

LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES II

Topics in Latin American Studies

COURSE AGENDA

Overview of the radical transformation of epistemological and methodological assumptions in Latin American Studies from the end of the 1980s to the present.

Week 1 - Race & Indigeneity in LAS

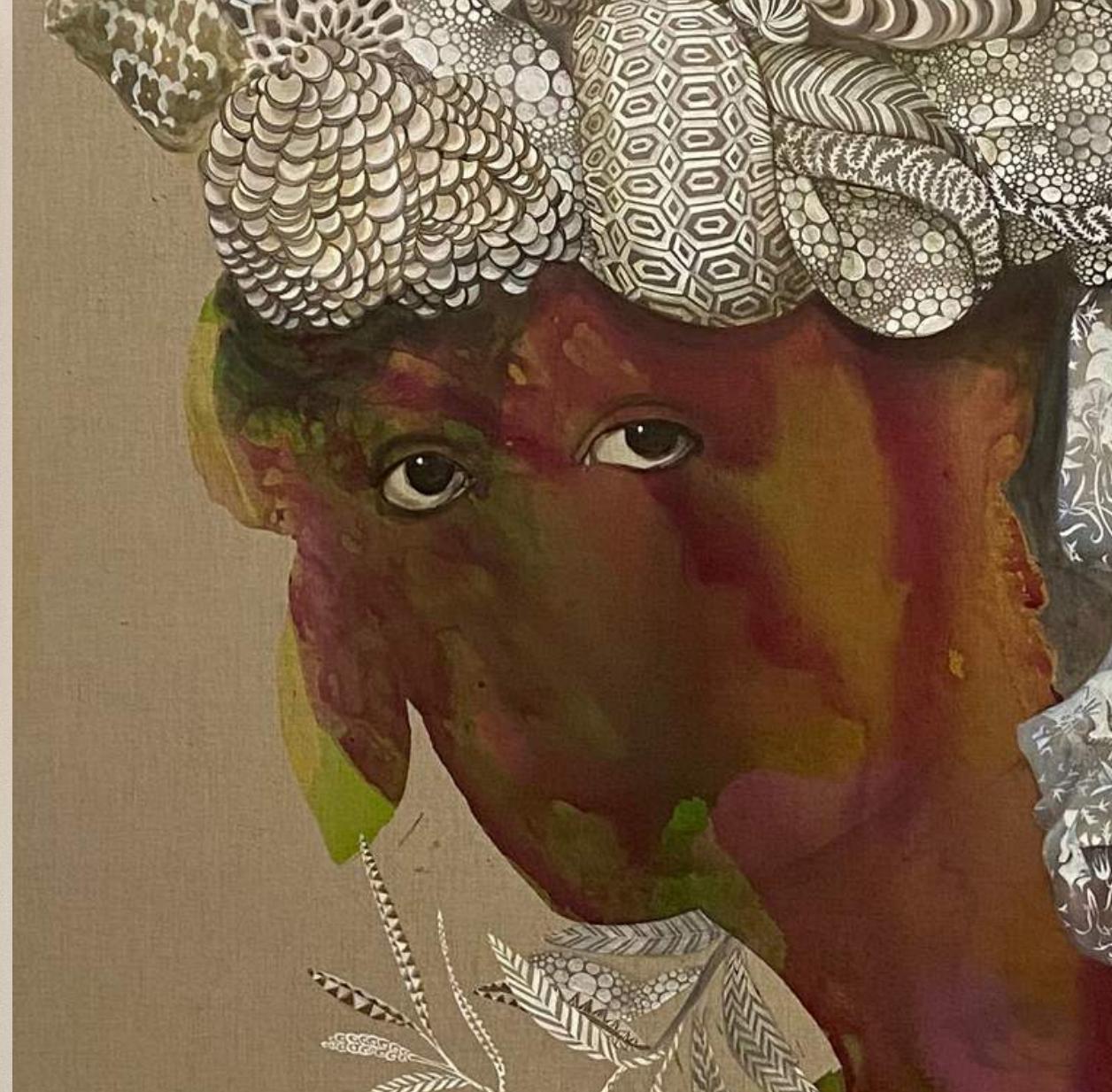
Week 2 - Afro-Diasporic Religions in the Caribbean

