

Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction

NELSON MALDONADO-TORRES
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

This special issue of *Transmodernity*, “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-Continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique,” stands on three fundamental premises that serve as the starting point for the dialogical encounters between intellectuals from Latin America, the Caribbean, and from minoritized sectors in the United States, particularly Latina/o and African American, who are featured here. The *first* one is that just as there has been a linguistic and a pragmatic turn, among other such turns in theory and philosophy, there has also been a decolonial turn with distinct features, some of which will be elucidated in these two issues.¹ Different from these other turns, however, the decolonial turn has long existed in different ways, opposing what could be called the colonizing turn in Western thought, by what I mean the paradigm of discovery and newness that also included the gradual propagation of capitalism, racism, the modern/gender system, and the naturalization of the death ethics of war.²

The *second* premise or fundamental hypothesis is that the decolonial turn is anchored in specific forms of skepticism and epistemic attitudes out of which certain critical questions and the search for answers are generated. And the *third* is that this turn, its form of skepticism and attitude, are arguably most at home in spaces such as ethnic studies and gender and women’s studies departments, units, and research centers in the Western academy, as well as in different institutions such as indigenous universities and among decolonial activists, independent scholars, and artists across the entire spectrum of the Global South, including the south in the north.³ To be sure, that the decolonial turn is particularly at home in spaces such as ethnic, women, or gender studies does not mean that every scholar in such spaces is effectively thinking through and contributing to the decolonial turn, or that the decolonial turn can only be found in such spaces. Arguably, because of its emancipatory goals and its suspension of method, the decolonial turn cannot be fully contained in single units of study, or captured within the standard division of labor between disciplines or areas in the traditional arts and sciences. What is at stake is the larger task of the very decolonization of knowledge, power, and being, including institutions such as the university.⁴

The Decolonial Turn

I have provided an initial genealogy and a description of the decolonial turn elsewhere, and Walter D. Mignolo adds important considerations in his contribution to this issue, but a succinct introductory note is in place here.⁵ Decolonial thinking has existed since the very inception of modern forms of colonization—that is, since at least the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries—, and, to that extent, a certain decolonial turn has existed as well, but the more massive

and possibly more profound shift away from modernization towards decoloniality as an unfinished project took place in the twentieth century and is still unfolding now. This more substantial decolonial turn was announced by W.E.B. Du Bois in the early twentieth century and made explicit in a line of figures that goes from Aimée Césaire and Frantz Fanon in the mid-twentieth century, to Sylvia Wynter, Enrique Dussel, Gloria Anzaldúa, Lewis Gordon, Chela Sandoval, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, among others, throughout the second half of the twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The events that led to its solidification include the collapse of the European Age in the first two World Wars, and the second wave of decolonization in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and other territories across the globe, including the Bandung Conference. Moments and movements that played a role in it and that are constitutive of it include the heightened perception of the linkages between colonialism, racism, and other forms of dehumanization in the twentieth-century, the formation of ethnic movements of empowerment and feminisms of color, and the appearance of queer decolonial theorizing.⁶ Anti-colonial and decolonial political, intellectual, and artistic expressions existed before, but not necessarily in the same amount, or with the same degree of self-awareness and regional and global exchanges as in the twentieth-century, when one can refer to an increasingly self-conscious and coalitional effort to understanding decolonization, and not simply modernity, as an unfinished project.⁷

There have been and there are differences and tensions among figures and movements that advance the decolonial turn. The decolonial turn does not refer to a single theoretical school, but rather points to a family of diverse positions that share a view of coloniality as a fundamental problem in the modern (as well as postmodern and information) age, and of decolonization or decoloniality as a necessary task that remains unfinished. These pair of special issues on “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn” aim to contribute to this turn not only by further clarifying its definition, depth, and scope, but also by doing so in dialogical manner. The articles provide analyses infused by a wide variety of decolonial discourses, including Africana and Caribbean philosophy, African American theology, feminism, Latina/o epistemology, Latin American liberation philosophy and theology, and modernity/coloniality/decoloniality.⁸ The contributors work in one or more of these areas, and a number of them have been aware or in dialogue with the work of at least some of the others. But, in addition to that, they read or heard a version of each other’s contributions before submitting the final versions of their essays for review, and in some cases, before they wrote the first draft of their papers. This makes these two special issues particularly strong in intergenerational, interethnic, and interspatial exchanges as well as in intertextuality.

