

(DE)COLONIAL SOURCES:
THE COLONIALITY OF POWER, REORIGINALIZATION,
AND THE CRITIQUE OF IMPERIALISM

Abraham Acosta

The last twenty years has seen decolonial theory emerge as a prominent approach to the study of Latin America and other areas of the global south. “Decoloniality” refers to the enlistment of alternative, previously relegated modes of consciousness, knowledge, and worldviews as a theoretico-political paradigm that challenges Western history and reason’s claim to universality. Understood previously through other such names as “Post-Occidentalism,” “border thinking,” and “de-linking,” the decolonial option as it is now called has been posited as a uniquely non-Eurocentric critical tradition that surpasses competing theoretical models such as Marxism, deconstruction, and postcolonial theory for its capacity to better account for colonialism and the legacies of colonization. Within various fields and disciplines, ranging from literary and cultural studies to history and anthropology, decoloniality has been heralded as the contemporary paradigm for the cultural and political emancipation of formerly colonized cultures from Western modes of knowledge and power.

Indeed, there may be no concept more pivotal and constitutive of decolonial thought than Aníbal Quijano’s coloniality of power. Quijano (in conjunction with Enrique Dussel) was instrumental to Mignolo’s early conceptualization of the modern/colonial world system in his book *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000)—from which would emerge the decolonial option—and Quijano’s coloniality of power has in recent years, and in many ways, taken hold of decoloniality itself.¹ The coloniality of power can now be seen referenced in numerous studies that aim to leverage claims of liberation against the divestiture of Western development and its universal narrative of history. Such is the level of explanatory power invested in the notion of coloniality of power that, alongside the work of Enrique Dussel and Walter Mignolo, Quijano’s work remains inextricable from this theoretical framework. One may even suggest that were it not for the development of the coloniality of power, decoloniality itself would have never emerged as a critical program.

However, aside from the centrality ascribed to it and the countless assertions of the term and bibliographic citations of Quijano’s work, very little

has been written on how exactly Quijano himself conceives and formulates the coloniality of power in his own writings. In other words, given the coloniality of power's enthusiastic reception within academic institutions worldwide, no substantive study has been offered that finally places its theoretical framework and historical claims under close, rigorous, scrutiny. The following pages aim to fill this void and advance a timely and critical exploration into the coloniality of power's wager as a concept that makes decolonization even imaginable. Through a reading of some of Quijano's earliest texts, this essay aims to offer insight into the theoretical and historical implications of Quijano's thought. As I will demonstrate below, the coloniality of power, as a concept, harbors much ambiguity and contradiction, so much so that it may not be, after all, the theoretical bedrock it is assumed to be to fulfill the project's infrangible wager. This wager is understood as the divesting of all western influence from indigenous and aboriginal cultural practices, and/or as the guarantee of direct, unmediated access to the inner workings of these radical, non-Cartesian, epistemologies and subjectivities. Instead, as we will see, coloniality of power (including Quijano's larger overarching terms for it: "cultural colonialism" and "reoriginalization" [reoriginalización]) is not only at odds with decoloniality as such, but also, perhaps more crucially, at odds with itself.²

There may be some debate over which of Quijano's texts are the most essential to his elaboration of coloniality of power. While the essay "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" (2000) may be his most widely read, a version of which is included in the recent anthology *Coloniality at Large* (2008), I maintain that we must instead look to some of the earlier work in which he more fully develops his notion of coloniality of power and to which he will consistently reference in his later work.³ In particular, I will be looking at two essays that contain Quijano's most explicit attempts at formulating the coloniality of power: "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad" (1992) and "Colonialidad de poder, cultura y conocimiento en América Latina" (1997).⁴ While the latter, to my knowledge, has not been translated, the former was indeed first translated into English in 1999 (in a slightly revised version), republished (with further modification) in the journal *Cultural Studies* (2007) and republished yet again in the edited collection *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (2013).⁵ I mention these translations because, as will be made evident below, they will prove instrumental as a means to interrogate Quijano's implicit claims.

But let us first move to a discussion of the first essay: "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad." The essay itself begins with a brief description of the history of a modern global order that began 500 years ago with the conquest of Latin America and which resulted in the concentration of all the world's resources into the hands of a small, European, elite class. While the narrative of history he offers moves from the period of colonization to the

rise of imperialism, Quijano nevertheless sets himself the task of defining certain specific aspects of colonialism because, according to him, colonialism has not yet completely ceased to operate as a modality of power. Now it is important to note that his understanding of coloniality of power does not yet issue from this; he will later seek to establish a distinction between this—what he calls “political colonialism”—and that from which coloniality of power more directly springs, which he will call “cultural colonialism.” As such, priority is given to provide shape to the notion of colonialism even as he suggests it is no longer the binding mode of governance that it used to be:

A relation of direct, political, social and cultural domination was established by the Europeans over the conquered of all continents. This domination is known as colonialism....Thus colonialism, in the sense of a formal system of political domination by some societies over others seems a question of the past.⁶ (1999, 41)

Quijano here describes colonialism as a relation of direct, political, social, and cultural domination established by Europeans over the rest of the “conquered” world, one which, however, is no longer predominant and has assumed a different form (“seems a question of the past”). Now, as a statement posited in the service of leading to a formulation of what he will call coloniality of power, there’s nothing particularly striking about this. Moreover, looking more closely at the above passage it becomes quite clear that it also doesn’t say enough. The paragraph in question, including its most central passage—“a formal system of political domination by some societies over others”—doesn’t at all sufficiently specify what indeed is the defining characteristic of colonialism as he defines it. Is it the relation itself of “direct” domination? Is it the overall scope of the domination: “political, social and cultural”? Or is it, as one often assumes in these discussions, the specific involvement by European actors in this relation of domination? All the text confirms is that “this domination is known as colonialism.... a formal system of political domination by some societies over others.” This distinction is important of course because it strikes at the core of what is assumed to be decoloniality’s promise: decolonization from not just any form of domination, but rather from a specifically and exclusively European modality of domination. So if in Quijano’s formulation, colonialism is defined simply as any formal relation of domination—“this domination is known as colonialism.... a formal system of political domination by some societies over others”—and not bound exclusively to the particular mode of domination of one particular group over another, does this then not imply that there are as many colonialisms as there are relations of domination? Or rather, that European colonialism is therefore only one of among many possible colonialisms? Or perhaps even that, for Quijano, all forms of domination are ultimately colonial in nature?

