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Mobilizing Insurgent Past(s) Toward Decolonial Futures

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Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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MOBILIZING INSURGENT PASTS TOWARD DECOLONIAL FUTURES

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Patrick Crowley

Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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Abstract

This project is an inquiry into modes of decolonial resistance that mobilize alternative relationships to the past against the modern/colonial writing of history from a Eurocentric perspective taken as universal. I contend that knowledges and memories rooted in non-Western cultural traditions have formed the epistemological basis for ongoing opposition to the hegemonic conception of history as the unfolding of global structural transformations on a single, homogenous timescale. I examine works by Frantz Fanon, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Zapatista videomakers that expressly reject a Eurocentric, monotopic perspective of history. My objective is to demonstrate the decolonial efforts of intellectuals and ordinary people to critically engage this hegemonic understanding of history from its epistemic borders and propose alternatives which do not merely repeat the monological impulse by replacing the West's imperialist perspective of history with the orthodoxy of another cultural or national tradition.

Keywords

Coloniality, Modernity, Decolonization, Frantz Fanon, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Zapatistas.

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Introduction: Towards a New Epistemological Paradigm of History

History and historical consciousness are indispensable concepts for Eurocentric modernity. In the current configuration of global cultural, political, and economic power, the dominant centers—which lie mostly in the West (not as a geographical designation, but an ideological one)—rely on particular modes of conceptualizing and recording the past to maintain their position of centrality. The need to provide a rational historical explanation of the West's position of global dominance, or of Western society as the embodiment of modernity, has been an intellectual preoccupation since the 16th century. The Argentine-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel defines the Eurocentric paradigm of modernity as one which “formulates the phenomenon of modernity as exclusively European” and which posits that “Europe had exceptional internal characteristics that allowed it to supersede, through its rationality, all other cultures” (“Beyond Eurocentrism” 3). According to Dussel, no thinker has expressed the thesis of Eurocentric modernity more clearly than Hegel: “For Hegel, the Spirit of Europe (the German spirit) is the absolute Truth that determines or realizes itself through itself without owing anything to anyone” (“Beyond Eurocentrism” 3). From Hegel's perspective, Europeans, and more specifically, the German people, “were the first to attain the consciousness that man, as man, is free: that it is the freedom of Spirit which constitutes its essence” (Hegel 32). In other words, Europe is where people first developed a true sense of themselves as makers of their own historical destiny; that is, Europeans were the first to embody historical consciousness. This is the basis of Hegel's well-known claim, “The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning” (Hegel 121). The Eurocentric conception of modernity rests on a model of

history in which the West positions itself as the culmination of universal civilizational development. Knowledge of the past situated within the epistemological horizon of Eurocentrism is codified according to the values and categories of thought that predominate in the West. As Dussel explains, “The ‘pseudo-scientific’ division of history into Antiquity (as antecedent), the Medieval Age (preparatory epoch), and the Modern Age (Europe) is an ideological and deforming organization of history; it has already created ethical problems with respect to other cultures” (“Beyond Eurocentrism” 4). The question of how to address these ethical problems that emerge from Eurocentric conceptions of history and historical consciousness, and how to do so from a perspective beyond the Eurocentric boundaries of thought, will constitute the common thread between the different inquiries that I present in the work that follows.

As I have already indicated, the starting point of my exploration of hegemonic norms in the discourse of history is a critique of the concept of modernity. One of the key premises of my project is that to begin rethinking modernity, and its global reach, from a non-Eurocentric perspective, it is necessary to examine its relation to forms of colonial violence and domination. The reasons for this lie not only with modernity’s historical origins in the violent expansion of Europe’s empires, but also with the correlation between Europe’s intellectual project of *universal reason* and its rationalizations of the brutality of colonization. If modernity is often understood in terms of a new age of reason, then a non-Eurocentric critique of modernity such as the one I am describing involves recognizing it as an age of *imperial reason*. Dussel’s many contributions to the

critique of modernity from the standpoint of coloniality¹ can hardly be summarized here, but since his thought has been a fundamental stimulus for my own work, it is worthwhile to consider some of the basic parameters of his analysis. One of the central claims that Dussel stakes out has to do with the origins and periodization of modernity and, therefore, its genealogy. Dussel thinks of modernity as having its first beginning in 1492, with the expansion of the Spanish empire (and, soon after, the Portuguese) into the Americas (“Beyond Eurocentrism” 5). However, as he explains, “[t]here are, at the least, two modernities,” with the second one being the “modernity of Anglo-Germanic Europe, which begins with the Amsterdam of Flanders and which frequently passes as the *only* modernity” (“Beyond Eurocentrism” 13, original emphasis). The beginning of the second modernity can be located almost two centuries after the first, but the important point for Dussel is that the shift of Europe’s principal locus of power from the Iberian peninsula to

¹ The term “coloniality” has a particular usage that was coined by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (see below). For him, the word primarily reflects the systems of racial classification and other related strategies of domination that have been employed in the colonial world by European empires. But the term also carries another important sense related to the transhistorical dimension of the colonial experience, especially in the Americas. Using the word coloniality helps to emphasize that colonialism’s legacy escapes any attempt to confine it to a “colonial period.” The underlying structures of social domination put in place during Europe’s initial expansions have largely remained in effect and have often been strengthened throughout the transition to “postcolonial” national independence and later globalization. This concept of coloniality forms a fundamental part of the theoretical framework developed by scholars associated with the modernity/coloniality research program (see below). Walter D. Mignolo explains that the dyadic construction “modernity/coloniality” is an attempt to convey the idea that coloniality constitutes the “hidden face” of modernity; that “modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin” (*Local Histories* 50).

the Anglo-Dutch-German regions of Northern Europe corresponds to an occlusion of the historical conditions that led Europe to be able to conceive of itself as a global “center” in the first place. In the introduction to his Frankfurt Lectures (delivered in 1991), Dussel argues that “Modernity appears when Europe affirms itself as the ‘center’ of a World History that it inaugurates; the ‘periphery’ that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition” (“Eurocentrism and Modernity” 65). Only once the Americas are “discovered” as Europe’s periphery and are integrated into its cultural and geopolitical imaginary as subordinate entities can Europe begin to define itself as the nucleus of the world and of world history. This relationship of subordination between center and periphery is what enables the creation of Eurocentric modernity:

... [M]odernity as such was “born” when Europe was in a position to pose itself against an other, when, in other words, Europe could constitute itself as a unified ego exploring, conquering, colonizing an alterity that gave back its image of itself. This other, in other words, was not “dis-covered” (descubierto), or admitted, as such, but concealed, or “covered-up” (encubierto), as the same as what Europe assumed it had always been. (“Eurocentrism and Modernity” 66)

Europe’s concealment of its Amerindian Other during the first modernity marks an important precursor to the relationship between East and West during the second modernity. It was not theoretically possible for Europe to conceive of itself as a center in relation to Islamic, African, Chinese, and Indian civilizations until it had consolidated a Western identity, and the colonization of the “New World” was precisely what made this possible. Whereas the “Orient” had long existed in the cultural imaginary of Europe, the