Week 3 - U.S. Imperialism and Hegemony in Latin America

Week 4 - The Subaltern: Hegemony, Cultural Studies, and Decoloniality

Week 5 - LAS Approaches: Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Week 6 - LAS Approaches: Affect and Post-Hegemony



Firelei Baez

Sans-Souci (This threshold between a dematerialized and a historicized body), 2015
Acrylic and ink on linen

Presented against a neutral backdrop, the striking figure in *Sans-Souci (This threshold between a dematerialized and a historicized body)* looks directly at the viewer with a calm yet powerful expression, giving the painting a mysterious quality reminiscent of neoclassical portrait painting. The subject is painted with yellow and ruby swatches of color and wears an exquisite headdress. The sitter's pose resembles the subject of Jacques Guillaume Lucien Amans's painting, *Creole in a Red Headdress* (ca. 1840), often regarded as a stereotypical representation of a sensuous black woman from antebellum New Orleans. Exemplified in this work, Baez is known for her painterly explorations on the tignon—a headscarf that was mandated by law to be worn by free women of color in Louisiana to prevent them from attracting white men. Here, the figure's gaze communicates a sense of authority, which draws attention to the history of the sensualized depictions of these women, who in reality had an unapologetic approach toward the mandate, decorating their headdress with beautiful textiles, ribbons, and feathers. In this painting, Baez acknowledges the history of the garment, and reinterprets it as symbol of pride and resistance.

TIMELINES

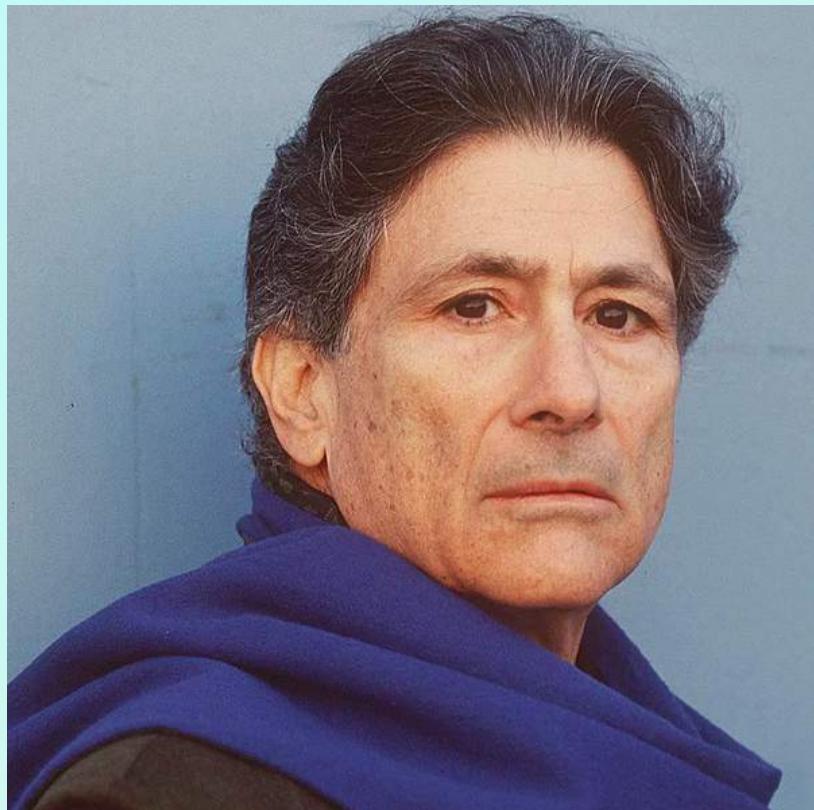
- **15th c.-19th c.**: formal colonization by the majority of European powers, especially Spain, Portugal, England, France with respect to the Americas; two main forms: **extraction colonialism & settler colonialism**, which are distinguished by the goals of those moving to "new" lands (extraction colonialism's primary goal is to extract resources while settler colonialism's goal is to establish a new state of settlers by exterminating native population altogether). This does not mean that extraction colonialism does not have settler colonial logics or that settler colonialism does not have extractive systems; it only means that the *primary* function of the colonial infrastructure was not set up to extract/export in settler colonialism and the *primary* function of the colonial infrastructure was not set up to create a "new" state in extraction colonialism.
- **19th c.-20th c.**: the end of empires, when the most common setup of government changes from monarchy to constitutional republic/monarchy, which is later called the 'nation-state' as it refers to the combination of a state (government) representative of a nation (people). This does not mean that imperialism does not continue; very infamously, the British crown continues imperialism well into the latter half of the Twentieth Century, when its colonies become part of the 'Commonwealth.' Unique to this era is the U.S., a former colony, turning itself into an industrialized military and imperialistic power in its sphere of influence. In Latin America, this era is characterized by independence fights and then criollo despotic rule.

