

**Decoloniality at Large:
Towards a Trans-Americas and Global Transmodern Paradigm
(Introduction to Second Special Issue of
“Thinking through the Decolonial Turn”)**

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“To Don Carlos, Emperor of the Romans,
King of Spain, lord of the Indies and of the
New World.... Lord sovereign: The greatest
event since the creation of the world
(excluding the incarnation and death of Him
who created it) is the discovery of the Indies;
and so it was called New World.”

-Francisco López de Gómara, 1552¹

“To the People of Mexico: To the peoples
and governments of the world: Brothers and
sisters... The flower of the world will not die.
The masked face which today has a name may
die, but the word which came from the depth
of history can no longer be cut by the
arrogance of the powerful. We were born of
the night. We live in the night. We will die in
her. For everyone everything. ... For us
nothing. ... Housing, land, employment, food,
education, independence, democracy, liberty,
justice and peace. These were the banners
during the dawn of 1994. These were our
demands during that long night of 500 years.
These are, today, our necessities.”

EZLN, Fourth Declaration of the Lacandona
Jungle, 1996

Few statements in history capture the enormous significance and marvel for European Christians of the so-called “discovery” of the Americas as the judgment from Francisco López de Gómara, which considers it next in importance to the creation and the birth of Jesus Christ. The “discovery of the Indies” represented the veritable emergence of a “new world,” one that challenged the then existing sense of time, space, laws, knowledge, and social organization, and that opened up new paths of power, knowledge, and being not only for Europe, but gradually for the largest part of humanity. This new system and worldview, which came together with a new sense of selfhood, new

institutions, and new civilizational and subjective goals, was premised on a fundamental division of humanity between those who deserved either the reality or the possibility of inner-worldly salvation and others who were considered less than fully human and ultimately condemned, as well as between human agency and the inert and always available-for-consumption-and-use world of nature. This is a system and worldview that we have seen unfolding in ways that are neither entirely logical nor necessary, and that yet can be discerned through multiple continuities and discontinuities. Its fundamental tasks included colonial expansion, the colonial reconceptualization of physical and human geography, the recreation, intensification, and naturalization of hierarchies of being that divide some humans from others, and the subordination of people and nature to the demands of production and accumulation. This was not only colonialism, understood as a political or cultural condition, but coloniality, conceived as a matrix of knowledge, power, and being. If one follows the ideas in these two special issues of *Transmodernity. Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, as well as previous formulations by key theorists such as Aimé Césaire, Enrique Dussel, Frantz Fanon, María Lugones, Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Chela Sandoval, Catherine Walsh, and, Sylvia Wynter, among many others, one could refer to this intricate matrix of power, knowledge, and being as modernity/coloniality.

The modern/colonial paths of power, knowledge, and being that began to emerge in certain places and moments before 1492, but more systematically so after the moment of “discovery,” did not affect everyone equally. The combined effects of discovery and colonization, as they took place in the context of already existing war, crisis, and an increasing social exclusion and slavery in the Iberian Peninsula, led to a gradual naturalization of war (with ideas about the value of masculinity and femininity, as well as enemies and slaves) and a sedimentation of what, with Fanon, we could refer to as Manichean conceptions of value and existence.² Manichean in this context makes reference to the dichotomous division between good and evil. An important part of the argument here is that the colonized is not seen or treated by the colonizer simply as an “object” and therefore that the colonial relation or the dynamics of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being cannot be accounted for simply by the problem of objectification. There is an added dimension of phobia, hatred, homicidal tendencies, and desires that take place between the colonizer and the colonized in ways that do not necessarily take place in the relation between subject and object. Likewise, this means that decolonization cannot be solely about overcoming the subject-object split, or about the rescue of the human from objectification, as some traditional humanism would have it, but about overturning a world structured around polarities of ethical and to some extent religious values, where good and evil, colonizer and colonized, are seeing in their more pure and extreme form as unbridgeable essences. This separation and inhibition of human contact is so brutal that it ultimately creates the conditions for, if not the necessity of, revolutionary violence, as Fanon aimed to make clear in his *Wretched of the Earth*. But Manicheism is also evinced in apparently less dramatic forms, as for instance, in the phenomenon of having “black skin,” yet living in a world that creates “aberrations of affect” that leads to desiring “white masks.” This entire complex where the structural and the cultural, the social and the psychological, the ethical and the religious, as well as the epistemological and the political are involved, helps to explain why Fanon’s work, or decolonial

