



Decolonial Historiography: Thinking about Land and Race in a Transcolonial Context

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Abstract

This paper examines key debates in critical historiography, from the work of Hayden White to Walter Benjamin, and thinks through them from the perspective of the critiques of decolonial scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Uma Narayan, Enrique Dussel, and Lewis Gordon. Through a focus on issues of land and race in the overlapping Spanish/British-U.S. colonial borderlands what emerges is a method to analyze history in a “transcolonial” context. Herein, I propose crucial dimensions of a decolonial historiography.

Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges.

Linda Tuhiwai-Smith

Placed before the alternative visions that history’s interpreters offer for our consideration, and without any apodictically provided theoretical grounds for preferring one over another, we

are driven back to moral and aesthetic reasons for the choice of one vision over another as the more “realistic.”

Hayden White

The tension between these opening statements on history by Linda Tuhiwai-Smith and Hayden White illustrates a central problem in critical historiography. On the one hand, colonized peoples are acutely aware of the need to reclaim the construction of historical narratives that erase colonialism and reduce slavery to an unfortunate exception in an otherwise proud past. The reason being, as Tuhiwai-Smith states, that this process of reclaiming can “form the basis of alternative ways of doing things” (34). On the other hand, critiques such as White’s are often interpreted as explaining away the importance of histories from the perspective of the colonized and enslaved as little more than one rhetorical strategy among many that promote equally arbitrary notions of the “real.” This ambivalence towards the possibility of truth and knowing characterizes not only the work of many continental philosophers but—and this should give us pause—it is also an attitude shared by right-wing ideologues: in the face of post-1960’s decolonial challenges to “universal” narratives of progress, development and the supremacy of Western civilization, many intellectuals within Europe and Anglo-America fell towards a deep skepticism of not only truth claims in science but also of liberation narratives put forth by decolonial movements.

The postmodern turn emerged directly from the epistemic challenges raised by decolonial uprisings, yet curiously, the intellectual production of these movements has remained largely invisible in critical European and Euro-American scholarship, revealing the deep epistemic dimension of the colonial context. It is the ongoing epistemic challenge that decolonial movements present that shapes the arc of this article.

[2] In White's assessment of the deep structure of the historical imagination, "the prestige enjoyed by a given historian or philosopher of history within a specific public is referable to the precritically provided linguistic ground on which the prefiguration of the historical field is carried out" (429). This is an important observation, for as Chela Sandoval has stated, one of White's main contributions was to point out that all scholarship is structured and emplotted by particular modes of perception (154). However, the conclusion I wish to draw differs from the relativism found in the epigraph from White. Rather, I want to emphasize that it is the formation of these precritical linguistic grounds that need to be brought into focus and challenged. Instead of seeing the prefiguration of linguistic grounds as a process in a level playing field, it is helpful to connect the writing of a given history to relations of power. To this end, differentiating between the *morality* that White speaks of in the epigraph and *ethics* can provide a beginning point. If we understand morality to be "the application

of the principles in force in a given system to a concrete decision,” then in contrast, an ethical consciousness is “the capacity to listen to the other’s voice, the transontological word that breaks in from beyond the present system” (Dussel 59). This differentiation between morality and ethics, and the foregrounding of critical voices outside hegemonic totalization, creates a space from which to think historical narrative anew. Rather than capitulate to historical relativism, the focus is to change the terms according to which history is defined.

[3] If one is to accept the generalization that various histories are equally arbitrary, one needs to assume that all the different modes of understanding and communicating history are produced in a condition of symmetry. Questioning this assumption turns our attention from the linguistic modes in which historical fields are cast (White x) to “the relations of power that distort or pervert the life-world of human communities” (Maldonado-Torres 99). Thus, “truth” is not destroyed by the inability to agree on a mode of discourse, but rather because some historians are materially deprived of even the possibility of sharing a linguistic ground in structures of knowledge production due to ongoing asymmetrical power relations that have historically excluded certain groups from those spaces (Gulbenkian 54-55). This analysis shifts the focus from debating the merits of so-called “subjective” knowledge against “empirical” knowledge towards assessing

those in positions of power to determine and legitimate what constitutes knowledge and history in the first place. Those writing critically from the underside of modernity have largely been excluded from the linguistic ground of history writing and institutionalization for the last 500+ years; a material condition that underscores the imperative for colonized peoples to make claims on the research university and other locations as centers of knowledge production.ⁱ To be clear, epistemic decolonization is not about adding voices to a multicultural melting pot of scholarship, but rather works to redefine the very conditions in which knowledge is produced and legitimated, situating ethical relationships as central, and recognizing that what is put forth is the basis for thinking through another world.

