

## The Coloniality of Power: A Critique

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For the past twenty years, few concepts have held more sway in the scholarly discourses associated with Latin American literary and cultural studies than the coloniality of power.<sup>1</sup> In spite of its embeddedness in the field, the concept impedes, rather than facilitates, historical interpretation and understanding. By trafficking in slippery genealogies, the coloniality of power dresses up old ideas as new ones, and beneath theoretical blustering it hides its conceptual poverty and obscures its complicity with the ideologies of race and capitalism from which it sets itself apart. In short, we need no more deployments of this concept, and in its absence the task for the field is to bring into view the historical processes and material conditions that it has obscured.

The term “coloniality of power” was first used in a 1992 essay by Aníbal Quijano published in *Perú Indígena* titled “Colonialidad y modernidad/ racionalidad.” However, the prominence it enjoys today did not begin until almost a decade later, when *Neplanta* published an English-language translation of Quijano’s 2000 essay “Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo, y América Latina” as “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America” (2000), and Duke University Press published Walter Dignolo’s *Local Histories/ Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (2000), in which Quijano’s concept plays a foundational role. Thereafter, the coloniality of power became recognizable as the key concept for what came to be known as the decolonial project and the scholars associated with it—such as Santiago Castro-Gómez, Enrique Dussel, Arturo Escobar, Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Javier Sanjinés, and Freya Schiwy.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the coloniality of power gained traction among scholars in fields such as U.S. American studies, queer studies, gender studies, and disability studies. For Latin Americanist scholars, as well as for scholars in other fields, the coloniality of power seemed to offer a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between capitalist exploitation and identitarian domination, and its popularity coincided with the rise of “intersectionality” as a critical concept in North American political and theoretical discourse.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing appeal of the coloniality of power undoubtedly stems from the breadth of phenomena that it ostensibly explains. According to Agustín Laó-Montes, for example, “the colonial power dynamic” all at once encompasses “such diverse phenomena in time and space as the conquest/invention of the Americas,

chattel slavery and the rise of the Atlantic system, twentieth-century U.S. imperialism, and the post-World War II ghettoization of African Americans and Latinos as neocolonial subjects in U.S. cities" (121).

Whereas the history of the term "coloniality of power" is relatively easy to trace to its origins in Quijano's writings from the early 1990s, the history of the ideas that the term contains is difficult to establish.<sup>4</sup> This is because the coloniality of power is frequently defined as a term that both introduces a new idea and names an established one. Mignolo, for example, calls Quijano's concept "a turning point" that "opened up new vistas" but at the same time, suggests that Quijano merely "reactivated a spatial epistemic shift that had its moments since the sixteenth century (Guamán Poma de Ayala, the Taky Onkoy) [...] but that for several reasons had never been articulated" ("Preamble" 13). Whereas Mignolo has affirmed both continuity and rupture—both tradition and innovation—in the concept of the coloniality of power, other scholars have gone to great lengths to emphasize its affinity with the main tradition of Latin American thought. Freya Schiwy, for example, affirms an identity between the coloniality of power on the one hand, and the thought associated with José Martí, José Carlos Mariátegui, and dependency theory on the other.<sup>5</sup> According to Schiwy,

Already by the end of the nineteenth century, José Martí was calling for a science that would focus on the Latin American context rather than import paradigms of knowledge from Europe, while José Carlos Mariátegui was trying to adapt, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Western Marxism to a social struggle marked by the colonial legacies of Peru. Both Martí and Mariátegui were reacting against the effects of colonialism on the production of knowledge. As Aníbal Quijano explained more recently, the logic of the coloniality of power and historico-structural dependency 'both imply the hegemony of Eurocentrism as a perspective on knowledge.' (177; my translation)

Schiwy not only situates the coloniality of power in a virtually seamless genealogy that includes Martí and Mariátegui, but also invokes Quijano to underscore the reducibility of the coloniality of power to the critique of Eurocentrism that runs throughout Martí, Mariátegui, and dependency theory.<sup>6</sup>

A similar tension can be found between the claim that the coloniality of power is a complex formulation and the shorthand manner in which the term is used. A great deal has been written to explain what Nelson Maldonado-Torres has called "the complexity of the coloniality of power," but one is left to wonder why so much explanation is necessary given how frequently accounts of the coloniality of power give way to the notion that, when all is said and done, the term basically means "racism" ("Liberation Theology" 55). Mignolo,

for example, refers to Quijano's "unveiling of the colonial matrix of power" as "ground-breaking work" only to then imply that even though "the initial concept of the coloniality of power was [...] developed by Quijano himself and others," it merely reflected "the basic conceptual structure shared by all participants in the [decolonial] project," a conceptual structure, he explains, that is "glued together by the historical foundation of the modern concept of 'racism'" ("Preamble" 15, 28). What is striking about Mignolo's account of the coloniality of power—aside from his suggestion that the concept breaks new ground and merely reflects what people were already doing—is his claim that the concept amounts to a "basic conceptual structure" that is reducible to "racism." In similar fashion, Grosfoguel acknowledges the simplicity of the coloniality of power when he declares, "White Creole elites maintained after independence a racial hierarchy where Indians, blacks, mestizos, mulattoes, and other racially oppressed groups were located at the bottom. This is what Aníbal Quijano calls 'coloniality of power'" ("Developmentalism" 349). Likewise, José David Saldívar concludes a 2006 essay on the coloniality of power in Gloria Anzaldúa and Arundhati Roy by positing that "the category of the coloniality of power is not, of course, without its defects" although, he points out, "it has fewer than others" (159). Without thoroughly explaining what those "defects" are, Saldívar asks his readers to "let the coloniality of power be taken in my essay for what it is: a hypothesis designed to grapple with hierarchy based on what Quijano terms 'the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race'" (159). Saldívar thus implies that whatever "defects" might be found in Quijano's formulations, they hardly matter because the coloniality of power is something his readers already understand: race and racism.

