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Mignolo's Idea of Latin America: Race, Place, and the Pluriverse

MIGNOLO, WALTER D. *The Idea of Latin America*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 198 pp.

In his recent book, *The Idea of Latin America*, Walter Mignolo offers an unearthing or what he calls an "archeology" of the layered histories and discourses which have colluded in producing the "idea" of Latin America. He is primarily intent on a systematic debunking of what he sees as an undue confidence in the "ontology of continental divides" which has historically created the illusion of Latin America as a real entity rather than a constructed idea, an ontological mirage which has superimposed its own self-serving, Europeanized and racialized image of Latin America onto the continent. As an idea, Latin America is not so much descriptive as it is prescriptive: the very categories it uses to explain, describe, and circumscribe Latin America create the conditions under which we understand and imagine Latin American reality. But in order for the idea of Latin America to carry the force that it does, that prescriptive dimension must be overlooked, discounted, or otherwise "forgotten"; this is how the idea of Latin America becomes confused with the reality of Latin America, what Mignolo understands as its ontology.

Mignolo offers an extensive treatment of America's invention—rather than discovery—and the gradually hardening historical distinction between the putatively Anglo-Saxon America, embodied by the United States, and the other America, the *Latin America*. Here there is also a progressively hardening racial difference which subtends this geographical distinction as the idea of Latinity strays from its associations with Europe toward its more recent groundings in the New World and an unspoken understanding of Amerindian racial mixing or *indigenization*: "'Latin' America became darker and darker in relation to the increasing discourse of White supremacy," which cast Latin America as "'Mestizo/a'; that is, darker skinned" (Mignolo 90). The racial logic and politics driving the split between the two Americas reflects the convergence of geo-politics and body-politics central to Mignolo's analysis.

Although the term *Latin America* did not surface until the continent's independence movements of the nineteenth century, the idea

of Latin America bears the weight of a much longer, often discounted colonial history of racial violence, which includes religious persecution, slavery, and genocide. Even in its contemporary applications, the “idea” still bears the painful and oppressive legacy of five centuries of colonialism in the New World, a legacy from which modernity has not yet been able to disentangle itself. As Mignolo argues convincingly throughout the book, modernity, both in its contemporary and historical moments, is inescapably conjoined to a history and reality of what he terms “coloniality.” Coloniality speaks not just to overt colonial occupation but also to the overbearing West’s ongoing economic, political, and epistemological force throughout the world. The term gathers the varied moments and locations of European colonialism along with what are for Mignolo the merely superficially distinguishable kinds of (economic) imperialism mostly attributed to the US as the epicenter of late, global capitalism after World War II. It also underscores the logics of racial division and subordination which the cultures of colonialism and imperialism share with those of modernity and global capitalism even in its contemporary moment. In Mignolo’s vernacular, this means not only that geo-politics continue to be mapped onto body-politics, blending a politics of place—nation, region, continent—with that of race, but that these are also the politics which govern and ensure the skewed distribution of wealth, knowledge, and power. According to Mignolo, Latin American countries’ “consistent descent in the world economy” following independence coincides with the progressively more insistent designation of Latin America as racially other, where “to be ‘Latin’ American was still to be not White enough” (Mignolo 90). The rhetorical indigenizing of Latin America following independence simply extended the colonialist logic whereby Latin America was understood strictly in terms of the raw materials it could provide the West. As Mignolo understands it, an indigenized Latin America connoted not only exploitable natural resources but also exploitable labor for the West of the twentieth century whose imperialism now speaks through the language of capitalism. Certainly the “idea” of Latin America has for the West a racial charge to it, but more importantly for Mignolo it is a racial charge produced and maintained by the manipulative Western oriented discourses which overwrite any attempts by Latin America to represent “itself” under its own terms and designs outside the West’s commodifying gaze. In other words, if the racial schema of Western discourse

corresponds to contemporary flows of global capital and the uneven relations of power and knowledge imposed by those flows, it leaves little doubt that late capitalism is directly taking up the mantle from colonialism, matching capitalism's economic hierarchies and divisions with colonialism's racial ones.

