

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



Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski
*I Was Not a Person I
Was a Place*
2020

*My figures are drawn with the intention of creating a visual language that alters our basic symbols for being human
These figures embody the everyday resistance encoded within the femme experience*

WHAT IS/WAS POST-STRUCTURALISM?

movement away from rigid or fixed definitions (*structuralism*), instead focusing on (or bringing out) complexities, anomalies, variances, volatilities and indeterminacies

(Western) thinkers often associated with post-structuralism: Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri, Jacques Lacan, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick

"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).

LATIN AMERICAN CULTURAL STUDIES

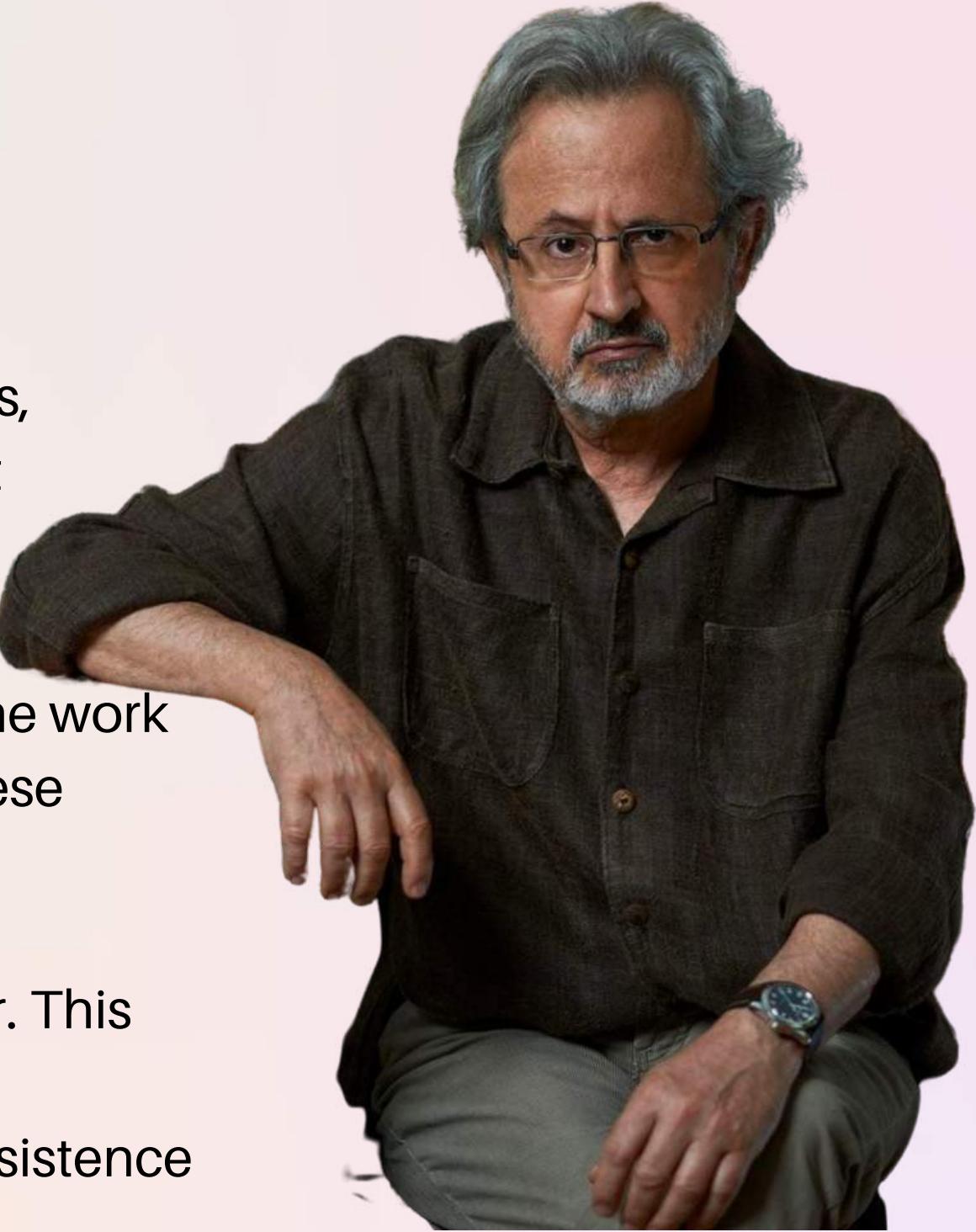
- In its heyday, Latin American cultural studies "seem to have overlooked the constitution of the feminine in culture as well as "the crisis of masculinity" that permeated many cultural manifestations. While cultural studies scholars cite all kinds of theorists—from Stuart Hall to Walter Benjamin; from Bakhtin to Foucault—they neglect theories of gender in their analyses. If they mention gender, they do it alongside other terms such as "ethnicity" or "identities," but without exploring the genealogies and the scope involved. This omission is particularly disastrous if we consider that gender and sexual difference are not only women's and feminists' concerns, but rather issues that affect a large spectrum of society from social organizations, politics, and forms of resistance, to social reproduction" (Jean Franco).
- Largely, as the chapter for today points out, it was not until well into the 1990s that feminist hermeneutics had a legitimate place within Latin American cultural studies—the Marxian-inflected academic formations surrounding the analysis of culture, imperialism, power, and politics. Cultural Studies, which transformed the Anglo-American universities (particularly the Humanities and Social Sciences), in Latin America focused class as the primary factor of social experience. When, in the 1970s-1980s, the feminist "interruption" (Hall) of Anglo-American Cultural Studies occurred, the same did not become the case for Latin American cultural studies. **Cultural critique was largely focused on Gramscian analysis of cultural hegemony with the primary factor being class.**
- "The feminist activist-intellectual shift emphasizing the imbrication of culture-power-politics explored in the above examples also represents a response to the overall challenges posed by new epistemological and ontological configurations facing feminist theories in the twenty-first century. In epistemological terms, movements for decolonizing gender, mostly led by subaltern feminists in Latin America, have been enacting a profound paradigm change. Geopolitically situated in the colonial wound, and bringing the coloniality of gender (and its binarism) as a key element of the coloniality of power, these movements advance radical challenges to authorized canons and methods in their articulation of alternative knowledges."