thinking for that matter, could not and cannot simply take the route of traditional disciplines or area studies, as I will elaborate further below, in aiming to understand human reality. This means equally that liberal humanism, and one could add here Marxist humanism as well, typically find limits when aiming to spell out the condition of colonized existence and to come up with ways to confront it, and this goes from attempts at condescending, unilateral, or regulated and well-guarded “inclusion” to the revolution of the proletariat, and multiple positions in between.

In the context of “discovery” and conquest, the emerging social and geopolitical Manichean reality redefined the traditional Christian terms of salvation and damnation leading to a world that would be experienced by some as a heaven or a hell on earth to which one belonged, not by virtue of faith or action, but by virtue of nature.³ The sedimentation and naturalization of the emerging ideas, practices, and institutions defined the “new world,” understood not only as the Americas, but as the hegemonic set of assumptions in an increasingly globalized world. This is why the “invention” of the Americas (as O’Gorman would have it) is not solely of local or regional, but also of global significance, just as one also needs to consider all the other so-called continents and their inter-relations.

The European sense of amazement and marvel in face of the apparently new for them was probably matched by the sense of horror generated in populations that were treated as undesirable, dispensable, and less than fully human.⁴ What European Christians like López de Gómara perceived as a glorious beginning of divine proportions when he was writing in the middle of the sixteenth century, turned out to be seen by those on the other side of the Manichean line as “that long night of 500 years,” as the Zapatistas put in writing in the Fourth Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle. What was the “new world” for some, became a “night” for others. Two fundamental metaphors expressing and asking for different interpretations of the same civilizational system. One is raised in a letter to a King, Lord of the Indies, introducing an ambitious “general history” of the so-called new world, while the other is part of a declaration that can be read as a manifesto for decolonization and is directed to people of Mexico (part of what was formerly called New Spain) and to everyone. One is driven by a project of conquest to define great part of the future, while the other is an account of the past, raising from the past that is very present (thus resisting linear temporality), while also acutely aware that the future might be, not for them who will die in the night, but for others. At least this is how they are prepared to fight the fight: nothing for them, everything for everyone, thus refusing also a separation between the ethical and the political.

Together, the two key metaphors at play here, “new world” and “long night,” also reflect the Manichean structure of modern reality: perpetual newness as the light of day and the place of salvation; the dark night as the destiny for the souls that are seen as essentially incompatible or unable to fully accomplish the modern destiny. In like manner this division also appears in the idea of the “new” and the desire for a sense of perpetual “newness” even among conservative sectors, predicated on others as irremediably backwards or primitive. And yet, out of this “night,” continually emerge the possibility of different rays of light and of new and better days. For coloniality is not only met with anti-colonial resistance, but also with decoloniality, understood as the multiple and varied forms of recreating the matrix of power, knowledge, and being, as well as of

culture and structure, beyond the Manichean divisions that inhere at the center of modernity/coloniality and its naturalization of war.

These two special issues of *Transmodernity* bring together voices from multiple sites in the Americas, offering at least part of what could be referred to as a trans-American theoretical apparatus that is not the province of one specific discipline or another, or just some new form of a comparative enterprise, or of Area or Diaspora Studies. Here we find insights from philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and literature, among other areas, but changed through their relation with each other, through the primacy that they give to problems vis-à-vis methods, and through the effort of *caminar con* (walking with) decolonial social movements and decolonial knowledges outside of the academy. In addition to that, there is the high level of dialogue, exchange, and intertextuality among the multiple contributions in these two issues. This is an effort to further contribute to a decolonial and transmodern (at least in Dussel's sense of the term) form of intellectual engagement and production of knowledge that seeks to provide fresh views about our collective histories, current condition, and the possibilities for future co-existence.