Departing from the intersection of the main theoretical currents present in these two special issues, one can also see the twentieth century as the moment when the decolonial skepticism, and the creative thought of figures such as the Caribbean-Algerian Frantz Fanon and the Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa—skepticism towards dehumanizing forms of thinking that present themselves as natural or divine—, animate new forms of theorizing based on the scandal in face of the continuity of dehumanizing practices and ideas. These dehumanizing forces, logics, and discourses hardly seem to find an end in the current neoconservative and neoliberal moment, or in the liberal and Eurocentric radical responses that it sometimes generate. Continued Manichean polarities between sectors

considered more human than others, the accelerated rhythm of capitalist exploitation of land and human labor—sometimes facilitated, as Fanon well put it, by neocolonial elites among the groups of the oppressed themselves—, as well as anxieties created by migration and rights claims by populations considered pathological, undesirable, or abnormal—to name only a few of the most common issues found today—, make clear that decolonization will remain unfinished for some time.⁹ Likewise, decolonial movements of racialized populations in as varied places as the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, to name only a few, make clear that decolonization is relevant in the present and will continue to be doing so in the considerable future.

Beyond Recognition and Redistribution: Decolonization and the Academic Sites of the Decolonial Turn

The decolonial turn entered the Western academy more centrally after the decolonization of many territories in Asia and Africa, the Civil Rights movement in the United States, including the end of formal segregation in schools, and the movements that led to the creation of Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies programs in the United States. Also relevant are similar movements in other countries, which led to institutional recognition of indigenous languages in different countries, such as New Zealand.¹⁰ From the very beginning, these movements, and the thought of colonized people as a whole, tended to accentuate problems of identity and liberation. Lewis Gordon has called attention for long to these two elements, and one can see them clearly in Latin American philosophy of *liberation* and Latina/o philosophies of *identity*, perspectives that are in dialogue in this special issue of *Transmodernity*.¹¹ For Gordon, the tension between identity and liberation is inherent in the struggle for decolonization, and it has a long trajectory of responses to it as well as creative articulations that reject a fundamental divide between the two. That is, colonized subjects did not have to wait for the alleged tension between recognition and distribution to be raised in the context of a critique of “identity politics” in the United States, in order to know that one-sided political struggles are problematic and that certain forms of “identity politics” are perverse—beginning with Eurocentrism.

The problem of liberation is as central to the project of decolonization as it is that of identity. But, as Gordon would readily admit, they are not the only ones. What happened in the late 1960s with the creation of Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies programs was not the reduction of concerns with distribution of resources and goods to demands for recognition, or of liberation to identity, but rather the affirmation of an old demand beyond the affirmation of identity and the need for distribution of resources: the challenge that became explicit then (but anticipated by many others before) in the form of a student and social movement face to face with the modern research university was that of epistemic decolonization and the creation of new categories for a redefined humanity.¹²

The institutions of higher learning that were facing the demands could not see much beyond the question of identity itself. So, for the university, opening Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies

programs became a matter of re-presentation within the framework of area studies, not one of decolonization or epistemic justice. The liberal university subsumed these programs into its logic, seeing them as not much more than containing measures to address social demands having to do with diversity, and then, after defining them in such limited way, faulted them for allegedly being too essentialistic and provincial. To be sure, sometimes, Ethnic and Women's Studies have contributed to such characterization or that position, but they do not have to do much in order for the worst presumptions and conclusions to be mobilized against them. What is missed is the way in which those spaces allow for the necessary explorations and experimentations that go beyond the strict and largely self-imposed disciplinary and Eurocentric limits of the traditional humanities and social sciences.

Not only the concern with identity has produced problematic expressions in Ethnic Studies; the same occurs with the imperative of liberation. The problem emerges when liberation is translated as a claim for immediate political action, a kind of political immediatism that becomes antipathetic to theoretical reflection. When the two combine, that is, the worst aspects of the claim for identity and those of the search for liberation, then we have a form of what Lewis Gordon calls epistemological closure.¹³ When this happens, the particular contribution of Ethnic Studies scholarship to the project of decolonization tends to be neglected, not only by the academy itself, but by Ethnic Studies programs. Beyond the dialectic between identity and liberation, and the expressions of its most problematic features, Ethnic and Women's Studies posit the imperative of epistemic decolonization and the construction of new categories, critical discourses, and sciences. What I am suggesting, and what intellectuals seeking to advance the discourse of decolonization make clear, is that beyond the dialectics of identity and liberation, recognition and distribution, we have to add the imperative of epistemic decolonization, and in fact, of a consistent decolonization of human reality.¹⁴ For that one must build new concepts and being willing to revise critically all received theories and ideas. This is part of the "stuff" of the decolonial turn, and here resides the fundamental contribution of Ethnic Studies: Ethnic Studies is not merely a province in the Enlightened or Corporate University; it is, rather, a decolonial force in philosophy, theory, and critique that asks for and anticipates an-other kind of intellectual space. This special issue reaffirms the true vocation of Ethnic Studies (which has remained alive in the work of many), and which finds expression in the decolonial turn.