This is not insignificant. What is at stake here in Quijano's passage is twofold. On the one hand, it speaks to a critical unbinding of the often-assumed relationship between colonialism generally defined (understood by Quijano as simply a relation of "direct" domination) and the specifically European modality of modern domination against which decoloniality as a concept is defined. On the other hand, one should point out that Quijano's argument, because it subscribes so heavily to the idea of colonialism itself as the name for all domination—that colonialism itself both underwrites and in effect names all forms of "direct" domination—is ultimately built on tautological grounds. In other words, if Quijano ultimately defines colonialism not as a modern and uniquely European form of subordination and exploitation distinct world-historically from other prior forms of domination, but rather, and as he does, as "a formal system of political domination by some societies over others," the very justification for decoloniality's positioning against Western modernity immediately evaporates because it could no longer be limited to Western modernity but would have to account for all forms of colonialism, past and present.⁷

In order to unconceal what exactly is at stake in Quijano's understanding of colonialism, let us remove all remaining doubt by consulting a closely related source: the English translation of "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad" (1992). As I mentioned earlier, the English translation (by Sonia Therborn) first appeared in a Swedish publication in 1999 and was subsequently republished, for a U.S. audience, in a special issue of *Cultural Studies* in 2007 titled "Globalization and the De-Colonial Option," edited by Walter D. Mignolo (now an edited book published by Routledge). Now before I go on, however, two clarifications must be made. First, I originally referred to "a" (i.e., one) translation of "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad," when in effect, there are at least two. The republished translation contains several not-insignificant modifications from the first, which, while still attributed to Therborn, might very well constitute an entirely distinct text. Second, and as a compounding of the always already tense and highly fraught relation between any original text and its translation, with these now three distinct texts before us (the Spanish original and two dis-identical English translations) matters with Quijano are even more tenuous. However, this by no means signifies that it is impossible to determine with sufficient clarity what kind of critical proposition Quijano is ultimately advancing here.

My reason for appealing to the translation as a means to further clarify what indeed is at stake in this text is straightforward, if somewhat inverted. In this particular case the translation proves instrumental not because the translation is able to adequately convey any proper meaning of the original, but rather the inverse; we are speaking of a rare situation in which the original is refined and clarified thanks largely not to the first translation, but to what appears to be a strong prescriptive and

overdetermining impulse in the republished, modified translation. That is, somewhere between the first and the subsequently republished translation of Quijano's essay, both still attributed to Therborn as translator, one sees inscribed numerous efforts at supplementation present neither in the Spanish original nor in the first translation. Allow me to cite once again from Quijano's Spanish original and this time followed by the two translations:

Quijano (1992)

De otra parte, fue establecida una relación de dominación directa, política, social y cultural de los europeos sobre los conquistados de todos los continentes. Esa dominación se conoce como colonialismo...Así, el colonialismo, en el sentido de un sistema de dominación política formal de unas sociedades sobre otras, parece pues asunto del pasado. (1992, 11)

Therborn (1999)

A relation of direct, political, social and cultural domination was established by the Europeans over the conquered of all continents. This domination is known as colonialism....Thus colonialism, in the sense of a formal system of political domination by some societies over others seems a question of the past. (1999, 41)

Therborn (2007)

A relation of direct, political, social, and cultural domination was established by the Europeans over the conquered of all continents. This domination is known as a specific Eurocentered colonialism.... Thus the Eurocentered colonialism, in the sense of a formal system of political domination by Western European societies over others seems a question of the past. (2007, 168)

Within and between these three passages what is made abundantly clear here is a divergence between the Spanish original and first translation with the republished translation. One cannot overlook the manner in which the second translation aims to curtail a very pivotal moment of ambiguity obtaining in the original through its supplementation of colonialism with the qualifying adjective, "Eurocentered." That is, where the original reads, "Esa dominación se conoce como colonialismo," the republished translation says, "This domination is known as a specific Eurocentered colonialism," and further, where the original would say "el colonialismo, en el sentido de un sistema de dominación política formal de unas sociedades sobre otras," the translation instead reads, "Thus the Eurocentered colonialism, in the sense of a formal

system of political domination by Western European societies over others.” In short, Sonia Therborn’s 1999 original translation of Quijano’s text is unequivocally modified in this republication and amends statements about colonialism that further problematizes the matter at hand with Quijano.

Though indeed unfortunate and worrisome as it relates to maintaining the integrity of the texts scholars use and cite from, the 2007 republished translation nevertheless confirms two things: that this ambiguity in the original is perceived as a significant problem; and that a modification of the translation may have seemed a way to mitigate what is now a contradiction at the heart of this theoretical concept. In other words, by incorporating “Eurocentered” into the second translation, that is, by suturing colonialism to Europe as an exclusive form of dominance, the translation retroactively invisibilizes, at least for first U.S. readers, the indeterminacy otherwise at play in Quijano’s formulation. The problem, of course, is that anyone with access to the original as well as even the most basic understanding of Spanish will see that the original simply does not ascribe the specificity to colonialism that the second translation later does. The ambiguity in Quijano’s text (as well as Therborn’s 1999 translation) remains irreducible.