And so, with this emphasis on the decolonial and transmodern form of intellectual production presented in these two issues, this second special issue begins with Catherine Walsh's essay "Other Knowledges, 'Other' Critiques: Reflections on the Politics and Practices of Philosophy and Decoloniality in the 'Other' America." Catherine Walsh is a scholar-activist who has worked with Puerto Rican youth in the United States, and with indigenous and Afro-descendent movements in South America, and particularly in Ecuador. She worked with Paulo Freire when she lived in the United States, and has collaborated with indigenous and Afro-descendent activists and intellectuals in Ecuador. Walsh has also been at the forefront with intellectuals such as Aníbal Quijano and Walter Dignolo, of the Modernity/Coloniality and Decoloniality collective, and directs a PhD program in (Inter)Cultural Latin American Studies at the Universidad Simón Bolívar in Quito, Ecuador.

Walsh's essay provides a clear example of the trans-Americas (and to some extent post-Americas) intellectual apparatus that I was referring to previously. She begins with a reflection on the conception of philosophy Rafael Sebastián Guillén, also known as Subcomandante Marcos, before he became part of the Ejército Zapatista para la Liberación Nacional (EZLN). Even then as a philosophy student, he was calling for "other" forms of "discursive strategies" and theoretical production that are precisely what Walsh aims to help elucidate in her essay. Walsh focuses her view on the "Other" America, by which she means, not so much a region, as a space but also a condition. It is the place and condition of occupying the "south," in its symbolic position of exclusion and marginalization with respect to a "north." These "north" and "south" are located in multiple places, but they have in common their intimate relation to the colonial matrix of power, knowledge, and being that has been at work in the "modern" and "postmodern" eras.

Walsh is interested in the "south" as a site of intellectual and theoretical production, and what she finds in voices that go from the Martiniquean/Algerian Frantz Fanon and the Bolivian Fausto Reinaga to the Afro-Colombian writer Manuel Zapata Olivella and Maroon forms of

thinking in Afro-descendent movements is varied forms of thinking from and not only about the local together with the global, and of combining theory and praxis, as well as philosophy and pedagogy. These perspectives serve as engines for decolonial thinking, a thinking that, as Walsh points out, is not only about decolonization, but also *for* (and not merely about) decoloniality in terms of the change in the matrix of power, knowledge, and being. This is decolonial theorizing, and not only critical theory, as Walsh also elaborates in reference to Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School.

The difference between decolonial thinking and critical theory had already come up in some way in the contribution by Enrique Dussel, which opened up the first of these two special issues. There, Dussel offered an account of his own liberation philosophy in dialogue with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, from Max Horkheimer to Jürgen Habermas. Dussel identifies and elaborates on the similarities and differences between his philosophy of liberation and the first and second generation of the Frankfurt School, including the innovations in his philosophy of liberation on the basis of the challenge and ideas offered by the Frankfurt School. He also offers common themes for further dialogue. In a way, Dussel's contribution to this second special issue continues some of those previous themes while centrally focuses on his concept of transmodernity. By transmodernity, Dussel understands what can be called a decolonial temporal and spatial horizon that involves the critical appropriation of elements of Western modernity along with the opening to multiple conceptions of knowledge and of the critical voices in them. It also involves the recognition and the effort to do away with the hierarchical relations in which these knowledges find themselves locally and globally.