Americas were entirely new and therefore could be freely conceptualized, or invented as “empty” space available for European expansion. In order to justify the colonial violence of this expansion, it was necessary to “cover-up” Amerindian (and soon afterwards, African) culture, history, and humanity: “if 1492 is the moment of the ‘birth’ of modernity as a concept, the moment of origin of a very particular myth of sacrificial violence, it also marks the origin of a process of concealment or misrecognition of the non-European” (Dussel “Eurocentrism and Modernity” 66). At the same time that Europe was developing the ideological paradigm that established a certain local concept of reason as the universal criterion of humanity and civilization, European colonizers were enacting a continuous campaign of brutal violence and dehumanization against Amerindians and black African people transported as slaves to the Americas. The ethical incongruity between the European Renaissance’s rational humanist philosophical reflection and its justification of colonial violence reveals what Dussel describes as the “myth of modernity”: “Modernity includes a rational ‘concept’ of emancipation that we affirm and subsume. But, at the same time, it develops an irrational myth, a justification for genocidal violence. The postmodernists criticize modern reason as a reason of terror; we criticize modern reason because of the irrational myth that it conceals” (“Eurocentrism and Modernity” 66).

The question of how to release modernity from its mythical conception and open it up to new significations involves subjecting it to a critique capable of accounting for the colonial relations of power that continue to hold the myth in place. Of course, postcolonial critique began seriously taking up to this task within the North American academy in the years following the publication of Edward Said’s ground-breaking work

Orientalism in 1979. While Said's influence has certainly deepened the critical analysis of Western discourses on non-European cultures, many scholars of Latin America have argued that postcolonial studies tends to privilege the history of the second modernity during which European colonialism penetrated the territories that were conceived as the Orient. Fernando Coronil is one thinker who has called for more critical reflection on the relevance of postcolonial studies for Latin America. He poses the question of how "to treat it [i.e., Latin America] as 'postcolonial' without framing it in terms of the existing postcolonial canon and thus inevitably colonizing it" ("Elephants in the Americas?" 397). For Coronil, one way of addressing the exclusion of Latin America from postcolonial studies while still retaining the critical contributions of the latter involves an engagement with questions of how the first modernity set the stage for Europe's colonial incursions into North Africa, the Middle East and Asia during the second modernity. Coronil argues for a framework capable of "problematizing and linking the two entities that lie at the center of his [Edward Said's] analysis: the West's Orientalist representations and the West itself" ("Beyond Occidentalism" 56).

In postcolonial studies, the underexamined factor in Europe's Orientalist representations of non-European Others, according to Coronil, is Europe's definition of itself. For this reason, his analysis focuses on

relating Western representations of "Otherness" to the implicit constructions of "Selfhood" that underwrite them. This move entails reorienting our attention from the problematic of "Orientalism," which focuses on the deficiencies of the West's representations of the Orient, to

that of “Occidentalism,” which refers to the conceptions of the West animating these representations. (“Beyond Occidentalism” 56).

This approach, explains Coronil, does not imply merely reversing the critical perspective from the Other to the Self, but rather involves “relating the observed to the observers, products to production, knowledge to its sites of formation” (“Beyond Occidentalism” 56). Occidentalism suggests a need to bring into focus the unequal relations of power that enable Europe to generate its imperialist representations. Coronil describes Occidentalism as, “not the reverse of Orientalism but its condition of possibility” (“Beyond Occidentalism” 56). In its epistemological dimensions, Coronil’s critique of Occidentalism articulates a mutual constitutive interdependency between the West’s knowledge of its Others and the West’s power over those Others. He defines Occidentalism in terms of an

ensemble of representational practices that participate in the production of conceptions of the world, which (1) separate the world’s components into bounded units; (2) disaggregate their relational histories; (3) turn difference into hierarchy; (4) naturalize these representations; and thus (5) intervene, however unwittingly, in the reproduction of existing asymmetrical power relations. (“Beyond Occidentalism” 57)

My analysis takes particular interest in how the West’s conceptualization of universal history functions along the lines of Occidentalism as defined by Coronil. One of my major concerns, especially in my discussion of Frantz Fanon, has to do with the colonial imposition and naturalization of a racial hierarchy that facilitated the theorization of Eurocentric modernity and its corresponding models of historical knowledge.

Perhaps the most enduring legacies of Europe's colonization of the Americas are the forms of racial discrimination and ethnic subalternization that persist in global modernity. Although expressions of racism today are sometimes concealed under liberal discourses of multiculturalism and the "post-racial" society, any close examination of the ongoing processes of exploitation and dispossession in the contemporary world will reveal that the victims are still predominately groups of people who have been included in the invented categories of bio-ontological inferiority put into practice by European intellectuals beginning in the first modernity. One scholar whose work has made important contributions to my own understanding of the continuity of racialization from the colonial societies of the 16th century up to the present day is Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. In order to describe the continuation of colonial paradigms of power that rest on racial difference in today's world, Quijano introduces the term "coloniality," or more specifically, "coloniality of power." For Quijano, Europe's classification of the world's population into different racial categories, all of which were considered inferior to the European or "white" norm, constitutes the most basic expression of colonial power. Taking account of the colonial roots of racism is one of the keys to understanding global capitalist modernity's forms of domination: "The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality" (Quijano "Coloniality of Power" 181). For Quijano, the establishment of racial difference was the most essential tool of social organization in the colonies, and its effects reach into other modes of exploitation that came into being under the coloniality of power, including the control of land and labour.

He writes, “coloniality of power is based upon ‘racial’ social classification of the world population under Eurocentered world power. But coloniality of power is not exhausted in the problem of ‘racist’ social relations. It pervaded and modulated the basic instances of the Eurocentered capitalist colonial/modern world power to become the cornerstone of this coloniality of power” (“Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality” 171). Importantly, Quijano also expresses the link between the coloniality of power and the Eurocentric paradigm for conceptualizing universal history. He identifies two “founding myths” of the hegemonic perspective of the past that are perpetuated in the forms of knowledge installed by the coloniality of power: “first, the idea of the history of human civilization as a trajectory that departed from a state of nature and culminated in Europe; second, a view of the differences between Europe and non-Europe as natural (racial) differences and not consequences of a history of power” (“Coloniality of Power” 190). Questions of how subjects might extricate themselves from this paradigm of Eurocentric knowledge, how to escape the mystifying historical consciousness of modernity, and how to challenge the coloniality of power from a position of subalternity occupy a large place throughout my work.