Similar shorthand uses of the coloniality of power abound: Arturo Arias, for example, declares that

coloniality of power basically means the production of identities based on race, conjoined with a hierarchy between European and non-European identities in which the first have oppressed all others, together with the construction of mechanisms of social domination designed to preserve this historical foundation and social classification. (18)

Viewed in this light, the coloniality of power starts to look like a term for the dominant tradition within Latin Americanist thought, which includes figures such as Francisco Bilbao and José Martí from the nineteenth century and José Carlos Mariátegui, Leopoldo Zea, Augusto Salazar Bondy, Arturo Andrés Roig, Arturo Ardao, and Roberto Fernández Retamar from the twentieth century. That is to say, if the coloniality of power merely names—as Santiago Castro-Gómez suggests—the "hierarchical classification of populations already established since the sixteenth century" undergirded by naturalized

notions of race, Eurocentrism, and epistemic universalism, then the politics involved in repudiating the coloniality of power would seem to be the same politics long associated with Latin Americanism itself (“(Post)Coloniality” 280). Indeed, the repudiation of Eurocentrism, the critique of racial and cultural hierarchies, the affirmation of identitarian difference, and the repudiation of epistemic universalism can be found at the heart of Latin Americanist texts ranging from Martí’s “Our America” (1891) all the way to John Beverley’s *Latinamericanism after 9/11*, where the project of “cultural dehierarchization” is taken to be the ground zero for a renewed politics of the left in Latin America (23).

It would be tempting to say that the theoretical appeal of the coloniality of power as a concept is owed to the fact that it facilitates the rearticulation of Latin Americanist ideologies under a new guise at a moment when factors ranging from globalization to the rise of “imported” theory within academe might have led some to believe that those ideologies were in crisis.<sup>7</sup> As Gareth Williams suggests in a recent article, Quijano’s formulation of the coloniality of power “reproduces one of the basic tenets of the creole-*indigenista* tradition forged by José Carlos Mariátegui,” rearticulates “a centuries old tradition of creole Latin American thought that is grounded in *lo nuestro*,” and thus “does not provide us with anything we did not know already” (“Subalternist Turn”). For Williams, then, the problem with Quijano’s theorization is precisely “the continuity of its essentially *criollista* ground,” which forecloses on the possibility of “turning our backs on post-Independence regimes of representation” and, moreover, leaves intact “the entire history of Western phallo-logocentrism [...] despite its accusations of Eurocentrism and its claims of a political and cultural alternative to the reigning *nomos*” (“Subalternist Turn”).

Seeing the continuity between the concept of the coloniality of power and the logic of *criollismo* helps us understand how decoloniality is grounded in the very things it sets out to critique. However, it does little to help us understand why the concept emerged when it did. Instead, the coloniality of power should be situated within a new way of understanding injustice and inequality that emerged with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s. As Rita Segato reminds us, even though the concept of the coloniality of power “radicalizes elements that were diffusely and embryonically present in [Quijano’s] previous writings,” the concept “must be understood in the context of, and as coeval with, the epochal shift that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War created in the political history of the twentieth century” (36; my translation). In other words, Segato suggests, Quijano’s conceptualization of the coloniality of power was “possible only with the dismantling [...] of the antagonism contained in the capitalism-communism binary,” which, she argues, enabled “the construction of the critical vocabularies and political goals” for new social movements, especially

“the indigenous and environmental movements” (36; my translation).

Broadly speaking, then, the backdrop of Quijano’s conceptualization of the coloniality of power was on the one hand the growing sense of what Francis Fukuyama infamously described in 1989 as the “unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism” (115), and on the other what John Beverley and José Oviedo described in 1995 as the displacement of modernization and dependency models in favor of

an interrogation of the interrelation between the respective ‘spheres’ (culture, ethics, politics, etc.) of modernity, an interrogation that required of social scientists a new concern with subjectivity and identity as well as new understandings of, and tolerance for, the cultural, religious, and ethnic heterogeneity of Latin America. (7)<sup>8</sup>

During this same period, the focus of left politics shifted from a focus on the inequalities produced by capitalism toward a focus on the inequalities produced by discrimination—a shift that Adolph Reed, Jr. has described as “the neoliberal redefinition of equality and democracy along disparitarian lines” (“Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism” 55). This new vision of equality and democracy is on view in the prologue written by Alejandro Toledo, Peru’s neoliberal president between 2001 and 2006, for an edited volume co-published by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank titled *Discrimination in Latin America: An Economic Perspective*. Toledo writes that discrimination is a central problem facing Latin American nations, given that “discrimination leads to a very unequal distribution of opportunities, which in turn prevents society from benefitting from a greater human capital, independent of race, that could contribute to higher rates of production, productivity, and competitiveness” (“Social Inclusion” xix). For Toledo, the problem is not inequality in general, but rather “irrational” “social exclusion” from the market and the “failures to engage the full human potential of all groups” (xxi). Toledo even appeals to the logical structure of the coloniality of power: although “discrimination has become better disguised,” he writes, “the depth of discrimination has perhaps not been significantly reduced,” as if discrimination were a constant face that merely assumes new masks (xx).