On Post-continental Philosophy

In addition to decolonial turn, another key term in the title of this special issue is post-continental philosophy. An elaboration of this concept appears in a "dossier" with the same name that appeared in the web dossier *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise*.¹⁵ *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* is a scholarly space dedicated to the exploration of questions and problems that are particularly relevant to the Global South and that seek to express a point of view grounded in it. The concept of post-continental philosophy points to an area of reflection that is not captured by the dominant tripartite division between Anglo-analytic, continental, or U.S. American philosophy. Post-continentiality is an

expression of the idea that continents are not natural spaces, but projects that rely on specific notions of spatiality. Instead of seeking a dialectic between Europe and other continents, post-continental philosophy suggests that the possibilities for generating and grounding theory and philosophy are multiple and include a variety of spatial and bodily references: the boat of the middle passage and the plantation, the black and the Chicana body, the island and the archipelago, the reservation and the boarding school, the prison and the camp. Post-continental philosophy revolves around “shifting the geography of reason,” which defines activities of projects such as the one by the Caribbean Philosophical Association.¹⁶

The concept of post-continental philosophy emerged alongside that of decolonial turn, and both can be traced back to efforts in defining the specific character of Africana and Caribbean philosophy—and similar efforts—and the project of shifting the geography of reason, on the one hand, and to explicit efforts to put in practice decolonial theorizing as well as Chicana/o, Latina/o and Latin American philosophy, on the other. I had the fortune of working in these intersections, and of being surrounded by terrific scholars who shared similar questions. Some, like Lewis Gordon and Gertrude González de Allen, contribute to the special issue in post-continental philosophy and to this one, primarily defined by the concept of decolonial turn. Others, such as Linda Martín Alcoff, have been part of the conversation about the character of Latin American and Latina/o philosophy for a considerable time, and now contribute with essays that, at least in my view, could be regarded as post-continental.

Thinking through the Decolonial Turn

This is the first of two special issues in *Transmodernity* that are dedicated to stage a conversation among a number of Latin American, Latina/o, Caribbean, and African American voices around, through, and on the basis of the idea of a decolonial turn in theory, philosophy, and critique. The conversation seeks to deepen the understanding of the genealogy and at least some fundamental conceptual components of this turn. Reference to this turn already appears in the first issue of this journal, and there are already several publications that refer to or draw from it.¹⁷ What is unique about these articles is that all of them emerged in the effort to spell out the contours of decolonial theorizing and that all the authors were aware of each other’s ideas before submitting or writing the articles. This means that there is a high degree of intertextuality, showing the movement of ideas, and the intersections and collaborations across what are sometimes taken as distinct areas or genealogies of thought: in this case, African American, Latina/o, Latin American, and Caribbean. The efforts here offer a sense of particularly critical and decolonial forms of each of these knowledge formations, and of a rich, ample, and complex body of thought that could be referred to as the thought of the decolonial turn.

The concept of the “decolonial turn” first came to light in a conference at the University of California, Berkeley in 2005. I was the main organizer and the concept reflected a long interest of mine in finding a way of articulating the massive theoretical and epistemological breakthroughs in the works of Third World figures, such as, for instance, Frantz Fanon, Enrique Dussel, Aníbal

Quijano, and Sylvia Wynter. It was the kind of breakthrough that I also identified in the works of a younger but not less illustrious generation of scholars, including Linda Martin Alcoff, Lewis Gordon, María Lugones, Walter Dignolo, Chela Sandoval, and Catherine Walsh, and in collectives such as the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality network, the Caribbean Philosophical Association, and in a varied group of Latina/o philosophers and critics. And so, the idea was to bring together a number of scholars from these groups, and a number of others with similar theoretical approaches in the effort of fomenting further intersections in their work. Conference presenters received a selection of each other's writings before the conference, including essays by keynote speakers Enrique Dussel and Sylvia Wynter.¹⁸

The conference "Mapping the Decolonial Turn: Trans/Post Continental Interventions in Philosophy, Theory, and Critique" took place one year after the first annual conference of the Caribbean Philosophical Association in Barbados, one year after Arturo Escobar and Walter Dignolo organized a meeting of the modernity/coloniality network at Duke University and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and right after the compilation of the essays that came out in the dossier on "post-continental philosophy" in *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise*.¹⁹ The idea for a conference that brought together African American and Caribbean, as well as Latina/o and Latin American figures working on questions of liberation and decolonization came up even before these meetings, since the exchanges between the philosophers and theoreticians working on these areas was taking place since at least the late 1990s. I brought this idea when I joined the Ethnic Studies faculty at the University of California, Berkeley, where two of my colleagues not only supported me but also joined the conference as co-organizers. They were Ramón Grosfoguel and José David Saldívar. I thank both of them for their support and collegiality, as well as for enchanting moments, such as when envisioning the rebirth of the *Revista Chicano-riqueña*, even as the dream did not get to materialize.