Dussel's conception of transmodernity can appear to advocate simply for yet another form of relativism, unable to provide normative grounds for its assertions. The feminist epistemologist Linda Martín Alcoff takes on Dussel's critics, and differentiates Dussel's position from that of modernist universalists like Habermas, or postmodern and poststructuralist figures such as Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze. For Alcoff, Dussel's holds a historically and politically conscious "perspectivalism" that avoids the pitfalls of abstract universalisms and relativisms. Dussel does provide a meta-narrative, but it is not infallible. He advocates for pluri-versality, but that doesn't mean that anything goes. Rather, by relying on an incessant effort to excavate history and bring to the table multiple points of views (more than we see in any modern or postmodern author of note), his metanarrative provides the basis on which it can be both enriched and contested. With all its limitations, Dussel's intellectual work stands as a serious effort to think more universally, not by increasing the abstraction from a single point of view, but by engaging histories and knowledges in different parts of the world, particularly paying attention to the plight of the dispossessed everywhere. But beyond the virtues or limits of Dussel's work, Alcoff's reflections can be taken more generally, as offering a possible account for the normative basis of decolonial thinking, at least on some of its forms. Here again we enter the area where the traditional disciplines and their foundations have to be superseded, put in parentheses, or left aside in order to provide the epistemological principles that can guide and offer a normative ground to decolonial knowledges.

It is in continuity with the theme of linking histories and knowledges, that Paget Henry's contribution explores the challenge of Dussel's position to Afro-Caribbean ethics. It is worthy of note here that when one puts together the essays by, about, or in a substantial conversation with Dussel's work that have appeared in these two special issues and the first issue of *Transmodernity* (see for instance, Maldonado-Torres, "Enrique Dussel"), they make a collection of their own that complements existing anthologies in English, such as the one put together by Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta a little more than a decade ago entitled *Thinking from the Underside of History*. The particularity of this implicit "collection" found in the first three issues of *Transmodernity* resides in that it not only puts Dussel at the forefront of Latin American thought, liberation philosophy and theology, or as an incessant critic of European philosophy, but also as an important source and as an interlocutor for coloniality and decoloniality theory, as well as for Latina/o and Caribbean thought, continuing and complementing the efforts of Alcoff and Mendieta, who themselves are key voices in this growing dialogue and exchange.⁵

In the case at hand, Henry writes his contribution to this special issue precisely out of a provocation by Dussel in a meeting of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, showing explicitly once more the high degree of dialogue and intertextuality in the essays that form these two special issues of *Transmodernity*. This essay also continues Henry's reflections on his *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*, where he analyzes the historicist and poeticist trends of thinking in the Caribbean. Here, Henry focuses on the conceptions of ethics, understood as normative or general reflections about good and evil. Henry provides an overview of the ethical views of the historicist and poeticist tendencies, showing how colonization and coloniality (which in Henry's essay it is particularly tied to the coloniality of being, and therefore with subjectivity) enter in different ways in their views of evil. He also uses W.E.B. Du Bois's conception of "double consciousness" and of its varied stages to provide an account of the differences between the main positions that he identifies. He concludes that even though Afro-Caribbean ethics tends to put more emphasis on the evil of racism than Dussel, and to have different conceptions of the good, Dussel's position is certainly closer to the poeticist and particularly the historicist wings of Afro-Caribbean philosophy than to either the traditionalist religious accounts in the region or to the current universalist or postmodern ethics in vogue for the last twenty years in the north.

In a way, Ramón Grosfoguel's essay "Decolonizing Western Universalisms: Decolonial Pluri-versalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas" combines the attention to epistemology that we find in Alcoff's essay with Henry's attention to Afro-Caribbean figures while also providing a conception of Dusselian transmodernity that is or at least aims to be in line with a formulation of "other knowledges" as is found in the opening essay by Walsh. Grosfoguel begins with a critique of the concept of the universal, particularly understood as abstract universalism, and traces its genealogy from René Descartes to Karl Marx. He then turns to the work of Césaire and Dussel, in order to bring an-"other" conception of universality that is not at odds with plurality, but that actually brings them together in a powerful way. This is "pluriversality", a concept that is central for the Dusselian view of transmodernity and the Modernity/Coloniality and Decoloniality collective. It also appears in the essays by Dussel and Alcoff on this issue, and in that of Walter Mignolo in the

previous issue of *Transmodernity* (No 2). Grosfoguel enriches the concepts of transmodernity and pluriversality by demonstrating the way in which they are at work in Césaire's philosophical-poetic concept of "négritude" and in the more expressedly political, but also richly philosophical, Zapatista concept of the "Other Campaign." Here we see yet another way in which neo-Zapatismo can and arguably should be put in conversation with other decolonial intellectual and social movements in the Americas and elsewhere.