[4] What is at stake is, for example, the ability to take seriously the material conditions in the United States and Canada that are pushing various generations of Mexican migrants to think about identity, history and indigeneity (Dunbar-Ortiz), while at the same time being able to account for when those claims to indigeneity are “an effect of the PRI’s statist policies to resuscitate, through state-funded documentation, [a] particular defunct Mexican Indian culture” (Saldaña-Portillo 416), in addition to a more complex telling of history that respects memory, imaginings and feeling (Million 54-55). In part, the inability to see together these often-disparate stances on north/south issues of indigeneity is a question of epistemology.

Science/Narrative

The truth claims that Indigenous Studies theorists such as Dian Million, Deborah Miranda, and Kim Anderson, for example, make regarding the contours of colonial violence and the related resolve for a just world are not sufficiently accounted for in continental philosophical critiques of cultural imperialism. On the issue of competing narratives across the colonial divide, Jean François Lyotard argues in *The Postmodern Condition* that the only solution is a relativist stance. To make his argument he draws an essentialist division between what he calls “narrative knowledge” represented by an example from the “Cashinahua” community in Brazil and “scientific knowledge,” represented by Copernicus’ theory that planets traveled in a circular path. Narrative knowledge, Lyotard argues, is characterized by four distinct qualities: “hero stories” that serve to legitimate social institutions, an engagement with a wide variety of language games organized under a unified viewpoint, the transmission of knowledge vis-à-vis particular kinds of rhetorical devices not found in scientific knowledge-making, and distinctive by particular rhythms that Lyotard describes as akin to music (20-21). Scientific knowledge, conversely, is juxtaposed as engaging only one kind of language game (denotative), positions itself over and above any social institution, makes apparent that the competence required to convey scientific knowledge rests solely with the researcher, is accumulated but

always prey to falsification through the presentation of new proof, and is thus dependent on a diachronic temporality (25-26). Based on this rendition of a two-way division between fundamental forms of knowledge, Lyotard concludes:

There is, then, incommensurability between popular narrative pragmatics, which provides immediate legitimation, and the language game known to the West as the question of legitimacy—or rather legitimacy as a referent in the game of inquiry. Narratives, as we have seen, determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do (23).

Although Lyotard uses Copernicus as his exemplar it is widely understood that his analysis was also an indirect critique of Marxist discourse of revolution and liberation (x). While much of Lyotard's critique against the pragmatics of "scientific narrative" holds, in another way through this surprising sweep, Lyotard manages to erase the intellectual work of decolonial activists from around the world who were deeply engaged in disrupting the narrative/science binary at the time *The Postmodern Condition* was published. Revolutionaries such as Howard Adams, Frantz

Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, and José Carlos Mariategui (to name a few) all had published work engaging the local knowledges of their colonized communities in conversation with historical materialist struggles for global change. Despite decolonial uprisings that were collectively traversing “Western” scientific analyses of economics, sociology, history as well as “narrative” Indigenous knowledge systems, and evaluating their respective merits and weaknesses for the struggle of decolonization,ⁱⁱ Lyotard states:

It is therefore impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa: the relevant criteria are different. All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal life (26).

In short, Lyotard does not sufficiently account for the knowledge production of the global South: a recognition of global relations of power in the terrain of knowledge production. Lyotard’s conclusion reveals something fundamental about the colonial condition: despite his close attention to the Algerian uprising, the intellectual work emerging from this and related movements is elided and makes no impact on his assessment of the current axes of knowledge production.ⁱⁱⁱ

[6] It is from this context that I define, as influenced by the work of Nelson Maldonado-Torres, a decolonial historian as one whose characteristic

as a researcher is to take the intellectual work of the colonized as seriously as they would any French or German scholar, and in fact is deeply engaged with colonized peoples' work and lives, not merely as an object of study, but as fundamental to their own intellectual production. They emphasize politics as necessary to realize a world where ethical relations are the norm and not the exception, and importantly, seek to redefine the scientific/narrative knowledge binary rather than reject one in favor of the other (Maldonado-Torres 7, Wilson 23-26).