The connections Mignolo draws here between race and the global economy underscore the political significance of race beyond the trumpeting of racial difference and the celebration of ethnic identity that he finds often miss the point. For Mignolo, Latin America is best understood simply as a wildly successful "political project," which inscribes the reality it claims to describe, precisely through its manipulative association of race, place, and difference. And Mignolo charts the progression of that political project from its incipient stages in the cultures of European colonialist expansion into the Americas starting in the late fifteenth century and extending into capitalism's contemporary geography. He divides this project into three distinct "nodes" of analysis, corresponding to the three chapters of the book. While the use of node is meant to emphasize the achronological bent of his analysis, that analysis can be nonetheless roughly divided into three successive but overlapping phases detailed below.

The first chapter, "The Americas, Christian Expansion, and the Modern/Colonial Foundation of Racism," explores the invention of America by and for Europe. The main concern of the first chapter lies in detailing an archeology of the "idea" of America coming out of the mechanisms of what he terms an occidentalist, universalizing Christian cosmology: Eurocentrism, for short. Occidentalism here speaks to the "epistemic location from where the world was classified and ranked," where so-called objective assessments of race, religion, and civilization were mired in the European viewpoint from which they were written and for whose interests they served. As Mignolo emphasizes, this Eurocentric "locus of enunciation" was a deeply racialized perspective: early European maps of the globe correlated discrete racial types with each of the "four continents," inaugurating a "logic of continental racialization."¹ On most (European) world maps even through the seventeenth century, the racial types embodying each of the four continents were "usually represented by naked or semi-naked women" (Mignolo 27). These indigenous women served as the literal embodiment of their respective race and place, which in turn coincided with a religious difference/otherness that was itself so thoroughly fused with

racial difference at the time. After all, Europe was not only white, but also Christian, and the rest of the world was cast as barbarian territory populated by the various races of barbarians, all of whom were judged inferior regardless of the extent to which they were understood as “civilized.” Of course, Europe itself had its own internal religious differences, which were themselves supported by racial differences.

Mignolo devotes the second chapter to an exploration of the ways in which Europe exported those differences to the New World, in the process creating two distinct continents and two distinct races. This part of the project really began taking shape in the independence movements of the nineteenth century when former Portuguese and Spanish colonies in the Americas looked to France as a political and cultural model in order to distance themselves from their former colonial attachments. As he tells it, Europe at this time in the nineteenth century typically understood itself as composed of two races, the Germanics and the Latins—a binary which reflects not just a racial division, but also a religious one; at this time, culture and cultural difference were really understood in terms of religious difference. This racial/religious binary was in turn superimposed on the continents of the New World, where North America was understood racially and culturally as Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, while “Latin” America was understood as Latin and Catholic. Of course, as Mignolo details, such a stark division and totalizing basis for identity and difference “erased” the religious, cultural, and racial heterogeneity of Indigenous populations, as well as those of African or Asian descent, most of whom the term Latin ill-reflected their reality, experience, or identity. The failure to account for the heterogeneity of the New World reflects the abidingly Eurocentric logic of “Latinity”—originally used in France in reference to so-called Latin countries with colonial and/or imperial interests in the Americas: Italy, Spain, Portugal, and France and in contradistinction and opposition to the expansion-minded Anglo-Saxons, the United States (Mignolo 58). Many of the newly independent nations in South American and the Caribbean, looking to get away from the colonial legacy of Spain and Portugal, looked to France as a political and cultural model, embracing the oppositional “Latinity”/“Latinidad” that colonialist France and its “Latin” European allies had taken up against the imperializing United States threatening their interests. And so Latin American nations themselves took on the term as a self-descriptive, albeit an ill-fitting one. As Mignolo puts it, “‘Latin’ America is not so

much a subcontinent as it is the political project of Creole-Mestizo/a elites" (59). The mistake here was in the overlooking of European colonialism as a part of this model. And so these nascent nations never undertook any attempt to decolonize: "Coloniality is the underlying matrix of colonial power that was maintained, in the US and in South America and the Caribbean, after independence. The colonial matrix of power remained in place; it only changed hands" (69). We can see this coloniality at work in the ethnic exclusivity or homogenization connoted by "Latin" in Latin America and Latinidad.