The notion that discrimination per se is the social problem to be solved is also on view in the essays collected in the volume *Pobreza, desigualdad y exclusión social en la ciudad del siglo XXI* (2008), where Luis Reygadas posits that the economic inequalities to be remedied are those that have their causes in the construction of “categories [...] in the colonial period,” and points out that “even though the juridical distinctions between ethnic groups later disappeared, many economic, political, social, and cultural differences persisted that marked barriers between them” (93). In other words, Reygadas’s politics are focused not on eliminating inequality in

general, but rather on eliminating "the colonial matrix of Latin American inequalities" in particular, which is to say, eliminating inequalities that are the product of "ethnic distinctions" (93). Reygadas and others are of course right to point out that, for example, "in Peru, 79% of indigenous people live in poverty, compared to 49.7% of the non-indigenous population," and it is entirely plausible for him to assert that the disproportionate percentage of indigenous people living in poverty is the result of "an inequality with pre-modern origins, an inequality that was born in the ethnic-racial domination of colonialism" (95). But even if one were to concede that coloniality explains why some people are disproportionately unequal given who they are, coloniality does not explain why there is inequality to begin with, and here we begin to see how the elimination of the inequalities produced by "ethnic-racial domination" need not involve the elimination of the inequalities produced by capitalism. Or, as Reed argues, the focus on eliminating the inequalities produced by discrimination justifies the inequalities produced by the market, since it depends on "the view that the market is, or can be, a just, effective, or even acceptable, system for rewarding talent and virtue and punishing their opposites and that, therefore, removal of 'artificial' impediments to functioning like race and gender will make it even more efficient and just" ("Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism" 55).<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the notion that the inequalities to be remedied are those produced by discrimination is the starting point for the 1992 essay "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad" ("Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality") in which Quijano first articulates the concept of the coloniality of power. He notes that with "the conquest of the societies and the cultures which inhabit what today is called Latin America" there began "a new world order" that resulted in the "concentration of the world's resources under the control and for the benefit of a small European minority" ("Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" 168). Moreover, he argues, "this process has continued ever since," and today, "the 'Western' European dominators and their Euro-North American descendants are still the principal beneficiaries" while "the exploited and the dominated of Latin America and Africa are the main victims" (168). Quijano's essay thus begins by focusing not on the inequality produced by capitalism but on the inequalities within capitalism produced by racism—the question of who its "main victims" are. Quijano sees inequality in crucial ways as "a question of the past," and also as evidence of the persistence of a "colonial structure of power" because, he argues,

if we observe the main lines of exploitation and social domination on a global scale [...] and the distribution of resources and work among the world population, it is very clear that the large majority of the exploited, the dominated, the discriminated against, are precisely the members of the 'races,' 'ethnies' [*sic*], or 'nations' into which the colonized

populations, were categorized [...] from the conquest of America and onward" (168-69).<sup>10</sup>

According to Quijano, the structure of exploitation in the present has its origins in the "intersubjective constructions" and "intercultural relations" that were established by European colonizers in ways that converted the cultural and epistemic differences between European culture and other cultures into "inequalities in the hierarchical sense" ("Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" 174). The notion that these differences could be viewed hierarchically was, Quijano points out, quickly naturalized by the concept of race, whereby "the old ideas of superiority of the dominant, and the inferiority of [the] dominated under European colonialism were mutated in a relationship of biologically and structurally superior and inferior" (171). If, moreover, "during European colonial world domination, the distribution of work of the entire world capitalist system, between salaried, independent peasants, independent merchants, and slaves and serfs, was organized basically following the same 'racial' lines of global social classification," the fact that "the main lines of exploitation and social domination" today align with "precisely the members of the 'races,' 'ethnies' [sic] and 'nations' into which the colonized populations were categorized" reveals, Quijano argues, the extent to which the "Eurocentered coloniality of power" continues to structure inequality even long after the disappearance of "Eurocentered colonialism" (171).

Given that Quijano's political arguments about inequality in the present are predicated in crucial ways on an argument about history, the contours of Quijano's historical argument need examination. That is to say, the coloniality of power requires us to believe that the present social order does not simply resemble the colonial social order but that the present social order is structured by the same thing that structured the colonial social order. In turn, this requires that we understand coloniality as autonomous from the political, economic, and juridical structures of colonialism. As Grosfoguel argues, "in the 'coloniality of power' approach, what comes first, 'culture or the economy,' is a false dilemma, since race and racism are not superstructural or instrumental to an overarching logic of capitalist accumulation" ("Epistemic Decolonial Turn" 72).<sup>11</sup> The result is that coloniality itself, once it becomes autonomous from the political fact of colonialism, can then be thought to survive the juridical and political order that it once served. In the words of Maldonado-Torres, "coloniality is different from colonialism" because whereas "colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation," coloniality refers instead "to long-standing patterns of power [...] that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production beyond the strict limits of colonialism" (243). The point is, as Maldonado-Torres puts it, that "coloniality is not simply the aftermath or residual form of any given

form of colonial relation" but rather that "coloniality survives colonialism" and is "maintained alive," so that even "as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday" (243).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in his contribution to the 2002 volume *Colonialism Past and Present*, Gustavo Verdesio argues that "the strategy of studying colonial legacies is not, in my opinion, another way of justifying mere analogies, but a tool for understanding the genesis of current situations of social injustice" (2). What is at stake for Verdesio is obviously something more than the glib truism that the events of the past led to the events of the present, and he explains that by "genesis," he means "the beginning of a process that led, throughout the centuries, to these social situations" (2). Thus, he argues, "the expression 'colonial legacies' does not simply describe an analogy between colonial and present-day social situations—something like a stable structural homology between past and present—but rather entails a notion of change and historical process" (2).<sup>13</sup>