When the conference "Mapping the Decolonial Turn" took place, both José David Saldívar and myself were part of a selected group of faculty participating in a working group on Critical Theory led by then UC Berkeley colleagues Judith Butler and Martin Jay. A few of the participants in the working group attended the conference, and Martin Jay served as respondent in a panel on Latina/o philosophy with Gertrude Gonzalez de Allen, María Lugones, Eduardo Mendieta, and Paula Moya. I thank Martin Jay for joining us in the conference and serving as respondent. Judith Butler also attended the event, and remained one of the most open, honest, and supportive colleagues in face of this theorizing that, different from mainstream critical theory, it does not seek its ground in a genealogy of European intellectuals. I thank her for her openness and support.

Even though it has been six years since the conference at Berkeley took place, the essays in these two issues are more recent. Also more recent is the avid use of the concept of decolonial turn, based not only in the introduction to the conference, which served as the point of departure for this introduction, but also by a number of publications in the last few years. They include several of my publications cited already, an edited project published in 2007 by Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel, which used the concept of the "giro decolonial" [decolonial turn] as an organizing category.²⁰ The concept was more recently highlighted by publications from the Unidad

de Apoyo a Comunidades Indígenas en Guadalajara, México, by the Universidad de la Tierra in Chiapas, México, and by Ramón Grosfoguel's essay in the anthology *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, edited by Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar.²¹ There are also multiple publications on decoloniality in the last few years, including works by Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, as well as projects such as the Decolonial Feminism collective with María Lugones, Sylvia Marcos, Laura Pérez, and myself, when I was teaching at UC Berkeley, along with a number of former and current doctoral students such as Dalida María Benfield, Tara Daly, Marcelle Maese-Cohen, at Berkeley and Gabriela Veronelli, among others, at Binghamton University, New York.²² It is also important to mention a number of graduate students and former graduate students who have recently finished or are about to finish doctoral dissertations that contribute to the understanding of coloniality and decoloniality, including Daphne Taylor García, George Ciccariello-Maher, Jorge González, Leece Lee, and Samuel Bañales, among others. Also of note is that the concept of coloniality of power has attracted the attention of mainstream leftist theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, causing, however, a debate about the extent to which they appropriate the concept without giving due recognition to its author—or, by extension, much reference to its already common usage among a number of southern intellectuals and scholars of color.²³ And so, the moment is right for the publication of these essays that aim to elucidate and further contribute to the decolonial turn.

The original plan was to publish all the essays in a book, but it became increasingly clear that coloniality and decoloniality literature is being engaged by multiple constituencies in a wide diversity of countries and contexts, which makes the medium of an online open peer-reviewed journal the best option. Considering options for publication account for a good amount of the time between the submission of the final essays and this release. The emergence of *Transmodernity*, a peer-reviewed journal particularly focused on cultural and theoretical investigations from the Luso-Hispanic world, presented the perfect occasion for the publication of the essays.

The concept of transmodernity has been part and parcel of discussions among a number of authors in this volume.²⁴ Particularly important in this has been the work of Enrique Dussel, the major Latin American philosopher who formulated one of the most powerful conceptualizations beginning more than ten years ago.²⁵ As I argue in my essay on Dussel and the decolonial turn that appears in the first issue of *Transmodernity*, from a Dusselian perspective, transmodernity represents the horizon of a possible decolonized world.²⁶ The Dusselian conception of transmodernity is about the transgression and transcendence of modernity, understood as a system premised on colonizing ideas, institutions, and practices. The concept invites critical and creative appropriations of selected modern ideas, along with multiple other conceptual frameworks that can contribute to forge a less oppressive future. It recognizes that liberation and decolonization can be told in multiple languages, with unique and rich meanings and conceptual bases, and therefore values south-south encounters and dialogues. Transmodernity, at least the Dusselian version of it, is one way of expressing a decolonial attitude with regards to modernity, opening philosophy to multiple languages and stripping modernity of its colonizing elements and biases.