What this means of course is that the second translation—in its attempt to secure and ground a specificity that ultimately does not obtain in Quijano’s text—confirms that, in effect, Quijano never effectively established the often-assumed premise that colonialism is an exclusively European contribution to the world. In fact, Quijano, in spite of the way he has been read and cited by critics, instead gestures in the opposite direction, suggesting that colonization is simply a general principle of governance and sovereignty that extends back, beyond European expansion and to the present moment. He adds,

Coloniality, then, is still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed. It doesn’t exhaust, obviously, the conditions nor the modes of exploitation and domination between peoples. But it hasn’t ceased to be, for 500 years, their main framework. The colonial relations of previous periods probably did not produce the same consequences, and, above all, they were not the corner stone of any global power.⁸ (1999, 44)

As we can see in this passage, even though Quijano reminds us of his specific interest in the last 500 years of colonialism which signal, of course, the historical coordinates of European expansion, the text itself does not ascribe European authorship to colonialism. In fact, Quijano admits that colonial relations of power actually predate and extend beyond European coloniality, when he references “the colonial relations of previous periods.” In other words, for Quijano the only thing that separates European from other, previous

forms of colonization is that, by dint of historical contingency, the former managed to reach a global level of power and domination whereas previous ones did not (“they were not the corner stone of any global power”). That is, between this case of colonialism or any other, for Quijano no essential difference between them exists; the colonial difference is not culturally specific, but purely differential and historically contingent. Given this context, one must contend with the possibility that at the core of decolonial thought, at which Quijano is situated, there exists a notion of colonialism that is defined not via ethnocentric and geopolitical identitarian claims, but rather as an ultimately differential relation of domination of one group over others. In other words, the implications stemming from Quijano’s own formulations of coloniality puts into question decolonial thought’s historical promise and its very own positioning as an alternative critical model.

And yet, I must remind the reader that we are not yet any closer to isolating what Quijano refers to by coloniality of power, for while Quijano’s elaboration of coloniality of power derives from these initial statements, it does not obtain directly from them, but once again from its distinction from something else. In Quijano’s essay, the notion of coloniality of power itself springs not from “political” colonialism, the very one which we have just dedicated several pages discussing and which Quijano himself has confirmed as a general condition of power throughout history, and not, as is incorrectly assumed, an exclusively modern, European modality of domination. Rather, coloniality of power springs from a distinction between what he calls “political” colonialism and what he calls “cultural” colonialism.

Now as we shall see, the distinction Quijano seeks to make between political and cultural colonialism is in itself very interesting, not simply because it advances two sequential mechanisms of power for what has been conventionally encapsulated under one, but also because Quijano conceives of these processes as ultimately distinct and more or less independent. This transition from political to cultural colonization is articulated in the following manner:

In the same way, in spite of the fact that political colonialism has been eliminated, the relationship between the European—also called “Western”—culture, and the others, continues to be one of colonial domination. It is not only a matter of the subordination of the other cultures to the European, in an external relation; we have also to do with a colonization of the other cultures...of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior of that imagination, in a sense, it is a part of it.⁹ (1999, 42)

This passage makes two points. The first of which is to assert that while “political” colonialism as a form has waned, colonialism nevertheless still subtends the current, this time cultural, form of domination between Europe

and non-European groups. As the passage suggests, even as the condition of “direct” domination ceases to hold, the relation between Europe and its others under cultural colonization remains the same as that which first emerged under political colonialism (“continues to be one of colonial domination”). Through the phrase “continues to be,” we are told cultural colonialism retains the quality as a form of colonial domination equal to political colonialism. Yet, while it remains understood that both political and cultural colonialisms retain their categorical consistency qua colonialism, it must be remembered that, according to Quijano, political colonialism also serves as a necessary antecedent to cultural colonialism. In other words, cultural colonialism simply does not obtain as a critical reality without assuming political colonialism as both a historical and logical presupposition. The former, therefore, obtains as secondary to the latter: cultural colonization, the specific sphere of domination from which coloniality of power springs, is itself a product of, and only comes about after political colonization.

But that is not all. The above passage calls upon another distinction between political and cultural colonization. This time between what he means by “subordination” and “colonization,” which, again according to Quijano, should not be conflated. He argues, “It is not only a matter of the subordination of the other cultures to the European, in an external relation; we have also to do with a colonization of the other cultures...of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated.” There is little doubt here that if in Quijano’s formulation “subordination,” as the very name for the condition of direct (and “external”) domination itself, coincides with his understanding of “political” colonialization, then “colonization” is reserved (tautologically, I insist) for whatever the core (“interior”) function of cultural colonialism turns out to be beyond simple political subordination, which Quijano understands as “the imposition of the use of the rulers’ own patterns of expression” (42).¹⁰ In other words, the difference between “political” and “cultural” colonization therefore hinges on the assumption of a qualitative difference between an antecedent, “exterior,” subordination of one group over another and a secondary, and now imposed and internalized colonization of the latter group into the former (“it acts in the interior of that imagination”). This is not at all trivial. Going beyond mere sequential ordering, the difference between subordination and colonization reveals itself as foundational, for despite Quijano’s insistence that both political and cultural colonialisms “[continue] to be one[s] of colonial domination,” it discloses instead the existence of a minimal gap wherein political colonialism ends and cultural colonialism begins.