But if we admit that "legacies of colonialism" implies more than an analogy between the colonial past and the present, and if we admit that there is ongoing historical *change*, how does it make sense to suggest, as Verdesio does, that many victimized people living today are literally "victims of colonialism"? The answer must be that coloniality is understood as something that acquires a transhistorical agency, since in order to acknowledge historical change, repudiate the notion of mere historical resemblance, and claim that people today are victims of colonialism, we must believe that coloniality is the force that structured the past, structures the present, defined whatever historical changes took place, and victimizes people today. This is all to say that the coloniality of power depends not merely on a transhistorical account of coloniality, racism, Eurocentrism, and white supremacy but instead on a vision of coloniality, racism, Eurocentrism, and white supremacy as transhistorical agents of history—as Mignolo writes, "the logic of coloniality [...] moves the world" (*Local Histories/Global Designs* xvi). The U.S. historian Barbara Fields brilliantly disentangles the consequences of this view of history: white supremacy, she argues, "once disentangled from metaphysical and transhistorical trappings, cannot be the central theme of Southern history. It was never a single theme, and it never led to consensus on a single program" ("Ideology and Race" 159).<sup>14</sup> That is because, Fields explains, ideas concerning transhistorical racism merely link superficial resemblances at the expense of understanding ideology and the extent to which race itself is a fundamentally ideological, rather than genetic or physical, construction. When race, which arises historically, "ceases to be a historical phenomenon and becomes instead an external motor of history," Fields argues that we find ourselves trading in camouflaged accounts of hereditary race, a "latter-day version of Lamarckism" ("Slavery, Race and Ideology" 101). Moreover, she suggests, the problem is not only that transhistorical accounts of race—the notion that race is somehow "an external motor of history"—depend on

naturalized notions of the ideological construction that is race, but also that race itself cannot provide adequate historical explanation: "a material reality underlies it [...] but the underlying reality is not the one that the language of racial ideology addresses" ("Ideology and Race" 151).

Indeed, as a way of understanding the Latin American past, the coloniality of power falls short, and because it fundamentally depends on the continuity of coloniality through the present, it must see historical and political transformations as masks for coloniality or not see them at all. In the most extreme instances, it produces distortions such as the following: "There were no major social transformations of Latin American societies after the independence revolutions of the first half of the nineteenth century" (Grosfoguel, "Developmentalism" 349). Nevertheless, decolonial scholars often gesture toward the usefulness of the coloniality of power as an explanation of the past: Grosfoguel, for example, suggests that "the central aspect of the concept of 'coloniality of power' is that it allows us to understand the interface between racist cultures and social power relations with a long colonial history in the capitalist world-system," and, he adds, "it shows how social power today is still informed by criteria built over a long colonial history" (*Colonial Subjects* 156-57). In this light, it might seem plausible to suggest that the coloniality of power possesses a certain explanatory promise—it helps us understand the dynamics by which, as the historian Ada Ferrer has shown, opponents of Cuban independence in the late 1860s were able to successfully exploit the fear of race war on the part of Cuban whites. Indeed, as Ferrer notes, even as late as the 1880s, fear of "black insurgents and the idea of black citizens operating in a public, political sphere were still powerful enough to compromise the success of a multiracial independence movement" (234). However, the coloniality of power cannot explain—and actually hinders any meaningful understanding of—the fact that less than ten years later, as Ferrer has also shown, independence activists managed to "strip race of its ideological hold" (234) for a brief period, or the fact that essays written by pro-independence leaders "neutralized and transformed the figure of the black insurgent" from "a dreaded emblem of race war and a black republic" into "an acceptable component in the struggle for Cuban nationhood" (235).

Nor can the coloniality of power explain how, as George Reid Andrews shows, during the early twentieth century, "workers in Latin America were able to come together to create the cross-racial alliances that proved so hard to construct in the United States and elsewhere" (147). Even during "a period of white supremacist ideology throughout the Atlantic world, the strong tendency in Latin American labor movements was to reject racial preferences of any kind and to push for inclusive, cross-racial mobilization" (147). The point is not, of course, that "racism wasn't that bad," or the laughable fantasy that we are now, or have ever been, in a "post-racial" era—instead, the point is

that the coloniality of power, as a paradigm through which to understand the past, cannot explain, and actually obscures, an entire history of contestations and challenges to both the theory and practice of racial hierarchies—often carried out by those who have been its most acute victims. Moreover, it virtually erases histories of political struggle predicated on inequalities that were not merely reducible to race, as well as the fact that racist ideologies were not always compatible with the interests of capital or coherent with actual political and social practices. One such instance can be found during the first three decades of the twentieth century, when whitening immigration policies, eugenics, and white supremacist ideologies coincided with ambitious infrastructural development projects and an export boom (Andrews 137). During the same period when the Venezuelan intellectual Rufino Blanco Fombona declared that Venezuela was “two steps from the jungle because of our blacks and Indians” and concluded that “we must transfer regenerating [Caucasian] blood into their veins,” Venezuela also received between 200,000–300,000 West Indian workers (qtd. in Andrews 119, 137).<sup>15</sup>