DECOLONIZING GENDER

- "According to Maria Lugones, seeing gender as a colonial category allows us to historicize **patriarchy**, emphasizing the ways in which **heteronormativity**, capitalism and racial classifications are always-already intertwined. Lugones also states that the gender binary introduces another hierarchy: the human and the nonhuman. One of the goals of Christianity's civilizing mission was to transform the "colonized nonhuman" (black and indigenous women and men) into the category of the human. Hence, **the colonized nonhuman female was not only racialized, but also reinvented as a woman through Western gender codes.**"
- Basic tenets introduced by the **decolonial gender theory**:
 - gender, along with race, were colonial constructs racializing and gendering subaltern societies
 - gender had never been an organizing principle or hierarchical category in tribal communities before the "contact," hence the need to decolonize it
 - even in the cases where gender nomenclature—and, in some cases, patriarchy—did exist, these were non-Western genealogies
- How to Decolonize Gender:
 - a. **Equivocation:** Marisol De La Cadena: "bringing other-than-human beings into the human domain of politics, she argues that [indigenous] communities are undermining the ontological distinction between humanity and nature that has been a hallmark of Western modernity. Earth practices, such as considering the political needs and desires of earth creatures, enact the respect and affect necessary for maintaining webs of relationality between the human and its others (the nonhuman)."
 - b. **Feminist Translation:** it is from politically motivated and unfaithful translations that the plurality of worlds/ontologies are interconnected without becoming commensurate.