Hermeneutic trends up until the mid-twentieth centuries could largely be put into two categories. The most 'liberal' (in the colloquial American sense, meaning accepting, left-leaning) are in the **Marxian/Socialist tradition** - focus on class, race as social formations from which social events derive their stakes. The mainstream trend of the era, the more conservative, is the **Darwinian/Nietzschean tradition** - focus on individuals with the most 'will to power' (strength) who change history because of their individual power, might.

THE POST-COLONIAL

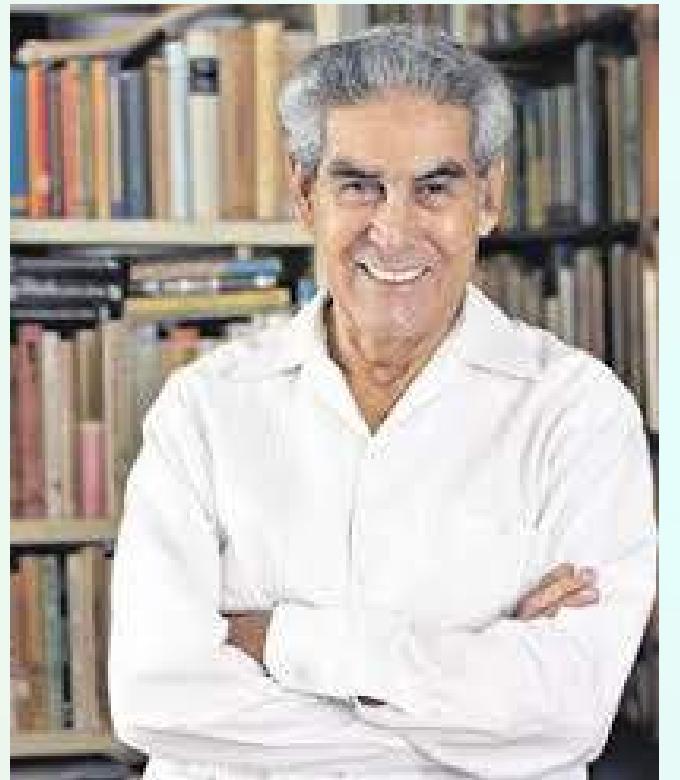
- As the colonial project comes to a close, theorists from the newly independent nation-states, educated most likely in their former colonial masters' traditions and institutions, write new traditions of hermeneutics — ways of questioning.
- These include the writing of Aimé Césaire, whose work is posthumously labeled **post-colonialist** in outlook, as Césaire wished to critique the Western philosophical traditions, particularly the notion of the 'benevolent White savior' or the 'White man's burden.' In *Discourse sur le colonialisme* (1950), he argues that there was never a benevolence to the colonization of any region in the modern world. He writes that all of colonialism was a project of economic exploitation and a combination of **genocidal extermination** and **displacement/enslavement**. He writes the central irony of the discourse of colonialism is that it argues the Europeans saw themselves as eliminating the '**savage**' nature of the natives and Africans even as they were the ones who were most savage. He compares the Nazism of the Second World War, a project of genocide, to the project of colonialism, writing that long before the Nazis dreamed of eliminating the Jews of Europe, the European powers dreamed of eliminating the native populations of the Americas. The savagery, he argues, does not begin in the 20th century, but long before. In this final point, he is even arguing against the more left-leaning historical narratives of the time (**Hannah Arendt**, namely), who argue the **totalitarianism** of the 20th century is unique in its all-encompassing nature.
- Another Martinican theorist by the name of Frantz Fanon puts forth post-Freudian theories of national culture, race, and violence center the colonized individual as being 'infected' with the master/slave logic and out of this will come the violent overthrow of this logic, **decolonization**. Decolonization, for Fanon, is put simply: the last shall be first and the first last. It is inherently violent, as colonialism was established in violence and therefore can only be undone with violence. Fanon adjusts Marx's theory of the proletariat to center the lumpenproletariat, which Fanon argues shall lead the revolution because they are 'untainted' by the colonial masters' logic.