But perhaps the most important history that the coloniality of power obscures is the history of inequality itself, especially in light of Jeffrey Williamson’s arguments against the myth of inequality’s so-called historical persistence in Latin America.<sup>16</sup> According to Williamson, inequality in Latin America from pre-conquest to the present “has exhibited immense variance” across both time and space (“Five Centuries” 25). In other words, averages of measured inequality for Latin America suggest dramatic differences in inequality between, for example, 1790 and 1870. At the same time, there were dramatic differences in the levels of inequality in Peru in 1856 (which had an estimated Gini of 35.5) and Chile in 1861 (which had an estimated Gini of 63.7) (Williamson, “Five Centuries” 37). Nevertheless, the most important aspect of Williamson’s argument concerns the point at which Latin America’s history of inequality actually becomes distinctive from the history of inequality in “Europe and its English-speaking offshoots” (27). According to Williamson, “pre-conquest Latin America had one of the lowest, if not *the* lowest, level of inequality anywhere in the poor periphery [and] remained one of the lowest anywhere around the world until the start of the seventeenth century” (25). Moreover, he argues, pre-industrial Latin America (pre-1870) was not more unequal than pre-industrial northwest Europe (pre-1800) (24). Williamson concludes that “the inequality history that makes Latin America distinctive” emerges in the twentieth century, “when Europe and its English-speaking offshoots underwent a secular decline in inequality correlated with the rise of the welfare state” (27). This is to say that Latin America’s relatively higher levels of inequality today can be traced to the period between the 1920s and the 1970s, which began with similar Gini coefficients for Latin America and the United States. Over the decades that followed, however, Latin American inequality rose by 54 percent while “the industrialized world [...] underwent

a Great Egalitarian Leveling" (Williamson, "Latin American Inequality" 24). Williamson's economic analysis obviously challenges the core assumptions about the historical past embedded in the concept of the coloniality of power. However, we might also add that by failing to account for the recent historical origins of Latin America's comparative economic inequality, Quijano's concept obscures the concrete structures and policies that are to be blamed. But the problems involved in Quijano's concept extend beyond the histories that it obscures or overlooks: the coloniality of power requires us to believe not only that coloniality itself "survives" or is "maintained alive" (and is not simply a "residual form" of colonialism) but also that the groups on which it exerts power are the same groups over time. In fact, Quijano argues that the very cornerstone of the coloniality of power is the "'racial' social classification of the world population under Eurocentered world power" ("Coloniality and Modernity / Rationality" 171). Thus what brings into view the workings of "the coloniality of power," according to Quijano, is the reality that victims of exploitation and domination today "are precisely the members of the 'races' [...] into which the colonized populations" were "categorized in the formative process [...] from the conquest of America onward" (169). For just as the coloniality of power depends on the stability and continuity of coloniality, the stability and continuity of coloniality depends in turn on the stability and continuity of the groups it classifies and whose domination and exploitation it structures.

The need for this stability is intensified given that the separation of coloniality from the concrete historical and material circumstances of colonialism requires abstracting coloniality. In his essay from 2000 titled "Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo, y América Latina" ("Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America"), Quijano writes of the ways in which concrete historical circumstances gave way to a series of "axes" that defined the "new model of power," one of which was "the codification of the differences between conquerors and the conquered in the idea of 'race'" (533). But the abstracted "axes" that enable coloniality to survive colonialism in turn threaten the historical specificity of "the coloniality of power." In other words, abstracting coloniality into "axes" makes it all the more essential to understand the victimized groups into which people were organized by coloniality not as abstractions, that is to say, not as groups of dominated peoples that change over time, but as groups that remain the same over time and in relation to Eurocentric modernity.

However, as scholars such as Nancy Leys Stepan have shown, the meaning of race itself over the course of Latin American history has been anything but stable. At the same time, as Alejandro Mejías-López and others have shown, the meanings of whiteness and Europeanness were themselves unstable.<sup>17</sup> This poses a problem for Quijano's concept inasmuch as the notion that certain people today and certain people in the past are members

of the same group requires that the criteria for membership in that group be the same. As Anthony Appiah argues, "when we recognize two events as belonging to the history of one race, we have to have a criterion for membership in the race at those two times, independent of the participation of the members in the two events" (27). In other words, Appiah explains, "someone in the fourteenth century could share a common history with me through our membership in a historically extended race only if something accounts both for his or her membership in the race in the fourteenth century and for mine in the twentieth" (27). But that "something" cannot be, Appiah insists, "the history of race" as a phenomenon or social construction, and must instead be "biological race," which means that thinking that "the history of Africa is part of the common history of Afro-Americans" depends not merely on the idea that "Afro-Americans descended from various peoples who played a part in African history" but actually on the idea that "African history is the history of people of the same race" (27). What this means is that when claims are made that Amerindians and Africans "remained in an abject oppression that continues in the present," we should ask what, if not a mistaken vision of race as stable and essential, could enable such a vision of history (Verdesio 6).

Indeed, we might say that inasmuch as the coloniality of power as a phenomenon is thought to become visible through the identification of races and ethnicities in the present as belonging to the same groups that were victimized under colonial domination, that act of identification cannot be based on either a shared victimization by colonial domination or the social construction of the group: in one case, the group would not resemble anything we have known as a "race," and in the second case, the group could not be the same, since the criteria by which races are socially constructed has changed over time. Thus the identification must be based on a much more fixed and unchanging notion of race—something that belongs definitely to the history of Eurocentric colonialism but that should in no way belong to a theoretical project that seeks to establish what Quijano calls "the liberation of intercultural relations from the prison of coloniality" ("Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" 178).