Possibilities for displacing or circumventing the “universality” of history posited by Eurocentric knowledge are currently being theorized by thinkers such the ones I have been discussing so far, but, in another sense, alternatives to this hegemonic perspective have been explored and enacted for centuries by resistant subjects at the margins of global modernity. One scholar who has paid particular attention to modes of thought which take shape at the limits of the West’s totalizing narrative of world history is Walter D. Mignolo. In his well-known book, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1995) he

examines how the Spanish colonizers in Mexico and Peru attempted to accomplish the “colonization of memory” by delegitimizing Amerindian knowledges of the past (3). They introduced alphabetic writing as the only legitimate means of recording history, which meant that other forms of collective memorializing could not qualify as historical discourse. Amerindian knowledges about the past had to be rewritten in conformity with the discursive standards of the colonizers, and the indigenous forms of historical knowing that had been transmitted orally and through pictographic writing were suppressed along with the Amerindian languages themselves. Mignolo’s work establishes that European historiography was merely “a regional Western invention,” and this allows him to “conceive record keeping of human memories as a more general practice” (*Darker Side* 127). The invisibility of other perspectives on the past has everything to do with the West’s position of imperial power: “The fact that this regional record-keeping maintains a complicity with empire and imperial expansion gave it its universal value and allowed imperial agencies to inscribe the idea that people without writing were people without history and that people without history were inferior human beings” (*Darker Side* 127). But, as Mignolo makes clear throughout his work, the epistemological hegemony of the Western idea of history certainly does not mean that other forms of historical knowledge have vanished from the Earth. It simply means that a decolonial perspective is necessary in order to conceptualize them from within modernity.

Mignolo has articulated numerous approaches to the decolonization of knowledge, many of which build upon the work of Dussel, Coronil, and Quijano. While it is not possible to provide an overview of the full range of his theoretical interventions into modern/colonial epistemology, I will offer a brief account of his notion of “pluritopic

hermeneutics” since it helps to illuminate some of the methodological motives for my own investigation. Mignolo argues that “Colonial situations invite one to rethink the hermeneutical legacy. If hermeneutics is defined not only as a reflection on human understanding, but also as human understanding itself, then the tradition in which hermeneutics has been founded and developed has to be recast in terms of the plurality of cultural traditions and across cultural boundaries” (*Darker Side* 15). The conception of human understanding that predominates in global modernity is a local or regional one tied to European historical experience. Introducing perspectives with roots in non-European experiences or traditions confronts the problem of how to assign truth value to one mode of understanding and not to another: “pluritopic understanding implies that while the understanding subject has to assume the truth of what is known and understood, he or she also has to assume the existence of alternative politics of location with equal rights to claim the truth” (*Darker Side* 15). Cultural relativism does not suffice as a viable solution to this dilemma, since colonial situations imply unequal relations of power. Thus, Mignolo identifies both “a need and a challenge” to develop a methodology of comparison whose ethical dimensions are capable of moving across a plurality of understandings, contesting the very idea of a universal perspective:

[A]n alternative comparatism grounded on a pluritopic hermeneutics is at the same time a need and a challenge: a need, because colonial situations are defined by the asymmetry of power relations between the two (or more) poles to be compared; and a challenge, because an alternative methodology must deal with and detach itself from the presuppositions of the established methodological and philosophical foundations from which

it departs: in this case, comparatism and monotopic hermeneutics. (*Darker Side* 19).

Having detailed some of the key ideas and approaches to the decolonial critique of history that have become important to me, I can now turn to a more detailed outline of the goals of own project. My effort is to conduct an inquiry into modes of decolonial resistance that mobilize alternative relationships to the past against the modern/colonial writing of history from a Eurocentric perspective taken as universal. I contend that knowledges and memories rooted in non-Western cultural traditions have formed the epistemological basis for ongoing opposition to the hegemonic conception of history as the unfolding of global structural transformations on a single, homogenous timescale. Peoples and communities in resistance against colonial and capitalist domination have continued to produce expressions (political, literary, philosophical, cinematic, etc.) of their rejection of a monotopic perspective of history; that is, one which views the past from solely from the vantage point of Europe and which relegates most non-westernized societies to the status of pre-modern, pre-civilized existence. I am interested in how the decolonial efforts of intellectuals and ordinary people critically engage this understanding of history from its epistemological borders and propose alternatives which do not merely repeat the monotopic impulse by replacing the West's imperialist perspective of history with the orthodoxy of another cultural or national tradition. Instead, as I illustrate in my work, there are numerous examples of decolonial projects that are focused on recognizing the persistence of local histories in the memories of colonized peoples and are creating the conditions of possibility for pluritopic models of conceptualizing the past.

My first chapter is a sustained discussion of the work of Frantz Fanon. I am concerned with investigating how Fanon manifests the *exterior* of modernity/coloniality in his theorization of revolutionary humanism. Lou Turner and John Alan write that “History, to Fanon, was not just past events but history-in-the-making by live men and women, peasant masses most of all” (108). My questions here have to do with whether this history-in-the-making also brings past resistances to life in the present. In what ways does this conception of making history inform resistance to coloniality? What historical perspectives does his writing open up beyond, or between the cracks of, modern/colonial universal history that enable us to perceive pluriversal histories of resistance? If the historical conditions associated with the coloniality of power naturalize the cultural and racial hierarchies created by Western intellectuals, what possibilities does Fanon see within the insurgent histories claimed by the “Wretched of the Earth”? How do traditional non-Western cultures and knowledges inform Fanon’s theory and praxis of decolonial struggle?

In my second chapter, I examine some tensions in the relationship between Marx’s theory of historical development and some decolonial critiques of modern Eurocentric historiography articulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty, an Indian scholar associated with the Subaltern Studies collective. Marx continues to be a central figure for intellectuals and activists seeking out decolonial options, but while Marx articulates a powerful critique of bourgeois ideology of capitalist modernity, he does so from a monotopic locus of enunciation which is undoubtedly Eurocentered. There is a problematic disjuncture between the significance of his thought and his apparent inability or unwillingness to understand historical struggles against colonialism outside the

perspective of modernity. For Mignolo and many other decolonial thinkers, Marx's blindness is especially acute in his conceptualization of historical materialism and the notion of a single line of progression from "pre-capitalism" to capitalism. Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on subaltern historiography in India considers whether it is possible to reconcile Marx's universalist categories with the theories of difference and plurality that have become so vital to conceptualizing decolonial critiques of the hegemonic globalization of capital. I examine how his reading of *Capital* (among other texts) emphasizes the plural and heterogeneous local histories rather than the universal linear narrative of capitalist social transformation.

Finally, my third chapter offers a reading of a recent documentary video produced by members of a Zapatista indigenous community in Chiapas, Mexico. I argue that indigenous video projects are a complex expression of subaltern self-representation in critical dialogue with modernity. The particular video that I concentrate on, "Arte en rebeldía" [Art in Rebellion], documents modes of social organization in the community as they are represented through the process of collectively painting murals. In my analysis, I consider how the Zapatistas place emphasis on ancestral memories and cultural traditions that have survived 500 years of struggle and thus highlight the decolonial orientation of their politics of resistance. The conceptualization of their struggle within a global matrix of power emerges from a perspective located at the horizon of overlapping histories of domination and resistance. The Zapatistas perceive their present condition of resisting oppression as fundamentally linked to several co-existing historical layers of struggle. Rather than thinking in terms of progressive stages of history, the Zapatistas practice modes of memorializing the past that place it in

complex relation with the present. Thus, even as these indigenous communities confront and critically engage modernity from its exterior with traditional knowledges and cultural memories, they do not present their struggle as anti-modern, nor do they advocate a return to pre-colonial conditions. Rather, they mobilize the past for the purpose of envisioning transformation toward a new paradigm of historical knowledge.