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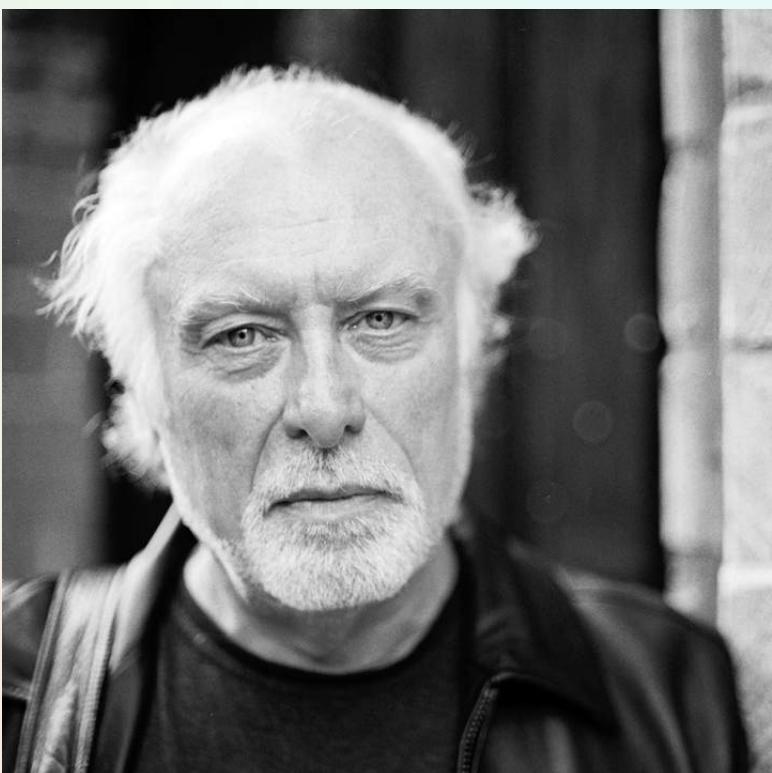


- **Edward Said**, whose work largely centers the so-called Middle East, argues that there is no such thing as 'the Orient,' in reality, as the concept relies on a Euro-centric (European) perspective rather than bottom-up data. Put another way, 'the Orient' is a discursive production, a collection of on-going, reiterative discourses about a fantasy region that exists in the cultural production of one region of the world (Europe) but does not exist in reality. He calls this project **Orientalism**, the simultaneous **exoticization/eroticization** on the one hand and **revulsion** on the other. This allows for the European subject to be both the center of history, from which all other cultures are deviations (exotic) and therefore sensually 'naughty' (erotic), and the standard of modernity, whereby all other cultures are pre-modern, savage (revulsion).
- **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** writes in the tradition known as **post-structuralism** and what she calls "Marxism-feminism-deconstruction" after the system set up in *Of Grammatology* by Jacques Derrida, which Spivak gained academic prominence by translating into English. Spivak is most known for essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" in which she uses the Gramscian subject called the '**subaltern**', meaning the heterogeneous set of fringe groups outside of the dominant culture (**hegemony**). As Spivak continues to write on the subaltern, her focus largely centers the women of the subaltern communities, adjusting feminist theories to include global colonial paradigms.