In the end, the most urgent challenges surrounding Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power have less to do with its interpretation of the historical past than with its vision of justice and equality in the present. At the heart of Quijano's project is a critique of both racism and capitalism. Quijano understands the undoing of Eurocentric racism and the coloniality of power as a form of resistance to capitalism, and he argues that "the coloniality of power is tied up to the concentration in Europe of capital, wages, the market of capital, and finally, the society and culture associated with those determinations" ("Coloniality of Power" 548). However, the way in which Quijano frames colonialism and coloniality implies that the unfairness he sees

lies not in the fact that the market generates inequality but rather in the fact that the inequalities generated by the market have been distributed by society along racial lines. In so doing, Quijano sets out to eliminate the social factors and "mental categories" (i.e., racism) that determine material inequality only to naturalize the market as the bearer of that function.

Quijano's naturalization of capitalism can also be found in the extent to which the logic of private property and the market abound in his writings. For example, he situates the crimes of coloniality in terms of a violation of private property rights and impeded access to the market: he refers to Eurocentrism as "the European patent on modernity" ("Coloniality of Power" 503), critiques "the European pretension to be the exclusive producer [...] of modernity," writes of the question "of the ownership of the phenomenon thus called modernity" (544), and refers to the "the plundering of their place in the history of the cultural production of humanity" and the fact that "peoples were dispossessed of their own and singular historical identities" (552). When Quijano envisions a world free from the "prison of coloniality," he describes the liberated as if they were actually entering the market: they would have "a freedom to choose between various cultural orientations" and also "the freedom to produce [...] culture and society" ("Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" 178).

This is not to say that Quijano is wrong to suggest that "the relations of exploitation and domination" were racist, or that historically there existed "a quasi-exclusive association of whiteness with wages." The point is instead that Quijano's objection to capitalism is fundamentally focused on the racist forms of inequality and exploitation rather than on the fact of inequality and exploitation itself ("Coloniality of Power" 537). By seeing the problem of inequality, as Quijano does, in terms of the division of labor along racial lines, the problem to be solved is not the division of labor itself but rather what he calls the "intersubjective constructions" and "intercultural relations" that determine who ends up in each class. It would be wrong to deny that class aligns in some ways with identitarian categories such as race—because it does—but as long as we believe that the class inequalities produced by the division of labor are fundamentally unjust, it is hard to see why the division of labor along identitarian lines should be the problem we set out to solve. Although theorists such as Linda Martín Alcoff are right to suggest that race "has carried since its inception an embedded *economic* meaning," it is not true that "to call for a focus on class [...] rather than race and gender, is to call for a diminution if not erasure of the latter's importance" (66). Instead, it is that, as Nancy Fraser persuasively argues, even though "economic injustice and cultural injustice" are "in practice [...] intertwined," (15) they are analytically distinct and, more importantly, they involve "two correspondingly distinct kinds of remedy" (15). Whereas the remedy for economic injustice involves "political-economic restructuring of some sort," the remedy for cultural

injustice, Fraser suggests, involves "some sort of cultural or symbolic change" (15).

This is precisely what Daniel Zamora means when he critiques the emphasis on "the identitarian dimension of inequality rather than its more impersonal dimension" ("Exclusion"). Zamora argues that discussions of inequality in neoliberalism tend to "take as their principal concern or adversary the *form* that inequality takes rather than the phenomenon itself," so that "the problem is therefore not so much inequality as seen through the lens of exploitation but rather the way in which effects of inequality get distributed throughout society (with certain groups comparatively sheltered from them, and others not)" ("Exclusion"). Zamora's argument is not that inequality does not disproportionately affect people belonging to certain groups—it does—but that "a society in which everyone were equally exposed to inequality would hardly be more desirable than the currently existing one in which some segments are disproportionately subjected to it" ("Exclusion"). His broader point is that a vision of inequality that focuses on the personal forms of inequality rather than the impersonal fact of inequality results in "a disavowal of the category of exploitation" ("Exclusion"). In fact, one might begin to wonder if such a disavowal of exploitation can already be found in Quijano's writings on marginality from the 1970s, where he develops the concept of the "marginal pole" to reconfigure the Marxist contradiction between capital and labor into a contradiction between "workers on the hegemonic level of production" and "the labor force excluded from the hegemonic level of economic activity" ("Marginal Pole" 419-20).<sup>18</sup> According to Quijano, there is a fundamental inadequacy in Marx's concept of "relative surplus population":

[W]hilst in the pre-monopoly period of capital, competition between the "active army of labor" and the "industrial reserve army" allowed capital to keep the wages of the former depressed, and forced them to submit to those conditions, the exclusion of marginalized workers and the elimination of their competition now permits capital to raise the wage-level of the workers employed and increase their bargaining power. (420)

Quijano implies, then, that workers are no longer to be seen as members of an exploited proletariat but rather as participants in a "hegemonic level of production" who, in the absence of "the factor of inter-worker competition (active or inactive)," enjoy "greater relative autonomy" and "do not have to subject themselves to the conditions dictated by capital as much as in the period examined by Marx" (419). The result is that the victims of capitalism are not exploited workers, who enjoy relative security, autonomy, and "access to goods and services they require" (403), but the unemployed, who

are “excluded from the significant levels of employment in the system” and relegated to a “marginal pole” of the economy (426). As Zamora reminds us, the problem is not that people point out the “ever-growing ‘reserve army of labor’ and its immiseration” (“Exclusion”). Instead, the problem is that “the focus on the ‘excluded’ [...] leaves the fact of inequality as such untouched,” which is to say, it makes the problem “not so much inequality as seen through the lens of exploitation, but rather the way in which effects of inequality get distributed throughout society” (“Exclusion”).