The Zapatistas also appear as an example of the Latin American decolonial movements that according to Oscar Guardiola-Rivera serve to correct Marx. Guardiola-Rivera links coloniality to the repetition of primitive accumulation, which in Marx's account is at the very origin of capitalism. The "repetitive compulsion to engage in (global) primitive accumulation," as Guardiola-Rivera has it in his essay, can be understood as an original crime, in that sense bringing ethics back to the table, along with the epistemological and political concerns that occupied central stage in the previous article. Of course, this "crime" cannot be properly understood without the colonial matrix of power, knowledge, and being, which explains why Guardiola-Rivera indicates that Marx needs to be corrected by Latin America. It should be clear, though, that this Latin America is arguably not the Latin America of Latin American area studies, that is, an object of investigation about which we can produce factual knowledge or interpretations. Latin America is rather the locus of enunciation of a form of critical and decolonial knowledge that, if we follow Walsh's discussion of Abya Yala in her essay and Guardiola-Rivera's own insights about placing Latin American Studies "under the mark of salvagepunk and decolonization," can put the category of Latin America itself in question. And so, it is this Latin America and Latin American Studies, both put under an erasure of sorts, their investment on continentality taken away from them and opened to postcontinental thinking, that Guardiola-Rivera sees in companionship with fields such as Latino and Ethnic Studies. We could call this perhaps a critical and decolonial Latin American Studies, with Latin America and Studies under erasure. This takes us back to the introduction to the first special issue, when I stated that decolonial thinking found itself particularly at home in Ethnic Studies fields. There, I also presented a version of Ethnic Studies under some kind of erasure as it is clear that the use of the "ethnic" in Ethnic Studies was part of a compromise between the social movements that fought for the institutionalization of this area in the university, and the established academy.

In our age, Guardiola-Rivera, argues, one of the forms in which coloniality expresses itself is in the continued production of fantasies that characterizes certain groups or societies as terrorists. Macarena Gómez-Barris provides a clear illustration of this in the case of the Mapuche in Chile, who are depicted as domestic terrorists. Gómez-Barris also provides yet another example of a trans-Americas critical reflection beyond the limits of traditional area studies and problematic tendencies that we can find in some of the established U.S. Ethnic Studies. She does this by theorizing Mapuche struggles in conversation with African American theorizing about the "social death" of the slave in conjunction with a conceptualization of the plight of indigenous people as living in a state of permanent war. She also does it by making explicit the epistemological dimensions of a political act such as hunger strikes, which she understands not so much in terms of the struggle for recognition (the usual plight to which all fights involving ethnicity are typically reduced), but to critique and a

desire for transformation. Gómez-Barris's essay is a clear illustration of the kind of critical and decolonial Latin American Studies and Ethnic Studies (both under erasure in different forms) that the collective of intellectuals in these two issues invite us to think.

But it is not only Latin America and Ethnic Studies that are under erasure. The Caribbean and the African Diaspora should also bring to this conversation. They are different, though, because they are both meant to be excluded or invisibilized, along with other regions and “ethnicities”, under the more general terms. But that does not mean that they remain untouched by the decolonial turn. The final article in this special issue is a good example of this. In it, Gertrude Gonzalez de Allen critically examines philosophical discussions about identity in the United States, and shows how Afro-Latin identity and Afro-Latin American authors help to disrupt some of its tendencies. By relying on the works of authors such as Quince Duncan, Manuel Zapata Olivella, and Nelson Estupiñán Bass, Gonzalez de Allen offers compelling insights about the meaning of being black in Latin America. Then, using her own experience as main reference, particularly as someone who was born and raised in a part of the Caribbean that usually does not figure much in Caribbean Studies, that is the U.S. Virgin Islands, and, in addition to that, as someone who was raised in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in St. Croix, she demonstrates the complex way that identity marks and identity formation take in different contexts. González de Allen seeks to bring richness and complexity to accounts of identity that often do away with an account of how identity and racial categories change depending on the context. She engages in an “interstitial” practice across different forms of African Diaspora studies, while she also unsettles continental and national discourses about identity in Latin America and the United States. Here again we find the trans-Americas theoretical apparatus that we see mobilized in these two special issues.