Articles in the first special issue

Enrique Dussel is the most senior scholar and the most widely published among all the contributors in these two special issues. He has also been, and continues to be, an important reference in the exploration of coloniality and decolonization at the philosophical and theoretical levels. This becomes evident in this issue, where most of the authors engage his work—some of them centrally, as in the case of Linda Alcoff, who takes interventions by Dussel and Sylvia Wynter as a point of departure for her own reflections in her essay.²⁷ For this reason, this first special issue begins with an article by Enrique Dussel. The article is the translation of a paper written for a conference that brought together a number of European and Latin American critical theorists. The conference was entitled “Critical Theory in the Dialogue between Europe and Latin America and the Present Tasks of Critique,” and took place on October 12, 2004 at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, in Mexico City. It included participants such as Axel Honneth, Stefan Gandler, and Albrecht Wellmer. This article is the first in the special issue not because it engages European critical theorists, but, because it is a good summary of some of Dussel’s main philosophical contributions, and because Dussel is the main living figure that is referenced in the essays. The essay also highlights one of Dussel’s main methodological procedures, which is to engage, criticize, and selectively incorporate ideas from European philosophers in his own framework of thought, anchored in questions and concerns that are central in the global south. This is a framework that focuses on the primacy of liberation and that highlights the relevance of questions that emerge from the colonized world.

Walter Dignolo complements Dussel’s essay, not by looking to the side, that is, to European philosophy, to explore possibilities of critique and conceptual affiliation, but rather by looking to the past and underneath, as it were. Dignolo thematizes the way in which sixteenth to eighteenth-century figures Waman Puma de Ayala and Ottobah Cuguano effected the decolonial turn. Dignolo also distinguishes decolonial thinking from postcolonial studies and from the typical markers of the political “left.” Perhaps, more than anyone, Dignolo has contributed to the task of mapping the decolonial turn globally and across several centuries, and this contribution provides an important point of reference for anyone interested in further elaborating this map and genealogy, in addition to understanding pivotal ideas and conceptual moves characteristic of the decolonial turn.

The third contribution is that of Linda Martin Alcoff, who takes us right to what is perhaps the central theme in these special issues: that of epistemology. Departing from challenges posed by Dussel and the Caribbean writer and theorist Sylvia Wynter, she provides key ideas for a decolonial epistemology that can provide an epistemological base and backbone to “the next revolution.” Revolutions need their epistemologies, or ways of approaching knowledge, its production, and its justification. Political revolutions have arguably suffered for not having good epistemologies, and the wrong epistemology can halt a revolution or even bring back the very vices and problems that the revolution seeks to overcome. And so, Alcoff insists that we cannot wish to bring decolonial social change without having an epistemology that is apt to the task of transforming the world accordingly. This runs counter to certain tendencies to conceive epistemology as a priori improper or oppressive,

which in turn leads to conceive knowledge production only as strategic or political, but as not having to do with justification or truth-value. Contrary to this, Alcoff believes that there are important truth-claims in revolutions that should not be reduced to matters of power and strategy. But for an epistemology to work “for the next revolution,” it has to be seen differently than it is usually seen by specialists in the area; that is, typically, as apolitical and acontextual, without reference to the concrete ways in which knowledge is produced and who produces it. Alcoff thus raises a double challenge, to the politically minded critic or theorist, and to the epistemologist. She defends a political epistemology that, among other things, is not afraid in considering identity and experience as key elements in the account of what counts as knowledge.

Paula Moya continues with the topic of the salient epistemological features of identity. In her article, “Who We Are and From Where We Speak,” she combines a perception of knowledge as always situated with the realist position that there is an independent world about which we have knowledge. For Moya, identity is not a prison, but rather an inevitable point of departure that allows us to observe, understand, and question particular aspects of the world. This means that there is no single point of view from nowhere, and that in many cases, hegemonic points of view are not general agreements, but the imposition of a particular view, and the expression of a particular identity, that has the pretension of representing all views. This view does not lead to easy rejections of dominant views, or easy affirmation of anything that is non-normative. Rather, it leads to serious reflection into what might constitute one’s most immediate epistemic interest and blind spots, as well as to multiple efforts to address those blind spots. Moya’s post-positivist realism is thus generative, rather than isolating or conformist. And because it departs from an acute understanding of the colonial structure on which identities and knowledges exist, it is fundamentally oriented by the task of decolonization. In that sense, the ethical, the political, and the epistemological are linked together in a powerful form. This is, indeed, one of the features of the decolonial turn, that is, the refusal to segregate epistemology from ethics, politics, and other areas of human creation. And this is something that she also finds in María Lugones’s work, which she takes as an example of the very decolonial epistemology that she defends. Moya very explicitly and emphatically turns her attention to decolonial artists and theorists in the elaboration of her ideas, those whose knowledges and identities are subalternized in society and the academy, complementing in very important ways the critical engagement with European figures in the opening essay by Dussel.