Indeed, a focus on the distribution of inequality is at the heart of Quijano’s later writings on the coloniality of power. In a discussion of European control over waged labor, he notes that “there is nothing in the social relation of capital itself, or in the mechanisms of the world market in general, that implies the historical necessity of European concentration first (either in Europe or elsewhere) of waged labor” (“Coloniality of Power” 538). But because it happened that Europe did first have a concentration of wage labor, this meant that European values—in particular, racist values that “associated nonpaid or nonwage labor with the dominated races because they were ‘inferior’ races” triumphed, with the result that in Europe and elsewhere, “wage labor was concentrated almost exclusively among whites” because

the racial classification of the population and the early association of the new racial identities of the colonized with forms of control of unpaid, unwaged labor developed among the Europeans the singular perception that paid labor was the whites’ privilege. (538-39)

More importantly, Quijano points out that “it is not difficult to find, to this very day, this attitude spread out among the white property owners of any place in the world” (539). Of course, it would be hard to deny that, as Quijano argues, “the lower wages ‘inferior races’ receive in the present capitalist centers for the same work as done by whites cannot be explained as detached from the racist social classification of the world’s population” (539). However, it would be just as hard to deny that a politics focused on disarticulating exploitation from identity is a politics that works within (and for) the logic of the capitalism, since such a politics will always, in at least some minimal way, involve the concession that the inequalities produced by capitalism itself are more preferable (and natural) than those produced by discrimination.

The horizon of justice and equality that the concept of the coloniality of power gives us involves what Reed describes as the “shifting around of the material burdens of inequality, reallocating them and recalibrating their incidence among different populations” in lieu of a “direct, explicit and relentless, zero-sum challenge” to capitalist class power (“Django Unchained”). What is at stake in the end is not the question of which

inequalities should matter, but rather a broader and more radical vision of egalitarianism. The coloniality of power, by focusing on the inequalities produced by discrimination, obscures from view those inequalities that are not, and even worse—it lets them off the hook.

#### Notes

1. As Williams suggests, “the so-called ‘decolonial option,’ coordinated and extended around the figure and writings of Walter Dignolo and others, has installed itself as the ubiquitous mode of postcolonial Latin Americanist thought in recent decades” (“Subalternist Turn”). Nevertheless, this should not imply that there have not been critics of the decolonial option or its foundational concepts—for example, the coloniality of power—see Acosta, *Thresholds of Illiteracy*; Graff Zivin, “Beyond Inquisitional Logic”; Michaelsen and Shershow, “Rethinking Border Thinking”; and Moreiras, “The Fatality of (My) Subalternism.” For an influential feminist critique of Quijano, see Lugones, “Heterosexualism.” Lugones sees Quijano’s “logic of structural axes” as “a good ground from within which to understand the processes of intertwining the production of race and gender,” but argues that Quijano “accepts the global, Eurocentered, capitalist understanding of what gender is about” (187-189).
2. According to Dignolo, “decoloniality means decolonial options confronting and delinking from coloniality, or the colonial matrix of power” (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity* xxvii). He goes on to endorse a definition of decoloniality offered by Linda Tuhiwai Smith: “decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power,” and he adds that “the foundational acts of decolonial thinking are, first, delinking and, second, border gnosis” (*Western Modernity* 41, 206). Prominent examples of decolonial scholarship across the disciplines include Shu and Pease, *American Studies as Transnational Practice*; Hanna, Vargas, and Saldívar, *Junot Diaz and the Decolonial Imagination*; Antebi, “Crippling the Camera”; Horswell, *Decolonizing the Sodomite*; Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”; and Villega, *Latin American Philosophy*. Noteworthy examples of the most recent Latin Americanist decolonial scholarship include Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* and Ramos and Daly, *Decolonial Approaches to Latin American Literatures and Cultures*.
3. An excellent genealogy of the term and concept can be found in Cooper, “Intersectionality.” More extensive accounts of intersectionality include Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* and Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons*. An important recent

critique can be found in Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*.

4. On the rise of decoloniality and the decolonial project within the field of Latin American literary and cultural studies (and in relation to the history and demise of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group), see Williams, "Deconstruction and Subaltern Studies." On the origins and development of the decolonial option, including an account of the role of the "Coloniality Working Group" at SUNY – Binghamton of which Quijano was a key member, see Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, "Prólogo."
5. In *Local Histories/Global Designs*, Mignolo writes,

[D]ependency theory was one of the responses, from Latin America, to a changing world order that in Asia and Africa took the form of "decolonization." [...] Dependency theory "preceded"—on the one hand—by a few years Wallerstein's "modern world system" metaphor as an account from the perspective of modernity. It was "followed"—on the other hand and in Latin America—by a series of reflections (in philosophy and the social sciences) as an account from the perspective of coloniality. Both Quijano and Dussel are indebted to the impact of dependency theory in its critique to "development" as the new format taken by global designs once the "civilizing mission" was winding down with the increasing process of decolonization. (54)

On dependency theory, see Pakenham's *The Dependency Movement*.