For Quijano, colonization expresses more than just mere direct subordination (political colonialism), but also something altogether different from, as well as a product of, political colonialism itself (“a colonization of the imagination of the dominated”). Colonization, according to Quijano,

is whatever obtains beyond—in both senses of the term: in excess of, and after—simple political subordination. One could indeed argue that based on Quijano's formalization, true colonization is not political colonization at all but is rather entirely and exclusively cultural. Thus, while political colonization may have sired it, cultural colonization is ultimately the only kind of colonization there is. So then, what exactly does cultural colonization consist of? What specifically pertains to the sphere of "cultural colonialism"? What exactly are we to understand by what Quijano calls the "forms and the effects of that cultural coloniality"(43)?¹¹

While it may appear that Quijano may be on the verge of establishing a new formulation and understanding of power through this notion of coloniality of power, the result is not so clear. Through political and cultural colonialism, Quijano is enlisting, and ultimately ascribing onto each, two quite conventional modalities of power drawn from Gramscian thought, domination and hegemony. Of course, to Gramsci has been credited the proposition of hegemony as a practice of power that relies on manufacturing the consent of the ruled classes as a means to maintain or secure state power, while domination relies principally on coercion. This understanding of state power has been widely influential in postcolonial and subaltern studies over the last thirty years, by critics and scholars not only of South Asia but also of Latin American cultural studies.¹²

Ranjit Guha famously characterized the (Indian) colonial state as a "dominance without hegemony," by which he means a power relation in which "persuasion was outweighed by coercion in its structure of dominance."¹³ In an inverted yet formally equivalent way, Quijano's cultural colonialism refers not to the simple fact of direct subordination ("domination") of certain cultures over others, but rather to the effective, and this time, ideological work that reproduces the given power dynamics of the colonial structure. Coming after "political" colonialism, "cultural" colonialism eliminates the need for direct subordination (coercion) by instantiating itself as a discursive socio-political matrix wherein the subjugated groups internalize and thereby consent to the values and interests of the ruling hegemony ("acts in the interior of that imagination") and voluntarily continue to subordinate their interests to them ("a colonization of the imagination of the dominated"). That is, for Quijano, cultural colonialism is ultimately conceived from the vantage-point of hegemony, distinct only from the more directly physical or material forms of subordination implied by "political" colonialism. This relation is not insignificant, for it positions the function of coloniality of power squarely within the sphere of the hegemonic articulation.

As has been made clear in Quijano, cultural colonialism is not direct domination, nor does it consist in simple political subordination. It is rather, and again tautologically so, an inner "colonization of the imagination of the dominated," which here signifies an internal transformation in the cultural

imaginary of the subordinated group (“the imposition of the use of the rulers’ own patterns of expression”). It constitutes an internally-conditioned shift in the behavior and social dynamics of this minor group (“acts in the interior of that imagination”) that acts independently of the relation of political colonialism that conditioned it. This ascription of secondary status, however, is not some neutral, inconsequential aspect of Quijano’s framework, but rather strikes at the heart of the matter because, as conceived and defined, cultural colonialism is disconnected from and therefore alienated from any actual concern with the political structure of domination: it does not attend to the economic and/or juridical structure of colonialism itself, nor does it address any foundational historical sovereign claim (applied or self-imposed). Cultural colonialism, or coloniality of power, is itself simply a concept that formalizes the ideological extension of this or that (i.e., any) prevailing hegemonic power. Cultural colonialism is thus neither the root nor the cause of power but merely an effect of hegemonic power. As such, coloniality of power as a concept expresses nothing more than the ideology of any reigning form of hegemonic power, and since it does not offer an account of forms of political domination that no doubt continue to occur, there is no way that undoing coloniality of power can change the unelaborated political structures of domination assumed in this model.

Therefore, to invoke coloniality of power is merely to refer to the general system of representation through which the postcolonial social text is enframed. It does not account for the subtending structure of domination nor for exploitation itself, that is, it fails to account for any underlying, structural or more foundational core of the political. Coloniality of power obtains as merely a synonym for hegemony, the simple elimination of which, it is presumed by certain critics, enables a long desired epistemological and cultural decolonization of Western values. Unfortunately, the realization that colonization possesses an ideological component is neither surprising nor of great value, since its extirpation would not automatically secure emancipation from either colonization or ideology. So when Quijano says, “The alternative, then, is clear: the destruction of the coloniality of world power. First of all, epistemological decolonization...as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality” (1999, 51), he ultimately says very little because, as simple ideology, the coloniality of power is not the only thing preventing decolonization from actualizing.¹⁴ Furthermore, even if it was, the promise of decolonization is far from able to guarantee any kind of position outside or before ideology; merely the transposition, yet again, from one form of ideology to another. As such, Quijano’s elaboration of coloniality of power, as well as his exhortation to bring about its destruction ultimately yields far too little to offer any kind of substantive intervention into our understanding of either power or colonization.

There is still, however, more to Quijano’s work on this question. It involves

his conceptualization of a transhistorical force that animates coloniality of power, which he calls “reoriginalization.” What exactly is reoriginalization? Is reoriginalization limited to coloniality of power, or does it pertain to some larger, overarching dynamic? Quijano reflects upon reoriginalization in the second of the two essays under consideration here, “Colonialidad de poder, cultura y conocimiento en América Latina” (1997). Quijano opens his essay with a description of reoriginalization and advances the following proposition:

Throughout history in Latin America and in the Caribbean there exists a conflict at play between tendencies that steer toward a cultural reoriginalization and other tendencies, repressive ones, acting against it or in favor of a reabsorption of its products into the society’s dominant power.¹⁵