History/Memory

When you tackle a problem as important as the possibilities of mutual understanding between two different peoples, you should be doubly careful.

Frantz Fanon

Here, it is useful for us to recall Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" to illuminate another crucial aspect of the decolonial historian:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger (255).

In the "Theses," Benjamin was speaking to power as it manifested itself in the construction of History as a dominant narrative, much in the same spirit as Tuhiwai-Smith speaks to anthropology/ethnography in her book,

Decolonizing Methodologies. Benjamin understood the politics of knowing history “from below,” via the stories passed down through his family, sacred texts and other means not found in traditional archives. This is an imperative point to consider when writing decolonial histories in the Americas, as colonists attacked Indigenous knowledge systems and did not recognize other forms of books.^{iv}

[8] Yet, we must also contend with the possibility that our memories of colonial traumas are mediated through a number of dynamics, including dominant ideology or historical narratives that deny intersubjectivity—a key requirement of decolonization and central to the argument in this article.^v The critique of History as Power still stands, but inserting in its place the colonized’s memories without critically evaluating those memories could lend itself to perpetuating a colonial strategy rather than reveal a path towards liberation. This is a problem that needs to be addressed. The U.S./Mexico border region—the historic battleground between the Spanish and other European colonial empires—is not the same situation from whence Benjamin spoke. What is left unresolved in many narrations of “memories that flash up” on colonial borderlands is the power relationship *between* two or more colonized groups whom live in close community. In this context, questions of indigeneity have been particularly controversial and apparently incommensurable. Africana philosopher Lewis R. Gordon raises the problem

of epistemology and the recurring erasures that occur through only “understanding” a given political situation:

What is often missing is a profound understanding that these may not be matters that can be settled at an a priori level because they are not problems of *understanding* but of *knowing*. Empirical work needs to be done to determine the degrees of similarity and differences that prevail (31).

However, conducting empirical research does not mean accepting whatever is submitted *as* evidence as evidence: “[Evidence] must be understood as such which means that it must be put through a process of critical inquiry, a process that requires thinking...” (Gordon 32). In other words, memories that flash up in a transcolonial context may not be sufficient to know the historicity of the region, thus opening the door for research and the presentation of collectively deliberated evidence so that a given situation can be understood from the perspectives of the multiple colonized and enslaved groups.

[9] The *Gulbenkian Report on Knowledge* (a report that can be read as a political and epistemic challenge to Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*) argues that scholars “present themselves to the intersubjective judgment of all those who do research or think systematically about the particular subject” (90). Normally, when and where histories are written by and for

white wealthy men, the bar for what constitutes a truth-claim is often limited to the demands of their small group and is easily identifiable. This is why one of the central demands of decolonial movements of the 60s and 70s was to teach history courses *from* the perspective of the colonized rather than just about the colonized. The result has been the creation of Indigenous Studies and Gender Studies programs, out of which the circle of academic peer reviewers to whom evidence must be submitted has grown and changed. This is an important momentum to maintain. The turn against historical evidence *vis-à-vis* the surprising influence of authors from Walter Benjamin and Jean François Lyotard to Hayden White, and towards our memories (that spring forth in a time of danger while dismissing even the need for systematic research and detail that is collectively agreed upon to substantiate a truth-claim in a transcolonial context), has created serious impasses in, for instance, anti-colonial movements in the US/Mexico border region. If we define knowledge as that which is achieved through a reflection on the consciousness of the colonized arrived at by taking account of evidence produced in an exchange of intersubjective activities, then the perspectives of all subjugated peoples, even as they produce uncomfortable positionings in relation to white supremacy and empire, are crucial for understanding ethical relations in a context of land struggles. For example, the formation and politics of the *casta* system, the *encomienda* and *hacienda* systems, are fundamental to understanding deterritorialization,

detrimental, and hispanicization under Spanish colonialism, yet do not appear in most discussions of Mexican migrants and the nuances of Indigeneity written either by supporters or detractors, resulting in a discussion that is completely removed from the material conditions that produced the debate.^{vi} This appears to be the result of a turn away from historical inquiry and material analysis, in favor of tropes of mobility.