Before proceeding, I would like to provide some background on two key terms that I employ throughout my work. First, there are a number of significant reasons behind the way that I use the word “decolonial” (as in “a decolonial perspective” or “decolonial resistance”). My principal motivation is to signal an intellectual affinity with the work of scholars associated with what Arturo Escobar calls the “modernity/coloniality research program” (180). Operating as a loose transdisciplinary collective, these thinkers have together been theorizing a paradigm of critical analysis founded on the notion of coloniality as the concealed underside of modernity and on the premise that a shift toward decolonial thinking is necessary to break from the epistemic hegemony of the West². Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, and Enrique Dussel (along with Fernando Coronil until his recent death) are all important figures within the group, and some others include

² Apart from a few exceptions, the body of work that has been produced by scholars associated with the M/C group is still relatively unknown in the English-speaking world (as compared with that of the most prominent figures in postcolonial studies, for instance). However, there have been several volumes published in English in recent years which have attempted to collect some representative texts that illustrate the main investigative and theoretical concerns of the project. One of these is *Coloniality at Large* (2008), edited by Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui. Another important publication for the group is a special issue of *Cultural Studies* (Volume 21, Issues 2-3, 2007), titled *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* and edited by Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar.

Catherine Walsh, María Lugones, José Saldívar, and Santiago Castro-Gómez. The research of these scholars is primarily focused on the intellectual, historical, and socio-cultural context of Latin America, but their critical engagement with global modernity posits that decolonial thinking is relevant to confrontations with diverse local manifestations of Eurocentric epistemology in all branches of knowledge production. As Escobar puts it, their work constitutes a “perspective from Latin America but not only for Latin America but for the world of the social and human sciences as a whole” (180). The group certainly has some common ground with postcolonial studies, or postcolonial theory, but there are also some significant areas of differentiation which the members of the modernity/coloniality group have emphasized in various ways throughout their work. As I have already pointed out in my discussion of Coronil, postcolonial studies has traditionally neglected to take up the particularities of the colonial experience in the Americas, instead taking its primary cues from Said’s initial studies on the discourse of Orientalism. The genealogy of the modernity/coloniality group can be traced to a number of different intellectual movements in Latin America, including liberation theology beginning in the 1960s (Escobar 180-81). Aside from their distinct intellectual roots, another important discrepancy between the paradigm of postcolonial theory and the model of decolonial thought proposed by the modernity/coloniality scholars has to do with the conception of the *colonial* itself and the applicability of the prefix “post-” within the context of Latin America. I have already explained that using the term “coloniality” as opposed to “colonialism” is partly intended to signal the continuity of colonial structures of power beyond the era of colonial rule by Europe. This reasoning is also at work in the formulation of a notion of decolonial thinking. As Santiago Castro-Gómez

and Ramón Grosfoguel write, “El concepto ‘decolonialidad’ ... resulta útil para trascender la suposición de ciertos discursos académicos y políticos, según la cual, con el fin de las administraciones coloniales y la formación de los Estados-nación en la periferia, vivimos ahora en un mundo descolonizado y poscolonial”³ (13). Of course, this is not to suggest that postcolonial studies itself has failed to interrogate the significance of the “post-”; on the contrary, there are numerous examples of critical reflection on this issue⁴. The modernity/decoloniality group members frequently affirm the necessity of dialogue with postcolonial theory, but they also perceive their own modes of engagement with the concept of modernity/coloniality and their development of a model of decolonial thinking as providing an alternative framework of inquiry.

In the chapters that follow, “decolonial” may also seem to be used in places where the term “anticolonial” might be expected instead. This is especially true with regard to my discussion of Frantz Fanon, whose work is most often described as forming part of the broad anticolonial movement of the mid-twentieth century. My preference for using “decolonial” in reference to Fanon’s thought is not meant to suggest that it is somehow inadequate to refer to him as an anticolonial thinker. However, there are a number of specific motives behind my choice. First, the anticolonial movement is generally associated with the struggle against colonialism; that is, it is normally perceived as being concerned with the national independence of Europe’s former colonies. From this

³ “The concept of ‘decoloniality’ is useful in that it transcends the supposition made in certain academic and political discourses, according to which, after the end of the colonial administrations and formation of Nation-states at the periphery, we now live in a decolonized and postcolonial world” (*My translation*).

⁴ For example, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay, “Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value,” and Stuart Hall’s “When Was ‘The Postcolonial’? Thinking at the Limit.”

perspective, anticolonialism's relevance might be reduced to its function as a precursor to a narrowly defined notion of postcolonialism. As I attempt to illustrate through my analysis, Fanon was acutely aware of how the dynamics of colonial oppression do not simply come to a halt on the day when independence is declared and the colonial governor finally departs the colony for his home country. Fanon's work is dedicated to theorizing a fundamentally new paradigm of humanism in order to overcome the deeply entrenched sense of European racial and cultural superiority that has been held in place over centuries of colonial domination and continues in the present world. I suggest that using "decolonial" in my discussion helps to emphasize that Fanon recognized a need to undo coloniality at the level of human subjectivity rather than merely in the realm of national politics and that this work continues long after the end of Europe's colonial regimes. Another reason that I choose to describe Fanon's thought as "decolonial" has to do with one of my principal claims about his philosophy of history and its relation to the modernity/coloniality research program. One of the more contentious lines of argument that have been developed by the modernity/coloniality group, but also one that is quite central to their intellectual project as a whole, concerns the question of modernity's exteriority. The claim that there is no "outside" to modernity (or ideology, or language, or "the text", etc.) has been widely validated in Western critical theory, but the modernity/coloniality scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to positing counterarguments to this view⁵. While I do not enter into this debate in a direct way, my

⁵ This large and on-going debate has been addressed in different ways by nearly all of the members of the M/C group and there are certainly many internal disagreements among them, so summarizing their collective position is not feasible in the space available here. Escobar's article "Worlds and Knowledges

discussion of Fanon puts forward the idea that he conceived the “history of decolonization” as taking shape beyond the limits of modernity’s model of historical subjectivity. It is in this context that I use the term “decolonial” to suggest that Fanon’s approach to history runs parallel to some of the theorizations of exteriority produced by the modernity/coloniality group.

The second piece of vocabulary that I want to call attention to is the neologism “pluriversal” or “pluriversality.” This word has been has come to occupy a significant place in the work of some members of the modernity/coloniality group⁶. In general, pluriversality is a term that stands in opposition to the notion of *universality*. While the latter conveys a strong association with the imperial designs of Eurocentric modernity and its epistemological paradigm of universal reason, pluriversality opposes this totalitarian perspective by placing emphasis on the possibility of co-existence between a multiplicity of diverse knowledges, cosmologies, and ways of being. Rather than merely opposing the universal with the specific or the singular, the modernity/coloniality group proposes pluriversality as a non-totalitarian form of universalism. The term “pluriversal” helps to describe decolonial thinking and the vision that it puts forward of an alternative to global modernity/coloniality. Walter Mignolo writes that

Otherwise: The Latin American Modernity/Coloniality Research Program” provides a general overview of some of the most significant contributions of some members of the group.