Straight away in this opening passage we are provided with a certain claim about Latin American and Caribbean history that pits something called cultural reoriginalization against its own failures and appropriation by dominant forces. “Throughout its history,” he says, as if to suggest that the entirety of historical events that ever took place on the continent can be accounted for through this dynamic of reoriginalization. Quijano continues:

Since the formation of colonial society, each of these junctures in our cultural history was produced by a process of reoriginalization of experience, tumultuous and massive, but which did not find, or could not establish a stable perspective and trajectory that would define and structure a new form of social existence and remained trapped within the prevailing power.¹⁶

Quijano is speaking of a “reoriginalization of experience” that could not reach a “new form of social existence” only to “remain trapped within the prevailing power.” Quijano provides further nuance in subsequent passages: reoriginalization is not only “tumultuous and massive,” but also a “modification of life,” a “mutation,” a “profound and radical”...“distortion” (113, 114, 116). Not unlike transculturation then, reoriginalization also aims to account for what Fernando Ortiz previously describes as “the transition from one culture to another...” as well as “highly varied phenomena that have come about...as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture.”¹⁷ In other words, then, reoriginalization—like transculturation before it—is used to signal watershed moments in world history, wherein one can presuppose some form of transformation between two forms of life, presumably one original and later reoriginalized, one autochthonous, and the other

“mutated,” “distorted;” the former being the way of life that existed prior to an encounter with a catastrophic force, and the latter being the irrevocably adulterated forms of experience and identity that resulted. In this context then, if Latin American history was indeed crosshatched by reoriginalization as he suggests, reoriginalization speaks to certain seismic moments of historical significance that condition and incite a transformation in a human collectivity’s mode of life, that is, in effect, a politically imposed reshaping of life onto a group, people, or community, the impact of which irrevocably changes a previous mode of existence.

If reoriginalization is beginning to sound a lot like the notion of coloniality of power (“cultural” colonization), then we are now coming upon the larger point. Coloniality of power, we should remember, obtains in Quijano not as cultural “subordination” but as cultural colonization: (“we have also to do with a colonization of the other cultures...of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated”). That is, colonization conceived as a process that works internally in the transformation of one culture in the terms of another (“the imposition of the use of the rulers’ own patterns of expression”). Quite simply what this means is that if for Quijano political colonization merely represses and subordinates, it is cultural colonization that is ascribed the work of generating cultural transformation within the subordinated group. It should come as no surprise then to see Quijano define coloniality of power via the very attributes he associates with reoriginalization, citing it as a definitive example: “coloniality of power, no doubt one of the key examples of these turbulent and drastic mutations in world historical experience” (114).¹⁸ The coloniality of power, not unlike reoriginalization, is developed by Quijano to account for and articulate the unassailably violent and destructive impact of the history of political and cultural colonization on the continent. As Quijano specifies, the coloniality of power is a particular instance of what he identifies as “deep and radical” reoriginalization of human experience in history. The modern form of coloniality of power, therefore, which Quijano cites as the principal cause for the destruction and subordination of Amerindian societies in Latin America, is still ultimately just one manifestation of the larger dynamic he insists on calling reoriginalization.

As we previously saw through the coloniality of power, reoriginalization, is not necessarily an emancipatory power, but simply an entirely contingent emergent cultural force that overtakes an older established one. Further, moments of reoriginalization are exceedingly rare, and not every moment of reoriginalization is successful, complete, or even felicitous. As the above passage itself suggests, successful processes of reoriginalization may have occurred in other times and in other places throughout the planet; since the colonial era, however, Latin American history is replete with moments of potential reoriginalization that have resulted otherwise. These moments are what Quijano conceives as monumental historical failures to establish new

and unique modalities of life that could have overtaken the prevailing order, but become instead appropriated by it (“trapped within the prevailing power”).¹⁹ As such, if successful or completed reoriginalizations are this exceedingly rare, why develop a theory embracing reoriginalization in the first place when, according to Quijano, modern Latin America has never experienced one? Is Quijano’s a theory of reoriginalization or of failed reoriginalization? For if Latin America and the Caribbean, “throughout its history,” have always been caught up in a conflict between reoriginalization and entrenched power, and if every “tumultuous and massive” reoriginalization of experience nevertheless failed historically to “establish a stable perspective and trajectory that would define and structure a new form of social existence,” then there is no reoriginalization that is not already a coloniality of power. That is, since for Quijano Latin America has never experienced a successful moment of reoriginalization but has always contended with coloniality of power, the coloniality of power is the name for failed reoriginalization itself.

Take for instance Quijano’s attempt to describe the way in which coloniality of power works to provide an appearance of an accomplished and universally binding social order, when in actuality it is merely attempting to naturalize a still-thoroughly contingent state of reoriginalization:

The colonizers identified the newly colonized aboriginal populations as “Indians.” For these populations colonial domination implied, as a consequence, the dispossession and repression of original identities (Mayan, Aztec, Incan, Aymara, etc.).²⁰ (114-15)

In this example—the deployment of “indio” as the means to redefine and supplant indigenous tribal specificity—Quijano aims to, on the one hand, demonstrate the irrevocable and profound shift in prevailing modes of life that occur during moments of potential reoriginalization, and on the other, to disqualify in advance any notion that the colonization of Latin America amounted to anything like a successful reoriginalization. In other words, it was only ever a failed reoriginalization: coloniality.

But again, things are not so unambiguous with Quijano. As with coloniality in power, which is not limited to accounting for a specific European colonialism, but to any formal relation of domination—“This domination is known as colonialism. . . . a formal system of political domination by some societies over others”—so too does this pertain to reoriginalization. Given its formalization there is simply no way to suggest imperial Amerindian culture (Aztec, Maya, Incan, etc.) is somehow any less colonial and reoriginating than European colonialism. Consequently, and far from clarifying matters, the notion of reoriginalization leaves one with not a few reservations and raises a number of serious questions. The first of which is how exactly one can discern between a successful process of reoriginalization and a failed one?