6. On Mariátegui and the coloniality of power, see Castro-Klarén, "Posting Letters." Castro-Klarén refers to "Mariátegui's thesis on the coloniality of power" as if it were identical to what "Quijano later theorizes" (147; 139). According to Castro-Klarén, "Mariátegui argues that colonialism, in order to exploit and continue suppressing the labor force that the Indian represents, has put in place a complex set of institutions that reproduce *coloniality at large*" (139).
7. For a noteworthy index of this sense of crisis, see Achugar, "Leones, cazadores e historiadores." According to Achugar, "the theoretical reconstruction that is being carried out in the intellectual environment of the Commonwealth and rearticulated in the United States [i.e., South Asian postcolonial theory]" was leading to "a re-edition of the 'Pan Americanism' that seeks to obliterate the '*nuestro americanismo*' of Martí" (386; my translation).
8. For an important argument regarding the rise of theoretical/political commitments to identity and the end of the Cold War, see Michaels, *Shape of the Signifier*.
9. This is what Michaels means in *The Beauty of a Social Problem* when he

argues that "the critics of disparity are protesting the ways in which the raced and gendered subject has been classed; they are not protesting the fact of class itself" (27). Moreover, he argues,

[T]he economic commitment to the primacy of markets is accompanied by an economic and ethical commitment to equality of access to those markets. That's the point of the claim that there is no connection between the commitment to equality embodied in antidiscrimination and the commitment to equality embodied in redistribution: the first is at the center of the effort to make markets more efficient; the second is at the center of the effort to combat one of the consequences of more efficient markets. (26-27)

As to the question of whether the critique of discrimination counts as a critique of capitalism and neoliberalism, Michaels points out that

[T]he belief in human equality that has cheered on anti-racism and anti-sexism has not only been compatible with—it's been supported by—a belief in human inequality that has been happy to accept the fact that 10 percent of the U.S. population now earns just under 50 percent of total U.S. income. This is what it means for the most eminent of the living Chicago economists (Gary Becker, whose first book was *The Economics of Discrimination*) to praise globalization and "the increasing market orientation of different economies" by noting that, although they may "raise rather than lower income inequality," they also make that inequality "more dependent on differences in human and other capital, and less directly on skin color, gender, religion, caste, and other roots of discrimination. ("Identity Politics" 9)

10. Reed argues that in "claims for the primacy of race/racism as an explanation of inequalities in the present by invoking analogies to regimes of explicitly racial subordination in the past [...] analogy stands in for evidence and explanation of the contemporary centrality of racism" ("Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism" 53). Such claims, Reed adds, treat race "as existing prior to and above social context" and render "racism to be a sui generis form of injustice" (52).
11. Grosfoguel goes even further: he argues that since

'capitalism' is only one of the multiple entangled constellations of colonial power matrix of the 'European modern/colonial/capitalist/patriarchal world system' [...] destroying the capitalist aspects of the world-system

would not be enough to destroy the present world-system" ("The Epistemic Decolonial Turn" 72).

For a compelling critique of decoloniality's refusal to see capitalism as "the material substratum of modernity," see Legrás, "The Rule of Impurity." According to Legrás,

the dissimulation of capitalist determination runs the risk of acting as the dissimulation of social injustice where the permanent weakening of living conditions and even the abandonment of subjects by the law is surreptitiously but also irresponsibly presented as an act of cultural affirmation. (27-28)

Moreover, Legrás argues, "Marxism is one of the most active traditions of an anti-colonial thinking in the Americas, and the whole colonial world," and thus "the place where decolonial theory pays the highest price for its purist desire is on the question of Marxism" (27-28). For a major recent critique of the rejection of Marxism and economic analysis in postcolonial theory, see Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*.

12. It is useful here to recall Idelber Avelar's incisive critique of the problematic historical/temporal continuities postulated by Latin Americanism. As Avelar argues, one of the "privileged operations" of Latin Americanism involved hypostasizing "a continuity between past and present, among heterogeneous subjects, in order to interpellate those heterogeneities as a common substance" (127).
13. For an excellent critical and historical overview of concept of continuity and the "colonial legacy" in Latin American historical discourse, see Adelman, "Introduction."
14. For a similar critique, see West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington*.
15. On the politics involved in transhistorical accounts of racism in the United States, see Reed, "Django Unchained." According to Reed,

insistence on the transhistorical primacy of racism as a source of inequality is a class politics. It's the politics of a stratum of the professional-managerial class whose material location and interests, and thus whose ideological commitments, are bound up with parsing, interpreting, and administering inequality defined in terms of disparities among ascriptively defined populations reified as groups or even cultures. ("Django Unchained")

16. Williamson is arguing against a tendency in the economic analysis of Latin American inequality represented in part by the work of Stanley Engerman and Louis Sokoloff—see Engerman and Sokoloff, "Factor Endowments." For arguments similar to Williamson's, see Coatsworth,

- "Inequality, Institutions and Economic Growth" and Dobado González and García Montero, "Colonial Origins." See also Gootenberg and Reygadas, *Indelible Inequalities*.
17. As Loveman reminds us, "in the colonial period (just like today), the term *raza* was not a stable signifier; it took on different meanings depending on the context of its use" (45). Moreover, colonial historiography "cautions against generalizing from one moment in time to the entire 'colonial period,' as if social relations and modes of governance remained static across more than three centuries of imperial rule" (46). For a sampling of recent work on race in Latin America, see Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Rosenblatt, *Race & Nation in Modern Latin America*; Graham, *The Idea of Race in Latin America*; and Fisher and O'Hara, *Imperial Subjects*. For an important account of race indebted to Quijano's thinking and framework, see Castro-Gómez, "Traditional and Critical Theories of Culture."
  18. See also Quijano, "Imperialism and Marginality." On the origins and development of Quijano's ideas concerning marginality, see Kay, *Latin American Theories of Development and Underdevelopment*.

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