The first draft of some articles in these two special issues were written several years ago, but all of them have been carefully reviewed within the last year. I thank the journal *Transmodernity*, and especially its co-executive editors, Dr. Ignacio López-Calvo and Dr. Cristián H. Ricci, as well as all the contributors for their patience, trust, and dedication. I also wish to thank the contributors of the two issues as well as a number of interlocutors that kept me believing about the relevance of these two issues on the decolonial turn. They include Linda Martín Alcoff, Walter Altino, Paola Bacchetta, Xamuel Bañales, George Ciccariello-Maher (who, in addition to work in translation, assisted me early on in formatting some of the essays), Enrique Dussel, Yomaira Figueroa, Gertrude Gonzalez de Allen, Jorge González, Lewis Gordon, Ramón Grosfoguel, Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, Paget Henry, Ramona Hernández, the late Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Tala Khanmalek, Leece Lee, María Lugones, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Eduardo Mendieta, Walter Mignolo, Paula Moya, Suzanne Oboler, Emma Pérez, Laura Pérez, Aníbal Quijano, José David Saldívar, Chela Sandoval, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Michelle Stephens, Jung Mo Sung, Francisco Valdez, Celínés Villalba-Rosado, Corey Walker, Catherine Walsh, and Sylvia Wynter, among many others with whom I have had the pleasure of sharing and learning ideas about coloniality and decoloniality in the last decade and, in some cases, considerably more. These two special issues are a tribute to all those conversations that we keep having among ourselves and with others.

The essays here form part of an open conversation that is international in nature, and they seek to be part of dialogues taking place at the academy as well as among communities of public intellectuals and multiple sectors interested in coloniality and decoloniality out of the university. We cannot possibly provide multiple translations for each of the essays (at least right now), as it would be the ideal, but at least we can make them available freely in a format as well as through a procedure that guarantees the highest standards of scholarly research. For that, I extend thanks on behalf of myself as guest editor and of all the contributors in these two special issues to the journal *Transmodernity*, to its co-executive editors, Dr. López-Calvo and Dr. Ricci, as well as to its Editorial Board. May your continued efforts bear great fruit!

Notes

- ¹ “A don Carlos. Emperador de romanos, Rey de España, señor de las Indias y nuevo mundo.... Muy soberano señor: La mayor cosa después de la creación del mundo, sacando la encarnación y muerte del que lo crió, es el descubrimiento de Indias; y así las llaman Nuevo Mundo.” (n.p.; English translation is mine).
- ² For an elaboration of modernity as the naturalization of a paradigm of war see Maldonado-Torres, and for Fanon’s views on Manicheism see *The Wretched of the Earth* 41.
- ³ Here the work of Sylvia Wynter is particularly instructive. In addition to the various articles that I cite in my introduction to the first special issue, see the recently published anthology *We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Decolonizing Essays 1967-1984*.
- ⁴ This point is related to the discussion about the colonial and decolonial attitudes, and to description of the “cry of horror” of the colonized as different from fear or anxiety, for instance, as found in Maldonado-Torres, “Enrique Dussel.” See also Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, and ...*la descolonización y el giro descolonial*.... Consider that the ellipsis before and after the previous title, which was a choice of the publisher, Universidad de la Tierra in Chiapas, Mexico, is meant to signify that the texts that they they publish are part of a longer conversation where the text inserts itself and continues. This is part of an indigenous conception, at least in the area of Chiapas, Mexico, of the meaning and significance of the circulation of ideas (within a non-linear concept of time) and their role in the process of decolonization.
- ⁵ Both Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta participated in the conference “Mapping the Decolonial Turn. Post/Trans-Continental Inventions in Philosophy, Theory, and Critique,” which took place at the University of California Berkeley from April 21-23, 2005. Most of the authors in these two special issues presented early versions of their essays in this conference and they have kept the conversation ongoing until today.

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