What criteria does one employ to make this distinction? On what grounds are such criteria selected? Who is enlisted to authorize and validate how this criteria is used in evaluation? It seems apparent that when it comes to the question of differentiating from either a felicitous or a failed reoriginalization, again not unlike the still-ambiguous relation between reoriginalization and transculturation, there is no non-ideological cultural position or historical location from which to arbitrate. Which is to say that every ascription of either successful or failed reoriginalization is always already ideologically overdetermined. A nonideological assessment between reoriginalization and coloniality of power simply doesn't exist.

But that is not all, for the implications of Quijano's conceptual framework are vast and continue to exceed itself. For if reoriginalization speaks to seismic assertions of force that effect radical epistemological and cultural shifts to subordinated groups, then it, of course, cannot be restricted to European colonization alone, but rather it must by necessity extend back beyond to the formation of even those cultures Quijano takes as original and autochthonous. The problem here is that Quijano seems quite content depicting and referring to the Mayan, Aztec, Inca empires as "original" cultures that were themselves subjected to reoriginalization at the hands of Europeans. Recalling a passage cited earlier—"For these populations colonial domination implied, as a consequence, the dispossession and repression of original identities (Mayan, Aztec, Incan, Aymara, etc.)"—one is obliged to have Quijano reconsider if, given his own theory of reoriginalization, the groups onto which he ascribes "original" status were themselves never subject to any previous process of reoriginalization? Or further still, if there are still cultures existing today anywhere in the world that have not been the subject of reoriginalization? We must remember that for Quijano reoriginalization exists as the name for a larger transhistorical dynamic for which coloniality of power is but a specific form. The first implication from such a premise is that if every currently existing culture has been reoriginalized at some point—at any point—that means reoriginalization exists as a general condition of human life that therefore impinges on all cultural formations, past and present. And again, if that's the case, then every single culture in the history of the world has been reoriginalized at some point, every society is thus always already reoriginal, and there has never been any original culture for reoriginalization to irrevocably alter and contort in the first place. In other words, reoriginalization, taken to its logical culmination, nullifies the very assumption of cultural homogeneity that reoriginalization itself (and coloniality of power) takes as a precondition. And this has very specific consequences for the concept of coloniality of power, of which it is but an instance, for, going back to the above passage, there are ultimately no "original identities (Mayan, Aztec, Incan, Aymara, etc.)" to speak of, as they are each, by strict logical necessity, products of at least one, if not numerous and

compounded instances of reoriginalization. Consequently, reoriginalization, established as the new cultural horizon to refer to moments of world-historical modifications of life in human societies, foils precisely what the concept of coloniality of power is almost always conscripted to convey: the degree to which colonization has merely impinged upon, but not eradicated, original and autochthonous ways of life, and to posit the politico-theoretical conditions under which the promise of colonialism's undoing or reversal can be imagined and anticipated. Simply: one cannot de-reoriginalize.

If coloniality of power, understood by Quijano as the more ideological/hegemonic and transformative of arm of colonization ("cultural" colonization, not "political" subordination), falls under the larger category and dynamic of reoriginalization, then the coloniality of power is itself a foundational and inextricable component of this larger transhistorical process of potentially emancipating cultural change and adaptation that Quijano ultimately affirms with reoriginalization. That is, as the very mechanism of colonization that, beyond direct subordination, actually does the ideological work of colonization, coloniality of power is the name for the specific apparatus that actively modifies and transforms people's lives and cultural practices into the form of another. Given this, it must then also be admitted that coloniality power has been a central and active force in every moment of reoriginalization since the beginning of human history (successful or failed). Coloniality of power is not at all foreign to reoriginalization, but is rather reoriginalization's innermost, necessary, and mechanical activity. It is ideology itself. Given Quijano's rationale, it cannot be disputed that the very driving force—reoriginalization, coloniality—that led Europeans to claim and settle the Western Hemisphere for themselves and enslave the indigenous populations in order to fashion them into their own image is the same one that previously compelled the great Amerindian empires to aspire to similar heights. Quijano logically cannot have it both ways: he cannot, on the one hand, maintain that the "Mayas, Aztecs, Incas [and] Aymaras" were original, un-reoriginated entities before they were mercilessly subjugated by European colonialism, and on the other, completely fail to see how those same great Amerindian empires themselves emerged via the political and cultural domination over others as well as, not unlike the Europeans, through the incontrovertible reoriginalization of their subjects in the process. For instance, while extolling the virtues of the Inca and the other great "original" empires of the Americas, Quijano remains completely oblivious to how his own overdetermined account of coloniality of power may itself ideologically motivate this completely naturalized, reverse-ethnocentric narrative of civilization:

The most developed original societies enjoyed a sophisticated urban culture, and in some, even writing. The letter was still, in truth, the patrimony and exclusive instrument of those dominant urban groups.

Nevertheless, that urban culture and its writing were original and of their own making. An autonomous, that is, modality and vehicle of expression of a subjectivity, a rich, ancient history, and of an exceptionally active and creative imaginary. This was no doubt a dominant cultural form. That is, an instance of domination existing within society. However, as in all societies of domination with their own culture and autonomy, that form was also an expression of the entire population's historical experience.²¹

Quijano here speaks eloquently of certain key Amerindian societies, which while boasting such features as writing and urbanity, are nevertheless still secured through forms of dominance and the subordination of other minor groups. This he does not dispute. Nevertheless, because those forms of tradition and social order issue from, again according to Quijano, the ancient autochthonous civilizations of the hemisphere and date back hundreds if not thousands of years; that is, because these forms of rule and subjugation are (mis)conceived as "original," "proper," and "autonomous," then not only is there nothing wrong with that, but in fact it should be celebrated as the product of dominating, reoriginating societies, and not as an effect of the cultural colonization of one group over others.