[10] To not be able to trace the *longue durée* histories of dispossession on a global scale, the very reason for many migrations and diasporas relegates the debate over Indigeneity to a struggle of entrenched positions with no foreseeable way out. Articulating a history of land dispossession via colonization and the discourses of race across colonial differences is an important move for not only North/South debates in the Americas, but to intervene in the anti-politicization of the transnational circulation of the term “Indigenous,” as in the case of Britain where the political class of white supremacists now call themselves “Indigenous Britons.”^{vii}

Land/Race

I use the term “transcolonial” to underscore that the delineated boundaries of influence by colonial empires were not as fixed as one might believe, and to highlight spaces in which knowing of a confluence of colonialisms is necessary for achieving the goal of intersubjectivity. A

number of books have been written that detail the differences between British, Spanish and other colonial empires, such as Anthony Pagden's *Lords of All the World* and Patricia Seed's *American Pentimento*, but few meditate on the way their projects overlapped, interconnected, and even borrowed from one another, particularly in border regions like the "US Southwest."^{viii} I will now discuss some necessary aspects of a transcolonial analysis through the work of a particular writer.

[12] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, an interdisciplinary feminist historian who was an active member of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the International Indian Treaty Council, has written extensively on Indigenous land struggles and issues of class and race in a transcolonial context. Her first of six books, *The Great Sioux Nation and its Struggle for Sovereignty*, was an oral history written at the request of citizens of the Sioux Nation based on court testimony that served as a key document at the first international conference on Indians of the Americas at the United Nations. In a later book, *Roots of Resistance: A History of Land Tenure in New Mexico*, Dunbar-Ortiz offers some of the most nuanced analyses on the often-troubled relationship between American Indian land struggles and the claim to resources that other poor, racialized, migrant, groups make on the United States.

[13] Dunbar-Ortiz is careful to tease out the internal class and race differences of southern “Mexicans” moving into the region now known as the state of New Mexico over four centuries, and the differences between all these groups and Pueblo communities in New Mexico.^{ix} Careful attention to the terms she uses and the descriptions she offers reveal a complex picture that is not found in many other texts on Indigenous issues on the Spanish/British-US colonial borderlands. Not all “Mexicans” in New Mexico arrived under the same circumstances, nor are they of the same race and class background. These differences, she shows, cannot simply be reduced to a settler/Indigenous binary, nor to Indian, Mestizo and Spaniard racial categories, nor to a homogenous class location overlapping with any given racial categorization.

[14] In the eighteenth-century there were over fifty racial categories articulated in the Spanish Empire, all of which held very specific social and economic benefits or limitations. Of those fifty or so, the ones most used in everyday life were Español (peninsular and criollo), Mestizo, Indio, Zambo, Mulatto, Negro, Coyote and Cholo (Morner 59). The *casta* system was developed as a tool of social control, imposed by Spanish colonists. It was a system that categorized physical features, such as hair texture, skin color, and facial features, but also language, clothing and literacy, and attributed particular social locations and economic opportunities—including access to

land—to each “group,” with Spaniards at the top of the hierarchy and black Africans at the bottom. The general ideology of the *casta* system was an imperative to assimilate Indigenous peoples into a Spanish Catholic hierarchy, yet situate black Africans as inherently inassimilable.^x It is the long history of this colonial process, from the sixteenth-century debate between Bartolome de las Casas and Juan Gines de Sepulveda regarding Spanish jurisdiction over Indian peoples to the legacy of deterritorialization legally justified by Francisco de Vitoria, bound by the question of the human status of people in the Americas, that makes it ahistorical to separate land issues from processes of racialization (Maldonado-Torres 216-226), even when community-based definitions of belonging are still strong. It is worthwhile to reiterate that the Spanish colonial dynamic was of consequence not only for people in “Latin America,” but also includes a significant section of the United States, and some legal scholars have argued that Spanish theologians continue to have a lasting impact on American Indian law (Williams).