AMERINDIAN PERSPECTIVISM

- Coined by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Brasil), **Amerindian Perspectivism** is the persistence of similar mythologies and cosmologies across several Amerindian cultures, including social phenomena like hunting, kinship, and war. In studying these recurrent phenomena, Castro reveals the taken-for-grantedness of things such as the distinction between the human and the nonhuman in Western tradition.
- Ironically (or perhaps to 'legitimize' the concept to Western scholarship), Castro uses the work of Western thinkers like Leibniz, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari. However, he uses these theories by transforming them (what the reading for today calls 'equivocation'—willful misinterpretation). The Western philosophical notion of **perspectivism** argues that knowledge is only perceptible, meaning knowable, from the perspective of the knower. This theory assumes, therefore, that there is no ability to perceive objective knowledge.
 - For Nietzsche, we reach 'truth' or 'objective knowledge' through evaluating the persistence or recurrence of something from multiple perspectives.
- According to Castro's analysis, **animality and humanity are relational categories—based on perspective**. One is always the human from one's own perspective; every animal appears to itself as human, not animal. Animality is, on the other hand, the perception of the body outside of oneself; humans appear to animals as animals, perhaps a dangerous predator.
- The difference between **perspectivism** and **relativism** can be explained in "the contrast between **multinaturalism** (different corporeal states that presupposes a similar human and cultural condition) and **multiculturalism** (the same and common nature or reality, regarded by different cultural points of view)" (Vanzolini and Cesarino, 2014).



THE QUEER TURN

- **Judith Butler** combined the work of many post-structuralist and psychoanalytic as well as feminist theorists to argue that "gender identity is not only not the product of biological essences, nor is it a mere social construct; instead it is an embodied practice, embodied specifically in everyday performances of gender traits, which are learned and often unconsciously enacted, but which can also be consciously performed in conformance with or in opposition to societal norms and expectations."
 - These come from her texts *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, foundational texts to **Queer Theory** (Teoría Cuir) — which, unlike Gay and Lesbian Studies, "was poststructuralist in nature, and rejected notions of sexual (e.g., lesbian or gay) identity as essence, instead seeing more productive approaches to sexuality through theories of performance, which allowed for all kinds of possibilities beyond the binaries of male-female, heterosexual-homosexual."
- The Latin America-based scholars that have begun seeking out autochthonous approaches to gender and sexuality theory, for example those working under the rubric of not queer but rather cuir theory, have mostly positioned their work in relation to the metropolis, without taking into account what are, in effect, critiques of metropolitan epistemologies of gender and sexuality that are realized not from outside the metropolitan academy, but rather from within it. Instead **Latin America-based scholars have turned to local genealogies**.
- The contemporary work of Argentine Carlos Figari ("Semióticas queer") is part of a process of what Figari has called the "cannibalization" of queer theory by Latin Americans under a rubric that has become known as "sexual dissidence," in a conscious distancing from metropolitan positions

TEORÍA CUIR

- **Equivocal translations, queer readings** of colonial texts, **invasions** of the arena of politics by unusual earth beings, **slowing down** thinking, and **rewriting** memories and histories in the articulation of other knowledges are, therefore, ethical and political practices that decolonial feminists have initiated in many locations of our vast and dense Latin/a American terrain.
- “It is important when cuir starts to get spelled with a ‘c,’ when it is no longer necessary to look only to the north to write and to deploy politics of sexual disobedience.”
- Sayak Valencia's **decolonial approach**, framed as a critique of capitalism, looks to local epistemologies, practices and politics that seeks to draw out new theories that dialogue with but do not depend upon the knowledge production of the global north.
- Agendas on sexuality in Latin America have been concerned with advancing rights, and also with issues of capitalism, and bodies with a profound critique of modernization and liberalism. Since 2010, same-sex marriage has been legalized in four South American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay) and civil unions are recognized in Chile and Ecuador. Same-sex marriage is legal in Mexico City and nine different states, with courts required to perform samesex marriages when petitioned in every state.
- A radical critique of state violence has brought forth an interest in examining the connections between liberalism, modernization and capitalism and extreme violence against bodies... Bodies are central to the agenda of these studies and a new generation of critics heavily invested in LGBTQI activism has centered bodies as objects of abjection, state intervention, and pleasure.

NEXT CLASS

LAS Approaches: Affect and Post-Hegemony



**Affect, Ecofeminism, and
Intersectional Struggles
in Latin America**

A Tribute to Berta Cáceres