This misrecognition of coloniality for reoriginalization is indeed an unfortunate contradiction in Quijano's thought. As Quijano himself again confirms, the qualification of a particular politico-cultural conjuncture as either reoriginalization or coloniality of power is never not pre-given and objective but ideologically overdetermined. Further, the very question of reoriginalization also turns on the presumed efficacy of the very stuff attributed to coloniality of power as well; which is to say that if one affirms a moment of successful or near successful reoriginalization, then one simultaneously affirms the transformative capacity that coloniality of power wields. In its most basic form, then, coloniality of power and reoriginalization are not just related, but are of the same kind. They partake of the same deep ideological grammar, and therefore, at a formal level, are indistinct from one another. As such, if there is no difference between Quijano's notions of coloniality of power and reoriginalization, then the same may also be said of decoloniality.

Quijano's own work on the notion of the coloniality of power resists its ascribed role within decolonial thought. It quickly proves to work in ways that instead call it into question. For what ultimately is the relation between coloniality and decoloniality? Is not decoloniality itself enlisted as the ideologically oppositional countermeasure to coloniality of power? Isn't decoloniality the very name for the decentering and reversal of the ideological structures of coloniality so as to condition, not unlike reoriginalization, yet another "profound and radical" transformation of life on different terms? Given this

conception of reoriginalization however, can there ever really be a reversal of coloniality that is not equally grounded in another coloniality?

The answer may prove to be sobering. In the final pages of “Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad,” Quijano offers the briefest glimpse for the possibility of an alternative, non-Eurocentric, rationality when he advances that despite what we’ve seen historically from the West, the rest of the world does not repudiate difference but rather embraces it. He asserts:

outside the “West” virtually in all known cultures...the perspective of totality includes acknowledgment of the heterogeneity of all reality...the legitimacy, the desirability, of the diverse character of the components of all reality—and therefore of the social.²² (1999, 50)

One may find it hard to continue to accept such naïve, empty, gestures suggesting that the West, and only the West, is historically guilty of installing and maintaining difference as the core of an imperial, reoriginalizing, project. In the same breath, Quijano offers us what he believes is a way out: “differences are not necessarily the basis of domination” (50-1).²³ Now this proposition is true. If what he is suggesting by this is that domination does not require difference, and thus difference does not necessarily produce domination, I am tempted to agree. But is he not in this statement also admitting, therefore, that there can indeed be hegemony without domination, which means, in other words, that there can be cultural colonialism/coloniality of power/reoriginalization without any change in the structure of political domination? And if this is indeed the case, then how effectively different is something like decoloniality from coloniality of power, and how can decoloniality be expected to present a path leading out of the Eurocentric models it seeks to undo? That is, if decoloniality is also just another example of reoriginalization, as they share in many if not all of the same functions and aims, then it stands to reason that decoloniality emerges from the same ideological stuff from which coloniality of power is made. So as a dynamic unity whose terms are defined not by specific political or cultural values but rather by their very difference from the other, coloniality and decoloniality ultimately have no content in and of themselves, no pre-given identity, specificity or particularity. Numerous questions follow from such a conjuncture. If on a formal level decoloniality and coloniality of power are identical to each other as opposing but competing forms of reoriginalization—for there is nothing outside of successful or failed reoriginalizations—how exactly can one begin to tell the difference between them as anything other than counterforces, counterhegemonies, countercolonialities?

NOTES

¹ Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and BorderThinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

² As will be elaborated more fully later in the essay, coloniality of power springs from cultural colonialism, and the latter constitutes an example of what Quijano conceptualizes as “reoriginalization” which he conceives as periodic, world-historical—“massive and tumultuous”—alterations of human societies. In the essay “Colonialidad del poder” which I take up in the second half this essay, Quijano also links coloniality of power directly to reoriginalization.

³ See Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533-80. See also Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Social Classification,” in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, eds. Mabel Moraña, Enrique D. Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 181-224.

⁴ See Anibal Quijano, “Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad,” *Perú Indígena: Órgano del Instituto Indigenista Peruano* 13, no. 29 (1992): 11-20. See also Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder, cultura y conocimiento en América Latina,” *Anuario Mariateguiano* 9, no. 9 (1997): 113-21.

⁵ The initial translation is available as follows: Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” trans. Sonia Therborn, in *Globalizations and Modernities: Experiences and Perspectives of Europe and Latin America*, ed. Göran Therborn and Lise-Lotte Wallenius (Stockholm: Forskningsrådsnämnden, 1999), 41-51. The retranslation (also attributed to Therborn) is available as follows: “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 168-78. This retranslation was also anthologized as follows: “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” trans. Sonia Therborn, in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, eds. Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (New York: Routledge, 2013), 22-32. The translator’s note in the 2007 version indicates it to be a “slightly revised version” of Quijano’s essay, which appears mainly to consist of the addition of a sub-section titled “Race and Coloniality of Power,” which did not appear in the version published in 1991 (41).

⁶ “De otra parte, fue establecida una relación de dominación directa, política, social y cultural de los europeos sobre los conquistados de todos los continentes. Esa dominación se conoce como colonialismo... Así, el colonialismo, en el sentido de un sistema de dominación política formal de unas sociedades sobre otras, parece pues asunto del pasado” (1992, 11).