⁶ For example, see Mignolo’s article “The Splendors and Misereries of ‘Science’: Coloniality, Geopolitics of Knowledge, and Epistemic Pluriversality” and the interview with Mignolo conducted by Marina Gržinić, “Delinking Epistemology from Capitalism and Pluriversality.” Additionally, see Ramón Grosfoguel’s “Descolonizando los universalismos occidentales: el pluri-versalismo transmoderno decolonial desde Aimé Césaire hasta los zapatistas.”

La enorme contribución de la descolonización (o Independencia), tanto en la primera oleada desde 1776 a 1830 en las Américas, como en la segunda en Asia y en África, es haber plantado la bandera de la *pluriversalidad* decolonial frente a la bandera y los tanques de la *universalidad* imperial. El límite de todos estos movimientos fue no haber encontrado la apertura y la libertad de un pensamiento-otro, esto es, de una descolonización que llevara, en términos de los zapatistas, a un mundo en donde cupieran muchos mundos (la pluriversalidad)⁷. (“El pensamiento decolonial” 31)

In my own work, I have attempted to develop the notion of “pluriversal histories” to help describe the alternative forms of historical knowledge that can displace the current Eurocentric model of conceptualizing history as a totality which excludes and renders invisible the existence and resistance of colonized and subaltern communities.

⁷ “The enormous contribution of decolonization (or Independence), as much in the first wave from 1776 to 1830 in the Americas as in the second in Asia and Africa, is to have planted the flag of decolonial *pluriversality* in front of the flag and the tanks of imperial *universality*. The limit of all of these movements was not to have found the opening and the freedom of an other-thinking, that is, of a decolonization that would lead, in the Zapatistas’ terms, to a world in which many worlds co-exist (pluriversality)” (*My translation*).

1. Frantz Fanon: Overturning the Colonized Subject of History

1.1 Critique of the Human: The Sociogenic Principle and the Rejection of Ontology

The principal concern of Frantz Fanon's theorization of revolutionary humanism in his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, is to confront the racist foundations of modern Western culture's dominant conception of "Man," particularly as they are manifested by the social construction of blackness as a sub- or nonhuman category. While spurning the conventional methods and doctrines of psychology, the discipline in which he was professionally trained, Fanon insists that his book functions as a "clinical study" which approaches the question of racism through an analysis of the alienated consciousness of racialized blacks living under the social conditions of white supremacist ideology (*BSWM* xvi). He announces that his subject matter will be "the various mental attitudes the black man adopts in the face of white civilization" (*BSWM* xvi), signaling that his analysis is not ethno-psychological in the sense that it proposes to study the unconscious behavior patterns intrinsic to a particular ethnic or racial group. Such an approach, according to Fanon, is seriously and dangerously misguided, as he demonstrates with his scathing critique of Octave Mannoni's work in the fourth chapter of the book. Fanon's project specifically and emphatically rejects ontological explanations of the consciousness of colonized black folk, and instead centers on a phenomenological examination of the "Lived Experience of the Black Man" (*BSWM* xvii), a focus informed by his close—although deeply critical—connection with Jean-Paul Sartre and the philosophy of existence.

This distinction between ontological and existential-phenomenological descriptions of blackness provides one of the keys to understanding the call to re-

conceptualize the human that resounds at the core of Fanon's work. Fanon's rejection of ontological description is evident at the outset of *Black Skin, White Masks* in the emphasis he places on the relational aspect of black experience. When he proposes to study the "mental attitudes the black man adopts in the face of white civilization,"⁸ the implication is that the inner life-worlds of colonized blacks can be understood only in terms of how they are formed in tense relation with whiteness. The split within the psyche of the black man or woman cannot be addressed in earnest outside the context of the colonial imposition of racial classification and hierarchy: "We believe the juxtaposition of the black and white races has resulted in a massive psycho-existential complex. By analyzing it we aim to destroy it" (*BSWM* xvii). The colonized black woman or man is always defined in comparison to whites, her experience is always conditioned by racist constructions of blackness, and it becomes impossible to conceptualize the self objectively, since her consciousness is constrained by the externally imposed sense of

⁸ Fanon unfortunately follows the normative scholarly writing practice of using masculine forms of nouns and pronouns as universal rather than opting for more gender progressive language choices. He also frequently uses "Man" (or, "l'homme" in the original texts) to refer in a general way to the human species or to a particular group, e.g. white man, black man, etc. In citing Fanon's work, I have made efforts to avoid duplicating the sexist paradigm inherent to these discursive norms, but there are occasional instances where, in the interest of clear expression, I use the same masculine forms that are found in the original. It is worth pointing out also that several feminist critics of Fanon have argued that there is a fundamentally patriarchal outlook that pervades his entire project and significantly delegitimizes his efforts to construct a radical re-conceptualization of humanism. On the other hand, there is also a growing body of critical work concerned with identifying Fanon's contributions to anti-sexist struggles. For an overview of this debate within Fanon studies, see Sharpely-Whiting's *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* and Chapter 4 of Reiland Rabaka's *Forms of Fanonism* (217-70).

inferiority with respect to whiteness. Fanon develops the central argument regarding his rejection of ontology throughout his text, occasionally articulating the point in unmistakable terms, as when he writes that “any ontology is made impossible in a colonized and acculturated society” (*BSWM* 89). He continues:

In the *weltanschauung* [worldview] of a colonized people, there is an impurity or a flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation. Perhaps it could be argued that this is true for any individual, but such an argument would be concealing the basic problem. Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. (*BSWM* 89-90)

In Fanon’s view, the relational or comparative impulse interrupts the process of self-definition or self-reflection. Under colonialism, black men and women are socialized to see themselves as inferior beings, and Fanon’s position is that this problem can only be examined through the suspension of ontological thinking in favor of shifting the focus to the black experience of self-estrangement. To decolonize the anthropological question, the question of “Man,” Fanon perceives the necessity of a critical form of self-reflection, which examines how social experience shapes human consciousness of reality—a process which may be rendered invisible by ontological explanations. Of course, this task is not only urgent for black folk and other people of color, but also applies to whites and colonizers, who must learn to recognize how they are socialized into accepting their *given* status as superior beings, and how they may unconsciously—or aggressively—ignore the underlying processes that produce social reality. Fanon’s “true wish,” he writes, “is to get

my brother, black or white, to shake off the dust from that lamentable livery built up over centuries of incomprehension” (*BSWM* xvi). A radical and decolonial critique of the human, Fanon argues, requires an effort to describe the human self and its social reality from the *lived* perspective of human subjects rather than as *a priori* essences to be analyzed from the transcendent standpoint of putatively objective reason.

