View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Case Western Reserve University School of Law

Societies Without Borders

Volume 10 | Issue 1 Article 5

2015

Review of Global Coloniality and Power in Guatemala

Andrew Crookston
Washington State University, andrew.crookston@email.wsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb

Part of the Human Rights Law Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation

Crookston, Andrew. 2015. "Review of Global Coloniality and Power in Guatemala." *Societies Without Borders* 10 (1).
Available at: https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol10/iss1/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Cross Disciplinary Publications at Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Societies Without Borders by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

Egla Martínez-Salazar. 2012. *Global Coloniality and Power in Guatemala*. Lexington Books pp. 258.

In *Global Coloniality and Power in Guatemala,* Egla Martínez-Salazar challenges the existing foundations of research on human rights, citizenship, and genocidal violence through an epistemology of decoloniality that emphasizes ways of knowing originating from 'Others' oppressed by colonialism and its subsequent processes. The epistemology of decoloniality shifts away from examining a changing and integrating world that is moving towards a set of abstract universalisms and focuses instead on the particularistic epistemologies of the oppressed 'Others' of the Global South. The particular epistemology of decoloniality employed in the book is that of the Mayan Cosmovision, which is "based on a set of philosophical, social, economic, political, and spiritual principles" (17). Martínez-Salazar, who has a cross-appointment in the Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies and the Pauline Jewett Institute of Women's and Gender Studies at Carleton University, lets it be known that her use of the Indigenous community of Guatemala as a case study is not that of an impartial, distant observer. Both her father and brother were killed at different times during the Guatemalan genocide and her sister, who is more recently deceased, was subject to the racial/gender violence that is thematic throughout the book. While acknowledging that some see the 'Other' studying the 'Other' as problematic for objectivity, Martínez-Salazar argues that it is important to recognize the value of the knowledge produced by those whose social situation provides them with closer insights. *Global Coloniality and Power in Guatemala* makes it clear that a failure to understand the epistemology of oppressed 'Others' is akin to following the lead of coloniality in which "universal" ways of knowing are deemed superior to the ways of those suffering the genocidal patterns initiated in colonialism.

Martínez-Salazar outlines her three main arguments in the introduction. The first argument is that coloniality resulted in human heterogeneity being treated "as a symbol of inferiority" and imposed "race and gender thinking *as tools for social classification*" (5). Martínez-Salazar links racial categorization to capitalist ways of thinking as it attempts to exercise control of its adversaries by subhumanizing every aspect of their lives, including their "bodies, clothes, cultures, and lands" (65). She describes sexism as being "central to racism" by explaining how the rape and torture of women are critical elements of the genocidal process. For example, a major reason why women become so vulnerable in genocidal processes is that their bodies become seen as "incubators" that perpetuate danger to the security of colonizers through their reproductive functions. Social classification allows groups of people to be labeled as inferior and from this labeling a logic develops in which the "inferior Other" must be

exterminated physically and culturally, including their system of knowledge, for the continuous wellbeing of the dominant group.

The second prevalent argument in the book pertains to the nature of violence. Martínez-Salazar writes, "violence consists not only of the 'extreme' acts that we commonly deem exceptional, cruel, or irrational (or indeed all three), but also of the many ways in which cruelty is rationalized and sanctioned through law, religion, education, and economics" (6). The rationality of the violence that coloniality has carried out against the Indigenous communities of Guatemala is the focal point of two of the book's stronger chapters. One chapter looks at how genocide was carried out in a bureaucratic fashion that intended to not only physically kill those who fought against oppression, but to also utterly wipe out their memory so that their cause is forgotten. Martínez-Salazar describes this process as the "thingafication" against those who are perceived as obstacles towards capitalist development. She provides a few copies of death dossiers that the Guatemalan police and military forces kept on victims of the genocide. The other chapter that deals specifically with rationalized violence describes the modern practice of citizenship. Citizenship is understood by many to be necessary for individuals to have protected rights in the context of the nation-state era. Martínez-Salazar explains that in reality citizenship has "always been a terrain of deep conflict and struggle, in which material, symbolic, and cultural inclusion and exclusion have prevailed" (197). She claims that citizenship has been a concept that has prevailed over humanity as it is used to determine who matters enough to have their lives protected and who mattered enough that their death should be mourned. There were various acts in Guatemala that were used to limit the citizenship rights of Indigenous people. Martínez-Salazar explains that citizenship has become contradictory to humanity and human rights. These values are purported to transcend citizenship, yet they have often been used to justify militant actions against oppressed groups across the globe.

Martínez-Salazar's final argument asserts that the modern condition of the Global South is not the product of structural incapacities, but rather the reality produced by the genealogy of colonialism, which includes liberal state building projects and modern neoliberal forces. Too often scholars talk about these eras as if they were separate historical paradigms, ascribing a unique set of characteristics inherent to each era. Martínez-Salazar disabuses us of the notion that there is "much newness under the sun," especially when it comes to the experiences of the oppressed 'Others.' While the systems of classifications and forms of government may have undergone some changes, the results of oppression have followed a linear pattern with many similarities between coloniality and modernity.

The only thing I found in need of clarification in *GCPG* was the Mayan Cosmovision; this epistemology that Martínez-Salazar purports to use was not always apparent – or perhaps just not discernible – for an outside reader to capture. I was left to wonder how much material could sustain a comparative analysis between the Mayan Cosmovision and the cultural beliefs of other colonized "Others." Certainly, the respondents were recognizant of the injustices done to them and had the desire to resist ongoing injustices, but it was unclear to me if the extent of their claims and practices were authentic to the Mayan Cosmovision or similar to 'Others' subjugated to the historical processes of colonialism.

Despite the stones that Martínez-Salazar may have left unturned, there is no doubt that the boulders of universal thinking that are part of coloniality/modernity were utterly pulverized, their essence revealed as an oppressive epistemology that seeks to annihilate the ways of knowing of oppressed 'Others.' While Martínez-Salazar's life is intimately entwined with the events and phenomena that form the background of her book, her call for understanding the knowledge of 'Others' through epistemological, theoretical, and methodological decoloniality is generalizable to all seeking to understand the struggle, exploitation, and oppression of the Global South. If you have an academic, activist, or lay interest in human rights and social justice in the Global South, then *Global Coloniality and Power in Guatemala* is an essential read. The missionary instinct to spread universal values to a Global South considered "backward" by ideologues is too strong. It is time that we begin to learn from 'Others' and understand the plurality of societies that have faced and resisted the genocidal tendencies of coloniality.