If Moya’s attention to the question of “who we are” foregrounds her view of the epistemological relevance of identity, the second part of her title, that is, “from where we speak”, leads us directly to the theme of place, and close to a concept that she cites: “shifting the geography of reason.” “Shifting” in this expression illustrates further that Moya, and, indeed, the entire array of contributors in this special issue, argue for the need to bring about changes and transformations in the world of thinking. “Shifting the geography of reason” is the motto of the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA). The concept is featured in the fourth article of this issue, entitled “Shifting the Geography of Reason in an Age of Disciplinary Decadence.” It is written by a founding member and first president of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, Lewis R. Gordon.²⁸

Shifting the geography of reason is part and parcel of the decolonial turn; it is indeed part of what the decolonial turn first achieved: the idea that we do not produce rigorous knowledge by adhering to the questions, concepts, and standards on the basis of the views or needs of only one region of the world, and even less of a region that has been characterized by either colonizing or ignoring other regions. This view of knowledge production as bounded by particular geographical horizons, or by disciplines or methods, is precisely what Gordon argues leads to disciplinary decadence. In that sense, decolonizing knowledge necessitates shifting the geography of reason, which means opening reason beyond Eurocentric and provincial horizons, as well as producing knowledge beyond strict disciplinary impositions. This includes the suspension of method, and the attention to problems and questions that emerge in the very effort to liberate oneself from the view of certain areas or bodies as epistemologically irrelevant. That is, “shifting the geography of reason” is a way to decolonize knowledge.

In his article, Gordon raises a word of caution about centering liberation and decolonization on ethical ideas. At first sight, this position would seem to be in tension with proposals such as Dussel’s “liberation ethics” and Moya’s view about the ethical and epistemological dimensions of identity. The tension might indeed be there, and yet, Gordon himself appeals to ethics in his view of the ethical and political challenges that emerge in the struggle against former liberators that turn oppressive: “Like Moses, they must move out of the way so the subsequent generations could build their freedom. We see here the sacrificial irony of all commitments to liberation: It is always a practice *for Others*.” Ironies like this, in fact, are exactly the kind of practical imperatives that are captured in a concept such as decolonial ethics.²⁹

In his contribution, “How Does it Feel to be a Problem?: (Local) Knowledge, Human Interests, and the Ethics of Opacity,” theologian and Africana Studies scholar Corey Walker, continues the exploration of the linkages between ethics and epistemology. Walker, who feels close to post-positivist realism and makes positive reference to Paula Moya’s work, draws from Charles Long’s reflections on the ethics of opacity in order to simultaneously oppose the colonial dimensions of mainstream ethics and epistemology. Colonial ethics and epistemology are characterized by either silencing a subject or by rendering him/her/them as fully transparent or knowable. The ethics of opacity highlight, both the impossibility of knowing a subject entirely, and the undesirability of attempting or pretending to do so. This applies not only to subjects, but also to local knowledges.

In this first issue of “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn,” we find then critical conversations with European critical theory, explorations of decolonial thinking in the past and engagements with decolonial thinkers in the present; we also find reflections on the role of ethics and politics in epistemology, and we are called to pay attention to identity and epistemic positionality, not out of self-protective considerations, but of generating the movement of decoloniality. We find the articulation of a political epistemology, the affirmation of the right to opacity, a call to build institutions that house or support decolonial views, and the assertion of the imperative of shifting the geography of reason as a way of overcoming disciplinary decadence. These

ideas give an indication of the depth, diversity, and substance of decolonial thinking and the decolonial turn today.

Notes

¹ I have elaborated further the concept of “decolonial turn” in multiple places including: “La descolonización y el giro des-colonial,” *Comentario internacional: revista del Centro Andino de Estudios Internacionales* 7 (2006-2007): 65-78; “Césaire's Gift and the Decolonial Turn,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 9. 2 (2006): 111-37; “Enrique Dussel's Liberation Thought in the Decolonial Turn,” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1. 1 (2011); [and *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* \(Durham: Duke University Press, 2008\).](#)

² For these different elements of the decolonial turn, see Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995); María Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22. 1 (2007): 186-209; Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003; Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1. 3 (2000): 533-80; Sylvia Wynter, “On Disenchanted Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond,” in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, 432-69. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, edited by Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford, 5-57 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

³ I have elaborated decolonial aspects of ethnic studies in “Pensamento crítico desde a subalteridade: os Estudos Etnicos como ciências descoloniais ou para a transformação das humanidades e das ciências sociais no século XXI,” *Afro-Asia* 34 (2006): 105-29, and “Epistemology, Ethics, and the Time/Space of Decolonization: Perspectives from the Caribbean and the Latina/o Americas,” *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/O Theology and Philosophy*, eds. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 193-206. See also the video of the forty years commemoration of the birth of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, which took place on February 26-27, 2010—Mattie Harper (Producer), and John Hamilton (Video Camera and Post-production), (2010), *Decolonizing the University: Fulfilling the Dream of the Third World College* [Web video], available online at Vimeo website. Jan. 12, 2012.