Fanon argues that human consciousness becomes alienated from its own existence through the racist, white supremacist organization of social reality. Colonization creates a situation in which non-Europeans are systematically dehumanized by the governing social and cultural representations that are imposed and inscribed as true knowledge. In an anti-black racist world, the appearance of one’s black skin closes off all possibilities for rationally interpreting one’s existence in ways that do not confirm the prevailing racist stereotypes; as Fanon puts it, “I am overdetermined from the outside” (*BSWM* 95). A crucial problem that concerns Fanon is how this hegemonic fiction inflicts epistemic violence upon the consciousness of colonized blacks, compelling them toward an implicit denial of their own humanity. The representation of social reality posited by racist ideology threatens to become “true” for blacks given that the majority of their efforts to publically express their perspectives on the condition of society are consistently delegitimated and erased. A colonial society structured upon racist principles of organization exerts intense and constant pressure on colonized blacks to accept a version of reality that contradicts their own experiences. For this reason, Fanon insists upon making the everyday “lived experience of the black man” under the conditions of colonial racism and social oppression the fundamental component of his critical exploration of human consciousness. He writes,

The analysis we are undertaking is psychological. It remains, nevertheless, evident that for us the true disalienation of the black man implies a brutal awareness of the social and economic realities. The inferiority complex can be ascribed to a double process: First, economic. Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority. (*BSWM* xiv-xv)

The colonial hegemonic fiction presented as reality functions through a comprehensive effacement of the differences in social and economic power established and maintained by the institutional racism of European colonial rule. Europe's governing knowledge attributes the alienated and impoverished condition of colonized blacks to an intrinsic bio-ontological inferiority rather than to the systematic dehumanization and denial of economic opportunity under the racially oppressive colonial regime. For Fanon, black folk's internalization of this knowledge constitutes a collective psychopathology that is augmented by the fact that, under colonial rule, blacks approach human status only insofar as they adopt the social and cultural truths of Europe. The neurosis of this assimilation lies in their contradictory awareness that black skin inherently disqualifies them from sharing full membership in the human race.

Fanon differentiates his approach from the particular emphases in Freudian psychoanalytic theory which locate the causes of neurosis in the interaction between primitive human instincts (phylogeny) and individual development (ontogeny). A truly liberatory theorization of black consciousness, he writes, must take into account the sociogenic factor: "We shall see that the alienation of the black man is not an individual question. Alongside phylogeny and ontogeny, there is also sociogeny. In a way ... let us say here it is a question of sociodiagnostics" (*BSWM* xv). Freudian psychoanalysis posits

a correspondence between the sexual development of the individual and the primal fantasies embedded in the deep recesses of the human mind. Thus, the psychopathologies of any particular individual can be said to have an ontogenetic origin (i.e., in the specific traumas experienced by that individual during childhood) as well as a phylogenetic origin (i.e., in the oedipal complex inherited from the earliest human societies which provides the universal structure of desire)⁹. Sociogenesis, by contrast, locates the origins of psychological dysfunction within the social conditions surrounding the subject. For Fanon, blacks who manifest signs of negative self-conception, as well as those who “want to prove at all costs to the Whites the wealth of the black man’s intellect and equal intelligence” (*BSWM* xiv), are experiencing a form a psychopathology rooted in the colonial organization of social reality. The imposition of European cultural norms transforms white superiority into a banal component of everyday experience and produces a collective rejection of blackness. Fanon’s conception of sociogeny refers to the normalization of anti-black racism throughout the entire society, such that it permeates the social fabric and influences the formation of individual consciousness. Speaking about his home country of Martinique, Fanon explains that “the feeling of inferiority is Antillean. It is not one individual Antillean who presents a neurotic mind-set; all the Antilleans present this. Antillean society is a neurotic society, a *comparaison*”¹⁰

⁹ For a brief overview, see Jean-François Rabain’s entry on “Ontogenesis” in the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*.

¹⁰ Richard Philcox, Fanon’s most recent English translator, leaves the term “comparaison” untranslated throughout *Black Skin, White Masks*. One of the reasons for this has to do with the word’s dual usage in Martinique and other parts of the Antilles. In French, the word is a cognate of the English “comparison” and Fanon uses it to refer to the social, cultural and psychological juxtaposition of Black and White which

society. Hence we are referred back from the individual to the social structure. If there is a flaw, it lies not in the ‘soul’ of the individual, but in his environment” (*BSWM* 188). Of course, Fanon also insists that white colonizers are equally affected by the racist sociogenic pathology, arguing that “both the black man, slave to his inferiority, and the white man, slave to his superiority, behave along neurotic lines” (*BSWM* 42). By focusing critical attention on the social construction of race and racial hierarchy, Fanon does not remove responsibility from individuals whose actions and behaviors perpetuate anti-black racism. On the contrary, examining the abstract value that European society places on whiteness makes it possible for Fanon to concretize the human agency involved in the creation of racist colonial social structures: “Society, unlike biochemical processes, does not escape human influence. Man is what brings society into being” (*BSWM* xv). Once the white supremacist social world is recognized as a product of human activity, Fanon argues, the possibility of other modes of social organization comes more clearly into view, and the necessity of revolutionary action presents itself more readily. A radical re-conceptualization of the human, one that moves beyond Europe’s posited equivalency between Man and White Man, requires nothing short of “restructuring the world” (*BSWM* 63).

The recent work of philosopher Sylvia Wynter provides some important insights into Fanon’s emphasis on sociogeny and its relation to the history of colonization.

constitute an internalized complex of inferiority. In Creole, however, the word “comparaison” conveys the sense of “contemptuous” or “contemptible.” Philcox’s decision not to translate the word signals the intention to preserve the conjunction of meanings that Fanon implies in the original text. For a discussion of Fanon’s understanding of *comparaison*, see Shu-mei Shih’s entry on “Comparative Racialization” in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*.

Adapting Fanon's concept of sociogeny, Wynter has developed what she calls the "sociogenic principle" as a theoretical tool to describe how the hegemonic and culturally specific definition of the human imposed through social power shapes and determines the possible modes of subjective experience. She argues that "our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man ... overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself" (Wynter, "Unsettling" 260). In Wynter's writing, the sociogenic principle refers to the culturally predefined conditions governing what it means to be human, which are understood as though they were natural or divine laws and not descriptive statements created by humans themselves. In particular, she is concerned with the consequences for blacks and other racialized non-Europeans living under a Western descriptive statement which defines them as aberrant and inferior to Man (i.e., white man).