[15] Dunbar-Ortiz’ carefully researched study of land tenure in New Mexico, dealing with both US and Spanish colonialisms, is an interesting example of how conducting historical and material analysis highlights the contingent nature of cultural or racial identifications over time and place. Such attention facilitates a politics that can critically identify and transcend the resulting

system of cycles of dispossession, alienation and exploitation. Her attention to not only nationality and race, but also to the economic status of the individuals involved, provides a much richer and accurate narrative that rings true for the readers of her work who are familiar with not only British or US colonialisms but Spanish colonialism as well.

The West/The Rest

Dunbar-Ortiz' work can be situated in conversation with postcolonial scholar Uma Narayan to further elucidate a necessary analytic in a transcolonial context. In Uma Narayan's article, "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism," she makes some crucial interventions in scholarship that repeats *unsubstantiated* narratives of absolute cultural difference between Western and non-Western peoples at the expense of analyzing historical specificities and the material conditions at hand. She argues scholars on both sides of the colonizer/colonized divide concur in this tendency:

While culturally essentialist feminist representations of "Third World cultures" sometimes depict the practices and values of *privileged* groups as those of the "culture as a whole," equally essentialist representations are produced when the "Representative Third-World Woman" is modeled on *marginalized and underprivileged* Third World women. The latter

sort of representation effaces Third World heterogeneity as effectively as the former, and bears the marks of a curious asymmetry, in that the most *underprivileged* of Western women are seldom cast as “representative of Western Culture (84).

She argues that the Third World feminist effort to decenter the category “woman” as an implicitly white Western subject tends to cast all women “in the West” as white and middle class, denying the legal nuances, economic, and social hierarchies between First Nations, black, brown, and white female subjects who live in the West.

[17] Conversely, she argues, the same overgeneralization is often repeated regarding female subjects outside the regions of “the West.” The “average non-Western woman” is constructed to be poor and marginalized, and thus conversations regarding privilege within that group, or the hierarchies operating *between* non-Western peoples is effaced in favor of a broad generalization that does not entirely hold up to historical or material analyses. Uma Narayan argues that if we conduct historical and material analyses of a given culture, it often emerges that what we understand to be distinct, homogenous cultures are often in fact “shifting designations” always “connected to various political projects,” thus foregrounding the contingent nature of many cultural differences (87). Such an analysis also reveals much more complex and nuanced dynamics: it is through the suspension of

assumptions when approaching a controversial situation with (what appears) to be incommensurable interpretations of events that Narayan wants to reinvigorate feminist decolonial analysis as historically and materially attentive. Dunbar-Ortiz provides an important example en route to this goal.

[18] For the purposes of this article, I have built on the work of others to introduce four key concepts towards the development of a transcolonial method of analysis: ethical relations as a first principle, recognizing the consciousness of the colonized as evidence regarding the contours and reality of colonization, and seeking the verification of research through a process of intersubjective activities that ushers in the subjectivities of the enslaved and colonized as central in the ongoing project of decolonizing knowledge production. Crucially, transcolonial contexts require a critique of a confluence of colonial practices and discourses.

ⁱ The most recent example of exclusion is Arizona's recent ban on books taught in the Mexican American Studies program at Tucson Unified School District that includes authors Sherman Alexie, Suzan Harjo, Winona LaDuke, William Katz, Cornel Pewewardy and Roberto Rodriguez.

ⁱⁱ The revolutionary nationalist versus cultural nationalist debates were precisely about the relationship between "traditional" and "scientific" knowledge forms. See Fanon and Nkrumah.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Lyotard *Political Writings*.

^{iv} See Mignolo and Youngblood Henderson for an insightful analysis of this history.

^v See Mamdani for an examination of the devastating possibilities of claims to nativism and uninterrogated memory in a transcolonial context.

^{vi} This may be a Southern parallel to the issues that Devon Mihesuah raises in "Commonality of Difference: American Indian Women and History."

^{vii} See "*Whites are Indigenous to Britain*." Nick Griffin, 2008 for a recording of a British Member of Parliament Nick Griffin of the British National Party.

^{viii} See *Greer and Cruz* for this growing field.

^{ix} I put "Mexicans" in quotations due to a common assumption that all brown people with Spanish surnames in the southwest are first or second generation migrants. However the history is much longer and more complex than that, as Dunbar-Ortiz explains.

^x See Katzew, especially chapter two, for a very good historical overview of the casta system in Mexico.

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