⁷ Note for instance, Quijano’s grouping of Japan among the European colonizing groups:

Los dominadores europeos “occidentales” y sus descendientes euro-norteamericanos, son todavía los principales beneficiarios junto con la parte no europea del mundo que, precisamente, no fue antes colonia europea, Japón principalmente. (1992, 11)

[The ‘Western’ European dominators and their Euro-North American descendants are still the principal beneficiaries, together with the non-European part of the world not quite former European colonies, Japan mainly. (1999, 41)]

⁸“La colonialidad, en consecuencia, es aún el modo más general de dominación en el mundo actual, una vez que el colonialismo como orden político explícito fue destruido. Ella no agota, obviamente, las condiciones, ni las formas de explotación y de dominación existentes entre las gentes. Pero no ha cesado de ser, desde hace 500 años, su marco principal. Las relaciones coloniales de períodos anteriores probablemente no produjeron las mismas secuelas y sobre todo no fueron la piedra angular de ningún poder global” (1992, 14).

⁹“De la misma manera, no obstante que el colonialismo político fue eliminado, la relación entre la cultura europea, llamada también “occidental”, y las otras, sigue siendo una relación de dominación colonial. No se trata solamente de una subordinación de las otras culturas respecto de la europea, en una relación exterior. Se trata de una colonización de las otras culturas...una colonización del imaginario de los dominados. Es decir, actúa en la interioridad de ese imaginario. En una medida, es parte de él” (1992, 12).

¹⁰“la imposición del uso de los propios patrones de expresión de los dominantes” (12).

¹¹“las formas y efectos de esa colonialidad cultural” (13).

¹² See the 1994 “Founding Statement” by the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group: “Founding Statement,” *Dispositio/n (American Journal of Cultural Histories and Theories)* 19, no. 46 (1994): 1-12. See also *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, ed. Ileana Rodríguez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

¹³ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), xii.

¹⁴“La alternativa...es clara: la destrucción de la colonialidad del poder mundial. En primer término, la descolonización epistemológica...como la base de otra racionalidad que pueda pretender, con legitimidad, alguna universalidad” (1992, 19-20).

¹⁵“En América Latina y en el Caribe, desde siempre en su historia, está planteado un conflicto entre tendencias que se dirigen hacia una reoriginalización cultural y otras de represión contra ellas o de reabsorción de sus productos dentro del poder dominante en la sociedad” (1997, 113). All translated passages from this essay are mine.

¹⁶“Desde la formación de la sociedad colonial, cada una de estas encrucijadas de nuestra historia cultural fue producida por un proceso de reoriginalización de la experiencia, tumultuoso y masivo, pero que no encontró o que no logró fraguarse una perspectiva y un cauce seguros para ir definiéndose y estructurándose como un nuevo patrón de existencia social y terminó reencauzado dentro del poder establecido” (113).

¹⁷ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 98. “el proceso de tránsito de una cultura a otra”; “los variadísimos fenómenos que originan...por las complejísimas transmutaciones de culturas” (Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* [Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1978], 93).

¹⁸“colonialidad de poder, sin duda uno de los ejemplos claves de esos momentos de bruscas y drásticas mutaciones de la experiencia histórica en el mundo.”

¹⁹“reencauzado dentro del poder establecido.” The historical case that served as the model for Quijano’s theory or reoriginalization in this essay is based on a moment emerging in early twentieth-century Peru, wherein “cholo” cultural politics or, as he calls it, “lo cholo,” came to represent a moment tilting toward the brink of a truly popular

hegemony. While ultimately failing to fully actualize, Quijano argues that “lo cholo” constituted a process of reoriginalization that should be understood as being fundamentally different from other cultural theory models of distinctly Latin American provenance, such as transculturation, hybridity and mestizaje:

Así, lo “cholo” implicó una primera perspectiva de reoriginalización cultural en el Perú y quizás en todo el mundo llamado “andino”, porque era la primera vez que se producía una re-estructuración de elementos culturales no simplemente como “aculturación” o “transculturación” o “mestizaje” o “hibridización.” (1997, 119-20)

[In this way, lo “cholo” implied a primary perspective of cultural reoriginalization in Peru and perhaps in the entire Andean world, because it was the first time that a restructuring of cultural elements was produced that was nothing like “acculturation” or “transculturation,” or “mestizaje” or “hybridization.”]

²⁰ “Los colonizadores definieron la nueva identidad de las poblaciones aborígenes colonizadas: “indios.” Para esas poblaciones la dominación colonial implicaba en consecuencia, el despojo y la represión de las identidades originales (mayas, aztecas, incas, aymaras, etc.)” (1997, 114-15).

²¹ “Las sociedades originales más desarrolladas tenían una sofisticada cultura urbana y algunas de ellas escritura. La letra era aún, es verdad, patrimonio e instrumento exclusivo de los dominantes y de sus grupos urbanos. Pero aquella cultura urbana y su escritura eran un producto original y propio, es decir autónomo, modos y vehículos de expresión de una subjetividad de antigua y rica historia, de un imaginario excepcionalmente activo y creativo. Ese era un patrón cultural dominante sin duda. Es decir, una de las instancias de la dominación existente en esas sociedades. No obstante, como en toda sociedad de dominación con una cultura propia y autónoma, ese patrón era también expresión de la experiencia histórica del conjunto de la población” (1997, 115).

²² “Fuera de ‘Occidente,’ en virtualmente todas las culturas concidas...la perspectiva de totalidad en el conocimiento, incluye el reconocimiento de la heterogeneidad de toda la realidad...la legitimidad, la deseabilidad, del carácter diverso de los componentes de toda realidad, de la social en consecuencia” (1992, 19).

²³ “las diferencias no son, necesariamente, el fundamento de la dominación” (1992, 19).