⁴ Decolonization of knowledge, power, and being are crucial concepts in the work of scholars who have theorized modernity/coloniality in at least the last fifteen years. They include Santiago Castro-Gómez, Ramón Grosfoguel, Edgardo Lander, María Lugones, Walter D. Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, and Catherine Walsh. The late Fernando Coronil, Enrique Dussel, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and Sylvia Marcos have also been important interlocutors, and have contributed with important ideas and developments to the understanding of coloniality and decoloniality. So is also the case with Caribbean scholars such as Lewis Gordon, Paget Henry, and Sylvia Wynter. On the topic of decolonizing the university, see the video with the same name on the 40th Anniversary of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, which took place on February 26-27, 2010—Mattie Harper (Producer), and John Hamilton (Video Camera and Post-production), (2010), *Decolonizing the University*.

⁵ I cite a number of these publications in the first note further above.

⁶ Figures such as Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones have been key figures in most of these moments or movements.

⁷ For a discussion of the idea of the unfinished project of decolonization, in contrast with Habermas’s conception of the unfinished project of the Enlightenment, see Maldonado-Torres, “Enrique Dussel’s Liberation Thought in the Decolonial Turn,” and Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and José David Saldívar. “Latin@s and the ‘Euro-American’ Menace: The Decolonization of the US Empire in the 21st Century,” *Latin@s in the World-System*, eds. Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres and José David Saldívar (Boulder, Co: Paradigm Press, 2005), 3-27.

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- ⁸ For a related effort see Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).
- ⁹ See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004).
- ¹⁰ For this see the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999).
- ¹¹ For Gordon's reflections on the problems of identity and liberation, see Lewis R. Gordon, "Du Bois's Humanistic Philosophy of Human Sciences," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (2000): 265-80.
- ¹² When I first wrote this session, I was bringing together two elements that are often brought out by Lewis Gordon (identity and liberation) with one theme that was and still is at the center of the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality network, that is, epistemic decolonization. Since then, Gordon has added a third component in his view of the basic questions that emerge in the context of colonization. He calls it the metacritique of reason, by which he means the critical revision of the concepts through which we understand identity and liberation—Gordon reflected on this most recently, to my knowledge, in his presentation at a panel honoring Fanon at the International Marcuse conference, University of Pennsylvania, October 28, 2011. Likewise, one can see in Walter D. Mignolo, who has long insisted on the need for decolonizing epistemology, an incorporation of the theme of “shifting the geography of reason,” initially proposed by Gordon as a recurrent theme for the Caribbean Philosophical Association—see the very essay on this issue.
- ¹³ See Gordon, “Du Bois’s Humanistic Philosophy,” 275.
- ¹⁴ These intellectuals include all the contributors in this volume, others already cited or mentioned in the essay, and others that have not been mentioned.
- ¹⁵ See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, coord., "Post-continental Philosophy," *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* 3 (Fall 2006). See <http://trinity.duke.edu/globalstudies/wko-v1d3>. This issue includes essays by Lewis Gordon, Alejandro de Oto, Gertrude James Gonzalez de Allen, Paget Henry, Jane Gordon, Kenneth Knies, and the late Esiaba Irobi.
- ¹⁶ See essay by Gordon in this issue, “Shifting the Geography of Reason in an Age of Disciplinary Decadence.”
- ¹⁷ See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Enrique Dussel’s Liberation Thought in the Decolonial Turn”.
- ¹⁸ These readings included Sylvia Wynter “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument,” *The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 257-337, and an unpublished version of Enrique Dussel’s “From Critical Theory to the Philosophy of Liberation: Some Themes for Dialogue,” trans. George Ciccariello Maher, now appearing in *Transmodernity* 1.2 (2011): n.p. Dussel offered the first keynote, based on “From Critical Theory to the Philosophy of Liberation,” and Wynter offered the closing keynote entitled “After Human as *Anthropos*: Towards the Sociogenic Principle and the Third Emancipatory Breaching of the Law of Cognitive Closure.” While Wynter is a foundational figure for this project, and her work is explicitly referred to by Linda Martín Alcoff and Corey Walker in this issues, she was working on a collection of her essays and could not to submit an article for the projected publication that was planned as an outcome of the conference.
- ¹⁹ See *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* 3 (Fall 2006), online.
- ²⁰ See from Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "La descolonización y el giro des-colonial"; "Césaire's Gift and the Decolonial Turn," "Enrique Dussel's Liberation Thought in the Decolonial Turn," [and *Against War*](#). Also see Santiago Castro-Gómez, and Ramón Grosfoguel, eds. *El giro decolonial: reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global* (Bogotá, Colombia: Universidad Javeriana y Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2007).
- ²¹ The Unidad de Apoyo a Comunidades Indígenas (UACI) at the Universidad de Guadalajara in Mexico publishes the newspaper *Tukari*, which dedicated its issue of November 20, 2011 to the theme “Giro des-colonial. La lucha de los pueblos por la autonomía y el territorio” [De-colonial turn. The struggle of peoples for autonomy and land.] See <http://www.tukari.udg.mx/publicaciones/giro-descolonial-la-lucha-de-los-pueblos-por-la-autonomia-y-el-territorio> Also, the Universidad de la Tierra put together a number of my articles on the topic and published them as Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “...la descolonización y el giro des-colonial...” (Chiapas: Universidad de la Tierra, 2011). See also

Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms," *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, eds. Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (London: Routledge, 2011), 65-77.

- ²² Key in the creation of the network on decolonial feminism was María Lugones, who was a presenter at the conference and who met Chela Sandoval, an important Chicana decolonial feminist, and also a presenter at the conference. Sandoval herself did not participate in the network, which was formed by groups in Bolivia, Mexico, Binghamton University in New York, and the University of California, Berkeley. At Berkeley, I had the pleasure of working with Laura Pérez, also a participant in the conference, and with the former and current students mentioned above, in the formation of the decolonial feminist working group there. At the conference, Laura Pérez presented a paper that explored intersections and contrasts between Dussel's liberation ethics and Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*. An expanded and more elaborated version of this paper is now found in Laura Pérez, "Enrique Dussel's *Ética de la liberación*, U.S. Women of Color Decolonizing Practices, and Coalitionary Politics amidst Difference," *Qui parle* 18.2 (Spring/Summer 2010), 121-46. Pérez's essay forms part of a "special dossier" on decolonial feminism that Marcelle Maese-Cohen, another participant in the decolonial feminism group at Berkeley, put together for the journal *Qui parle*. See Marcelle Maese-Cohen, "Introduction: Toward Planetary Decolonial Feminisms," *Qui parle* 18.2 (Spring/Summer 2010), 3-27. Also, central for decolonial feminism, see, Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), and Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System." A version of this essay by Lugones, originally published in the feminist journal *Hypatia*, also appears in what is a collection of essays by scholars who engage the concept of coloniality—see Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
- ²³ See Mark Driscoll, "Looting the Theory Commons: Hardt and Negri's *Commonwealth*." *Postmodern Culture* 21.1 (2010).
- ²⁴ As a matter of fact, already in 2005, Ramón Grosfoguel, José David Saldívar and I began to prepare an anthology entitled *Coloniality, Transmodernity, and Border Thinking*, focused on contributions by Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Walter D. Mignolo. I had written the section on transmodernity for the introduction. However, there were several complications and the project took a different route.
- ²⁵ Enrique Dussel, *Posmodernidad y transmodernidad: diálogos con la filosofía de Gianni Vattimo*. (Puebla, Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, Golfo Centro; Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente; Universidad Iberoamericana, Plantel Laguna, 1999). For a discussion of the concept transmodernity and some of its uses, see the opening article by Rosa María Rodríguez Magda in the first issue of *Transmodernity*, 1.1 (2011), entitled "Transmodernidad: un nuevo paradigma" (transmodernity: a new paradigm). Magda coined the term in 1989, making her the first or one of the firsts in using the concept—certainly before Dussel did. Her definition of it has some elements in common with Dussel's, but it is also quite different, a discussion that is beyond the scope of this introduction to the "decolonial turn."
- ²⁶ See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Enrique Dussel's Liberation Thought in the Decolonial Turn," 3, 9, 14.
- ²⁷ Sylvia Wynter was part conference that led to these special issues, but she was working on the collection of her essays and could not submit a contribution.
- ²⁸ For a brief introduction to the Caribbean Philosophical Association and access to an annotated bibliography see Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Lewis R. Gordon, "The Caribbean Philosophical Association," *Oxford Libraries Online*.
- ²⁹ For an exploration of decolonial ethics, see Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*.

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