The problem with the idea of Latin America is two-fold. On the one hand, it is reflected in the Eurocentric legacy of the term, which poorly suits the racial and cultural heterogeneity of Latin America. On the other hand, the racialized logic of global capitalism renders Latin American heterogeneity a moot point as occidentalist discourses merely impose their own racially and culturally homogenizing "descriptions"—i.e. inscriptions—of Latin America. The question of how to contend with these occidentalist discourses is the subject of the third and final chapter, which explores the way in which the frightening monolith of Occidentalism has been taken on and the accompanying "epistemic geo-/body-political shift" that has enacted. Though he opens the chapter with a discussion of the ways in which the (Euro/American) logic of global capital tends to focus on the reduction of Latin America to a summation of its resources, raw materials and labor, Mignolo is primarily concerned here with the movements to destabilize the Eurocentric idea of "Latinidad" beyond this problem of Latin America's commodification. Specifically, his focus is on Afro-Caribbean and Amerindian philosophies, cultural discourses, and historical memories, all of which are working to tear the universalizing fabric of Latin America. But "isn't that pure and simple essentialism?" Mignolo asks, to which he answers in the negative: "I am endorsing, joining, promoting, and supporting the project of the Caribbean Philosophical Association or the Afro-Ecuadorian social movement not because I am Black but because I see it as a project of liberation and epistemic decolonization" (Mignolo 114). For Mignolo, race is to be understood in strictly political terms; but this touches on the trickiest aspect of his study: the nature of the relationship between the political and the ontological. The very point of the book lies in the idea that what was essentially a political project—the idea of Latin America—seemed to take on an ontological consistency.

But even if we can establish through some empirical means that the “real” Latin America does not correspond to the idea of it propagated by the West, that does not change the reality that the West’s idea of Latin America was so wildly successful *because of*, rather than despite, the fact that it was a political project masking itself as an ontological reality. Indeed, pointing out the idea of Latin America as an ontological fallacy does nothing to defuse its representational power—a fact corroborated by Mignolo’s focus on *political* (rather than sociological or empirical) projects designed to combat the idea of Latin America. To bring us back to Mignolo’s question as to whether his endorsement of say Afro-Caribbean political projects were “pure and simple essentialism,” the answer must be “yes, in practice,” simply because they call on and inhabit the essentialist, racialized categories set by occidentalist discourse. After all, if we are to understand essentialism as confusing the ontological with the political, is that in practice any different from confusing the political with the ontological, which Mignolo attributes to the idea of Latin America? Certainly Mignolo is at pains to demonstrate that the political projects he espouses are merely strategic and thus anti-essentialist; but for as much as they question the content and reductive make-up of racial categories, they nonetheless leave the categories in place. Thus it is not clear how that will prevent an occidentalist/capitalist, essentialist co-optation of those projects as they reinforce the racial and racializing categories of modernity and coloniality. The more pressing problem seems to be occidentalism’s power of representation itself, its power to overwrite any and all political projects. What do we do about that?

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Note

1. As the book duly chronicles, Christianity itself already laid the groundwork for modern-day racial divisions through the Bible’s treatment of Noah’s three sons, Shem, Japheth, and Ham. Mignolo cites an early—from the ninth century—Christian map consisting simply of a circle divided into three sections corresponding to the positioning of the three biblical brothers in Europe, Africa, and Asia, respectively. This model was revised with the “discovery” of the Americas, which not only necessitated an acknowledgement of the existence of another continent but also of another race.