality; a politics of transfiguration that critically reinvigorates feminist-informed politics of fulfillment grounded in lived realities.

*[A] politics of fulfillment envisages that the society of the future attains more adequately what present society has left unaccomplished. It is the culmination of the implicit logic of the present. [A] politics of transfiguration emphasizes the emergence of qualitatively new needs, social relations, and modes of association, which burst open the utopian potential within the old (Benhabib 1986: 13).*

A politics of transfiguration warrants speculation and the possibility of fully departing from the structures of Enlightenment Man and counter-Enlightenment richly-fleshed, nonracial *humans*. The latter is arguably the ground of intersectionality and writerly style. The remainder of the essay speaks to our post-Enlightenment forays, whereby instead of speaking about humans we solely recognize that some phenomena *human* (Guadeloupe and Granger 2021). Humans as a noun connotes species specificity, while *human-ing* as a verb signifies multi-durational microphysical, biological, inorganic, symbolic and other semiotic processes and performances as constitutive of the richness of any human subjectivity. In other words, *human-ing* conceptually puts species-specificity under permanent erasure. *Human-ing*, as a picture of how we become with others, enables the articulation of what philosophers term the manifest and scientific image of existence (Sellars 1963). The manifest image refers to the observable ways in which we who *human* habitually experience the world and ourselves: as wholes with social identities clearly discerning specific species, places, things and happenings we reason about in collectives. This is the world where we who *human* consider ourselves

free, or ideally strive to found freedom, justice, and equity in common. The work of teaching-researching is about finding out with those we study the reasons for their actions and the reasons for the acts done to them. The scientific image by contrast is the world that is not observable by the naked eye. It is the world of microphysics, particles, atoms, viruses, unwilling transactions between so-called species, but also of the unconscious, ideological power structures, disciplinary discourses and the likes. Here the work of teaching-researching is about uncovering the causes for actions of those we study, and what caused particular actions to befall them. Our conception of *human-ing* recognizes the importance of both the manifest and scientific image – and the specific teaching-researching endeavors they entail.

It goes without saying, given the first half of this essay, that we emphatically insist on keeping a trace of counter-Enlightenment subjectivities, intersectionally-constituted by observable social identities. We also affirm that conception-signaling multiplex subjectivities are in line with the world of selves that, in our conception of *human-ing*, we integrate with a scientific appreciation of we who *human* as a complex of cells. We therefore coined the compound term ‘*cell(ves)*’ to denote that we who *human* – on the manifest level as selves – are societies of cells which, in actuality, consist of a multitude of molecular compositions in concert with microbial and other becomings. A continual prehension of processes with differing durations, thinking with Isabel Stengers (2011), whereby hospitality is integral to the human condition; the willed and what we termed above the unwilling transactions between so-called species.

To become, *cell(ves)* must commune internally and externally in manifold ways. So-called internal communing is done through emergent operations known as sub-, un-, or full consciousness within *cell(ves)*. These operations of awareness are structured like a language and come into being through semiotics. Here is where the idea of having a self or consisting of multiple selves comes in.

But there is also an outside. Kristeva (1982: 95) already stated the obvious when she averred for “a theory of the subject that does not reduce the subject to one of understanding, but instead opens up within the subject this other scene of pre-symbolic functions”.

Taking her cues, we acknowledge as stated above that *cell(ves)* do not live by words and signs alone nor solely among those who *human* too. Attention has to be given to what Donna Haraway terms our companion species, meaning a recognition that we co-appear with others who *animal* in manifold ways, more specifically those we domesticated. In addition, our becoming cyborgs, i.e. thinking ourselves in conjunction with the technical-scientific and other inorganic processes, also

has to be taken on board. *Cell(ves)* in this case are cyborgs and in an inextricable appearing with several termed, in Enlightenment-speak, species.

*Cyborgs and companion species each bring together the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways... neither a cyborg nor a companion animal pleases the pure of heart who long for better protected species boundaries and sterilization of category deviants (Haraway 2003: 5).*

All of this seems far removed from the coloniality of 'race' and 'gender', or rather, intersectionality. Again, it is not, but rather a supplement; a thinking beyond while recognizing that we still need to mourn, as Wendy Brown (2005), the end of counter-Enlightenment subjectivities. Brown's insistence ties into those inspired by a preferential option for the poor, such as Lisa Isherwood's feminist liberation theology (2004) or Vandana Shiva's ecofeminism (1989); we would be remiss if we forgot of those whose oppression indirectly enables cyborgs to philosophize while sipping wine in suburbia.

Looking back at how intersectionality was introduced and further elaborated upon in Nijmegen as a decolonial practice in Dutch academia, we recognize that our work continues. The further theoretical-practical deepening of intersectionality as a critical mode of inhabiting or appearing with others remains a matter of consequence for all.

## References

Bandyopadhyay. R. 2019. "Volunteer Tourism and 'The White Man's Burden': Globalization of Suffering, White Savior Complex, Religion and Modernity." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 27 (3): 327–343.

Benhabib. S. 1986. *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Brown W. 2005. "Feminism Unbound: Revolution, Mourning, Politics." In *Edgework, Critical Essays on Knowledge and Power*, by W. Brown, 98–115. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (8): 139–167.

Dahinden, J. 2016. "A Plea for the 'De-migrantization' of Research on Migration and Integration." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (13): 2207–2225.

Davis, K. 2008. "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful." *Feminist Theory* 9 (1): 67–85.

Davids, T. 2011. "The Micro Dynamics of Agency: Repetition and Subversion in a Mexican Right-wing Female Politician's Life Story." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 18 (2): 155–168.

Davids, T., and F. van Driel. 2002. "Van vrouwen en ontwikkeling naar gender en globalisering." In *Voorheen de Derde Wereld: Ontwikkeling anders gedacht*, edited by B. Arts and P. Hebinck, 60–85. Amsterdam: Mets en Schilt.

———. 2005. *The Gender Question in Globalization: Changing Perspectives and Practices*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

———. 2009. "The Unhappy Marriage between Gender and Globalisation." *Third World Quarterly* 30 (5): 905–920.

Davids, T., Driel, F., and F. Parren. 2014. "Feminist Change Revisited: Gender Mainstreaming as Slow Revolution." *Journal of International Development* 26 (3): 396–408.

Davids, T., and K. Willemse. 2014. "Embodied Engagements: Feminist Ethnography at the Crossing of Knowledge Production and Representation – An Introduction." *Women's Studies International Forum* 43: 1–4.

Guadeloupe, F. 2022 *Black Man in the Netherlands: An Afro-Antillean Anthropology*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Guadeloupe, F., and C. Granger. 2021. "Trans-Caribbean Thought: A Manifesto for Renewal of Dutch Caribbean Studies in the Age of the Anthropocene." *Esferas* 12: 157–164.

Haraway, D. 2003. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Isherwood, L. 2015. "When the Flesh is Word: Debt Economy Is Not a Thing for Heaven." *Feminist Theology* 23 (3): 284–291.

Kristeva, J. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lugones, M. 2007. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System." *Hypatia* 22 (1): 186–209.

Quijano, A. 2007. "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality." *Cultural Studies* 21 (2/3): 168–178.

Rancière, J. 2004. *Philosopher and His Poor*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Rooden, P. "Contesting the Protestant Nation: Calvinists and Catholics in the Netherlands." *Etnofoon* 8 (2): 15–30.

Sellars, W. 1963. *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, London: Routledge.

Shiva, V. 1989. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. London: Zed Books.

Stengers, I. 2011. *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.