THE DECOLONIAL



- **Aníbal Quijano** works on what he calls **Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality**, two hermeneutics that understand colonialism not only as a physical, material reality, but a set of beliefs, traditions, and philosophical/artistic norms that establish Europe as 'universal.' Critiquing this, he argues that any discussion of **modernity/rationality** has often centered the definition of these terms from Europe, just as the white male Christian European subject is seen as the '**universal**' philosophical subject, all others deviations from this norm. In establishing themselves as universal, the European regional philosophical norms infect the native epistemologies of the Americas so far that in order to disentangle what is Eurocentric baggage and what is 'inherent' or indigenous to a particular region is extremely difficult. This process he calls **decolonization**.
- **Walter Mignolo**, agreeing with the tradition set up by Aníbal Quijano, pushes the process of decolonization into a set of standards, practices, and philosophical questions that he calls **decoloniality**. In this interdisciplinary hermeneutic, sometimes called **Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD)** research program, is a collective project associated with Latin America characterized by a critique of **Eurocentric "colonial modernity"** and emphasis on **non-Eurocentric forms of knowing and being** in the world. It also aims to foster alternative or decolonial thinking emerging from the lived colonial experiences of those situated "outside" Europe. This last is what MCD proponents claim differentiates it from **postcolonial critiques of modernity with their emphasis on deconstruction**. This review provides a brief but critical overview of the MCD project's parameters and claims. It makes a cautionary call to those tempted by "**alternatives to modernity**," who might want to uncritically adopt alternative decolonial thinking. It concludes with a call for a closer and critical engagement with Latin American decolonial ideas and those they contest.



JEAN FRANCO, "MOVING ON FROM SUBALTERNITY: INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN GUATEMALA AND MEXICO"

- Where "Can the Subaltern Speak?" had most impact was among Latin Americanists in the United States and especially in the controversies and arguments around one particular "subaltern," Rigoberta Menchú, whose interview and testimony, transcribed by Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, was, soon after its publication in English in 1984, a year after it had appeared Spanish, celebrated and debated. The book was dragged into the Lynn Cheney-inspired debates over the Western canon after it appeared on a Stanford University syllabus; it was invoked as a source of inspiration by guilt-tripped academics and claimed as a teaching tool in an effort to increase U.S. student awareness of other cultures, as an ethical example, and as a challenge to literary studies that had suppressed orality
- the revisionary version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that appeared in the "History" chapter of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. It is a rich and complex chapter that ranges over archival material of the East Indian Company, in search of the Rani of Sirmur, while appropriating insights from many fields and in the process developing her critique of Deleuze and Guattari and Foucault among others. Both the earlier and later essay are acerbic criticisms of the "transparency" of those intellectuals who "report on the nonrepresented subject" and "the foreclosing of the necessity of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production." She also explores the erasures of the imperial historical record of the Rani, who was certainly not a subaltern. The history chapter also provides new definitions of subalternity both within nation building... and of the "new subaltern" brought into being by the financialization of the globe and the denial of consumption to sectors of the exploited population, particularly women. In the course of this wide-ranging discussion, Spivak describes her visits to Jaipur where she comes upon women gathering leaves and vegetation for their animals and comments... This "unorganized landless female labor," she goes on to note, "is one of the targets of super-exploitation where local, national, and international capital intersect. . . . By that route of super-exploitation these women are brought into capital logic, into the possibility of crisis and resistance" (242-243), although, she argues, they cannot be placed in some general category such as "third world women's resistance." In the same chapter she mentions the emergence of the new subaltern in the New World Order: "This new subaltern under postfordism and international subcontracting becomes the mainstay of globalization" and is "rather different from the nationalist example" (276/42).

"LATIN AMERICAN DECOLONIAL THOUGHT, OR MAKING THE SUBALTERN SPEAK" – KIRAN ASHER (2013)

- Race and place, if not gender, are also at the analytical and political heart of the modernity/ coloniality/decoloniality (MCD) project. Based on my reading of some of its key publications (discussed and cited below), the following premises undergird the project's narrative: 1 The conquest of the Americas by Europe and the subsequent racialized colonial practices constituted the modern world-system. 2 But Eurocentric modernity obscures the specificities of race and place, and invisibilized other epistemes to masquerade as universal and total. 3 The coloniality of power ensures the expansion and continuation of this geopolitics of knowledge production, which dominates disciplinary thinking about politics, economics, society, and culture. 4 For the sake of humans and nature, it is imperative to come up with alternatives to the exploitative and destructive practices of colonial modernity. 5 Such decolonial alternatives or "non-Eurocentric" forms of knowing and being in the world can emerge from the different wisdom and experiences of those who have been on the borders of colonial modernity. 6 Latin America and the past and present experiences of Latin Americans are a key, though not the only, loci of enunciation for decolonial thinking
- The MCD collective acknowledges some kinship with postcolonial critiques of modernity. However, they differentiate their work from postcolonial studies and the metropolitan knowledge of South Asian, African, and Middle Eastern scholars on three main grounds: 1 That unlike postcolonial scholars, they consider the Conquest of the Americas and its formative role in modernity. 2 That they aim to go beyond critique and deconstruction to foster decolonial thinking. 3 That their critiques and proposals of liberation emerge from the cosmovisions of exploited and marginal groups rather than from privileged institutions of higher learning.