Wynter traces the genealogy of the current conception of Man through its earlier stages, beginning with medieval Christian Europe, "which had defined the human as primarily the religious subject of the Church" (Wynter, "Unsettling" 265). The imperial expansion of Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth century necessitated a cultural validation of the conquest of Amerindians and the enslavement of massive numbers of Africans. Hence, European intellectuals were prompted to redefine the human based on a pseudo-secular, "neo-Aristotelian" notion of reason combined with a concept of bio-ontological difference:

It was here that the modern phenomenon of race, as a new, extrahumanly determined classificatory principle and mechanism of domination, was first invented, if still in its first religio-secular form. For the indigenous

peoples of the New World, together with the mass-enslaved peoples of Africa, were now to be reclassified as “irrational” because “savage” Indians, and as “subrational” Negroes, in the terms of a formula based on an a-Christian premise of a by-nature difference between Spaniards and Indians, and, by extrapolation, between Christian Europeans and Negroes. (Wynter, “Unsettling” 296)

This initial shift towards a racially defined version of Man marks a crucial turning point which eventually led to what Wynter identifies as the West’s modern “biocentric ... Darwinian” descriptive statement in which “the Human Other malediction or curse, one shared with all the now colonized nonwhite peoples classified as ‘natives’ (but as their extreme nigger form) would be no longer that of Noah or Nature, but of Evolution and Natural Selection” (Wynter, “Unsettling” 307). The hierarchical separation between human (i.e., white) and subhuman (i.e., non-white) subjects, now ascribed to a purely biological process rather than to divine ordering, is sustained through the continual reaffirmation of its validity in cultural representations, while the historical origins of racialization as an enabling component of colonization are denied. The West’s sociogenic principle functions by deploying “strategic mechanisms that can repress all knowledge of the fact that its biocentric descriptive statement is a descriptive statement” (Wynter, “Unsettling” 326). In other words, human agency is erased as the culture continues to produce and reproduce the “truth” of Europe’s superior evolutionary status. In the modern/colonial world dominated by European forms of knowledge, the sociogenic principle projects a culture-specific mode of being-in-the-world as the universal standard. This negatively conditions the *sense of self* available to racialized subjects since they are

induced to know and understand themselves as inferior beings, a process which Wynter sees exemplified in Fanon's efforts to describe the "Lived Experience of the Black Man": "This mode is one that compels him to know his body *through* the terms of an always already imposed 'historico-racial schema'; a schema that predefines his body as an impurity to be cured, a lack, a defect, to be amended into the 'true' being of whiteness." (Wynter, "Towards" 41).

Fanon's sociogenic approach, as Wynter's reading indicates, emphasizes the forced imposition of a hegemonic definition of the human which produces the condition of exclusion from humanity experienced by racialized black men and women. My analysis seeks to pose questions regarding how Fanon's thought illuminates the status of other modes of being human, both those which pre-exist Europe's colonial imposition and those which are forged in struggles by colonized people everywhere to cast off the racist "descriptive statement" that generates and sustains oppressive modern/colonial concepts of subjectivity. I am concerned with investigating how the exterior of modernity/coloniality manifests itself in Fanon's theorization of revolutionary humanism. What perspectives does he open up beyond the universal history of modernity/coloniality that enable us to conceive pluriversal histories of resistance with radically unforeseeably trajectories? If the historical conditions of colonial conquest, slavery, and neo-colonial domination produce and reproduce the "natural" hierarchical order invented by Western intellectuals, what possibilities does Fanon envisage for registering and articulating the

insurgent histories claimed by the *damnés de la terre*?¹¹ To what extent and in what capacity do traditional cultures and knowledges inform Fanon's theory and praxis of decolonial struggle? My underlying objective in formulating and discussing these queries in the remaining pages of this chapter is to move toward an analysis of the intersection between Fanon's critique of the human and his call to "bring to life the history of the nation, the history of decolonization" (WE 15).

1.2 Colonial and Decolonial Appropriations of the Past

Fanon's description of experiencing self-consciousness through an imposed "historical-racial schema" evokes multiple connections between the social operation of racial oppression and European modes of conceptualizing the pasts of colonized and non-Western people (BSWM 91). His account illustrates how Europe's designation of Africans and Amerindians as "people without history" becomes a powerful ideological trope that reinforces a hegemonic position for Western civilization, culture, and knowledge. The denial of the humanity of black women and men finds its basis in a denial of coevalness framed in terms of ethno-cultural history. The writings of Hegel are emblematic of this view, as when, for instance, in *The Philosophy of History* he notoriously relegates Africans to the realm of the "unhistorical" and claims that the culture of the entire African continent merely lingers on "the threshold of the World's History" (Hegel 117). Western civilization's self-presentation as the embodiment of universal History rests on the foundation of a systematic suppression and devaluation of

¹¹ The accepted English translation of the title of Fanon's last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, does not quite do justice to the deep sense of exclusion and condemnation that is conveyed by the participle *damnés* in the original French title taken from the first line of the socialist anthem "Internationale."

other cultures and histories. The “historical-racial schema,” as Fanon explains, is constructed from Europe’s diffuse representations of the inferiority of African and Afro-descendant cultures and functions to permanently link blacks to a world of primitive savagery. From Europe’s perspective, the black man or woman “has no culture, no civilization, and no ‘long historical past’” (Fanon *BSWM* 17). Africa is not merely placed behind Europe in terms of historical development, but rather European ideology constructs the black man as a being who lacks both historical consciousness and agency. The black man becomes the static sign of the uncivilized, the unhistorical.

The habitual denigration of Africa and the African past in the Western imagination is a fundamental component of Fanon’s argument regarding the “massive psycho-existential complex” affecting blacks living under the conditions of colonial racism (*BSWM* xvi). Europe’s cultural imposition in the colonies normalizes white supremacist ideology and violently dislocates the traditional life-worlds of colonized people. Under the oppressive force of a worldview dominated by anti-black racism, Fanon explains, “it is normal for the Antillean to be a negrophobe” (*BSWM* 168). The social conditions of colonialism create a situation in which colonized subject, who has “breathed and ingested the myths and prejudices of a racist Europe, and assimilated its collective unconscious,” develops a self-negating “split” within his or her own psyche (*BSWM* 165). Fanon’s notion of the split consciousness of the colonized intellectual reflects how the cultural imaginary projected by Europe becomes a (failed) source of identity for the very people whose humanity it functions to deny. Fanon describes the process whereby in seeking to claim a sense of Self in accordance with Western humanist principles, he finds himself “fixed” by the “white gaze, the only valid one” (*BSWM* 95).

In attempting to conceive his identity in European terms, he discovers that it has already been predetermined “by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (*BSWM* 91). The identities of colonized blacks are imprisoned by the degraded image of Africa as it exists in the European imagination. They are burdened and immobilized by a version of history that is not only defined by racial violence, but also written exclusively from the perspective of the oppressor: “I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders , and above all, yes, above all, the grinning *Y a bon Banania*”¹² (*BSWM* 92).