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- Both Quijano and Dussel take the "Conquest" and colonization of Latin America as constitutive of the modern world and contest the triumph of Enlightenment rationality and its claims of universal totality on the grounds that they are based on erasure of "colonial difference." For the Argentinean/US semiotician and cultural theorist Walter Mignolo, this colonial difference and the cosmologies and worldviews obscured by Eurocentric claims of rationality contain the possibility of "border thinking as an epistemology from a subaltern perspective." (2008: 238). Such epistemologies could enable the radical transformation of the social sciences and philosophy and lead to a "decolonization" and diversification of knowledge production.
- Mignolo differentiates the MCD project from postcolonial studies in terms of those who inspire it (non-European thinkers and activists) and the locus of enunciation (allegedly beyond or outside northern, metropolitan institutions). These claims notwithstanding, Quijano, Dussel, and Mignolo engage the work of non-European thinkers and activists largely in abstract, theoretical, or textual/rhetorical terms, and from within the academy or at what Escobar (2007) calls "the academic-intellectual" level.
- Maria Lugones (student of Mignolo) draws on the work of third world feminists, women of color, and African anthropologists to formulate a "colonial/modern gender system." Lugones' concept expands Quijano's "coloniality of power" to highlight how race, sex, and gender underlie coloniality. It also expands white feminist perspectives' to flag the centrality of race in constituting the sex/gender system.
- Freya Schiwy aims to disrupt the colonial legacies of gender dualities (man/woman) and binary thinking, which continue to permeate mainstream and radical thought and actions. De-essentializing identities and dealing with the heterogeneity of subjectivity is no easy task, as feminists and other critical scholars have discovered.

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- As examples of the prevalence of other ontologies, Arturo Escobar lists the communal forms living and organizing among the Zapatistas in Mexico and the granting of special rights to Pachamama (roughly translatable as nature) in the Ecuadorian constitution. In Ecuador and Bolivia, *buen vivir* (in Spanish) and *sumaq kawsay* (in Quechua)—understood as the well-being of people and nature—appear as fundamental goals in the new constitutions. For Escobar, these signal a postliberal form of representation and a challenge to the idea of autonomous individuals living separate from their community. Developing these themes, he draws special attention to the role of decolonial feminism and indigenous and Afro-Latina women in imagining life according to other paradigms.
- Escobar is clear that solidarity with cultural struggles and the urgent necessity of alternatives to modernity drive his decolonial politics. In his earlier work, he notes, "... subalterns do in fact speak..." (1995: 223). Because their lives and ours are at stake, Escobar's subalterns not only can but also must be made to speak. Then as now, he ignores the problem of representation or resolves it through ethnography.

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- Contributors to the MCD project acknowledge that both decolonial thinkers and postcolonial studies ask how colonial legacies shape development, globalization, and modern subjectivity. Yet they do not engage with postcolonial theories on the grounds that they come from metropolitan institutions of higher learning. This seems odd given that most decolonial thinkers are also based at universities of the West (either epistemological or geographically). And if we are urged to go beyond the geopolitics of modern knowledge and attachment to disciplinary thinking, why then identify members by their disciplines and their national (and institutional) locations?
- The MCD project is right in calling attention to the need to pay attention to the specificities of Latin American colonialism in shaping colonial modernity. The project also opens up several questions that are imperative and necessary to understand and address the social and environmental crises of the day. Among these are the need to pay attention to the interaction of race, place, and gender in shaping economic, political, and socio-cultural relations in the past and present and to question how the categories and units of analyses of modern disciplines are produced discursively rather than to take them as given. But other than rhetorical attention to going beyond essentialism, the texts reviewed here pay scant attention to heterogeneity and diversity within the continent. More problematic, Latin American people and places are assumed as categories of analysis rather than parsed. Of course, engaging with the entirety of scholarship on Latin American colonial history, culture, and politics is an impossible task. Yet, one notices the curious absence of engagement with the Caribbean, which is surely central when discussing the Conquest (see de la Luz 2008).

NEXT CLASS

LAS Approaches: Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