Fanon’s critical analysis of how colonized blacks respond to the oppressive social reality created by European anti-black ideology takes into consideration the efforts of black intellectuals to resist cultural “Westernization.” While there had been many earlier significant political and cultural movements dedicated to combating anti-black racism and promoting a sense of pride, solidarity, and shared experience among black folk, Fanon’s thought was most directly influenced by the emergence of revolutionary *négritude*, and particularly by the work of his fellow Martinican, Aimé Césaire. While studying in Paris in the 1930s, Césaire became friends with other expatriate students from French colonies, including Leopold Sedar Senghor and Léon Damas, with whom he eventually produced a literary journal, *L’Étudiant Noir*, dedicated to publishing texts

¹² The phrase “Y a bon Banania” is a reference to a 1940s breakfast cereal advertisement in France which employed a stereotypical image of a black Senegalese soldier wearing a grotesque smile on his face. Fanon uses this reference several times in *Black Skin, White Masks* to indicate the banalization of anti-black racism in European culture. See *BSWM* 17, 35, 162, etc.

which were deeply and positively engaged with African culture and history and aggressively opposed to racist colonialism. Collectively, their political and cultural discourse became known as *négritude* (appropriating and transfiguring the French pejorative term *nègre*), and it quickly emerged as a significant movement that contributed much revolutionary energy to the growing struggles for national independence in Africa and anti-racist battles elsewhere. That Fanon took enormous inspiration from *négritude* in general, and from Césaire in particular, cannot be doubted. Neither can it be denied that Fanon had many serious misgivings about the practical efficacy and theoretical validity of asserting a specifically black identity rooted in a shared pre-colonial African past. However, Fanon was keenly aware of the differences between the multiple voices and views that comprised the *négritude* movement as a whole, and his concerns always address specific problems within the *négritudists'* distinct modes of conceptualizing blackness without ever wholly negating the value of the project.

To some critics and readers, Fanon's position regarding *négritude* often appears ambiguous¹³. On the one hand, he frequently pays homage to Césaire as a source of personal intellectual inspiration and as an anti-racist, decolonial thinker whose writings had a transformational impact on a generation of self-alienated Afro-Caribbeans. Before Césaire, as Fanon puts it, "no Antillean was capable of thinking of himself as black" (*BSWM* 131). On the other hand, he also expresses deep concern about the model of Africanity embraced by some proponents of the *négritude* movement. Fanon cautions

¹³ For example, Benita Parry, in her essay "Resistance Theory" examines the "dilemma of fashioning/disavowing black identity" in Fanon's work with careful consideration of his "ambiguous critique" of *négritude* (240). See also Tony Martin's description of Fanon's "contradictory" position regarding *négritude* in "Rescuing Fanon from the Critics" (98-99).

against using an overly romanticized understanding of the African past as the basis for black identity. In his effort to free himself from the prison of Europe's denigrating stereotypes of primitive African cultures, "the educated black man" may end up a "slave to the myth of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro" (*BSWM* xviii). The danger of an uncritical celebration of pre-colonial African culture is that it risks deprioritizing the need for revolutionary action against present-day racism, "reject[ing] the present and future in the name of a mystical past" (*BSWM* xviii). Fanon engages in critical dialogue with *négritude* in search of ways to distinguish the necessary revalorization of blackness in the lived experience of the racially colonized from reactionary forms of cultural nostalgia and ethnic essentialism that can function to re-imprison those seeking to liberate themselves from white supremacist ideology.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon negotiates a complex relation with *négritude* that considers its limitations as well as its contributions to the decolonization of black consciousness. Fanon pays particularly close attention to how *négritude's* cultural discourse often appears to revolve around a concept of blackness that continues to be defined in terms of its opposition to whiteness. In other words, the basis of the colonial Manichaean structure remains intact for the *négritudists* even while they proclaim a reversal of Europe's negation of Africa. Rather than attempting to fundamentally deconstruct the categories of "black" and "white" as they have been established in colonial discourse, *négritude* posits a celebration of the blackness that Europe had deemed inferior. Where Europe defines itself as rational, technologically advanced, and civilized, *négritude* asserts the advantage of the "irrational" creative energies of the black spirit, its deep connection to the natural world, and its intensity of emotion. From Fanon's

perspective, the uncritical négritudist seems to proclaim, “Yes, we niggers are backward, naive, and free. For us the body is not in opposition to what you call the soul. We are in the world. And long live the bond between Man and the Earth! Moreover, our writers have helped me to convince you that your white civilization lacks a wealth of subtleness and sensitivity” (*BSWM* 106). This position presents several theoretical problems that occupy Fanon throughout a significant part of his work. One crucial point that he raises early on in the text emphasizes that, under the conditions of colonial oppression, any effort to embrace a black identity must confront the fact that racist Europe is responsible for the creation of blackness: “what is called the black soul is a construction by white folk” (*BSWM* xviii). The empowered image of the black self offered by négritude leaves unchallenged the essential characteristics of black folk attributed to them by colonial ideology. In this way, the rehabilitation of African and Afro-Caribbean identity in the négritude movement risks re-establishing the notion of ontological difference that sustains the colonial system of racialization. The négritude poets may re-conceive blackness as a positive rather than negative category, but if they preserve a notion of black identity predefined in terms of a pure essence fundamentally distinct from the pure essence of other peoples, they will not have succeeded in moving toward a revolutionary humanism.

Fanon also considers the analysis of the movement made by Jean-Paul Sartre in his well-known 1948 essay “Orphée Noir” or “Black Orpheus,” which served as the introduction to the first major anthology of négritude poetry. It is partly through the critical stance that Fanon adopts with respect to Sartre that the former’s understanding of the potentially positive significance of négritude becomes perceptible. In his essay, Sartre

addresses himself to white readers and purports “to explain to them what black men already know” (16). However, Sartre clearly goes beyond the task of merely describing why “black poetry is, in our time, the only great revolutionary poetry” (16). His effort becomes one of transforming *négritude* into something more amenable to traditional Marxist thought; ultimately, he argues, the anti-racist struggle of blacks will be subsumed into the universal (i.e., European) revolution of the proletariat. It must be noted that Sartre does spend a large part of his essay usefully elucidating the differences and contrasts within *négritude*. While he initially asserts that the movement as a whole is “based first of all on the black soul,” or, in other words, “on a certain quality common to the thoughts and conduct of negroes” (19), later he qualifies this by identifying a distinction between “objective” and “subjective” modes of articulating blackness. The “objective” is associated with a poetics of “primitive rhythms” and “timeless instincts” that reunites modern blacks with ancestral traditions emanating from the “great period of mythical fecundity” (30). The “subjective” form of *négritude* mostly refers to the poetry of Césaire, whose words, according to Sartre, “do not describe *négritude*, do not designate it,” but instead “they *create* it” (35, original emphasis). Sartre recognizes that Césaire’s focus is directed less towards notions of a shared ontological essence of blackness and more towards a revolutionary opposition to “Europe and colonialism” (33). “What Césaire destroys,” according to Sartre, “is not all culture but rather *white* culture; what he brings to light is not desire for *everything* but rather the revolutionary aspirations of the oppressed negro” (33, original emphasis). Despite Sartre’s emphasis on Césaire’s highly inventive approach to *négritude* poetics and radical black politics, in the final part of his essay he turns away from the revolutionary potential of the movement and instead

argues for its inevitable obsolescence and self-destruction.

Sartre's arrogant and patronizing retheorization of *négritude* attempts to demonstrate that the cultural politics of a specifically black struggle against white oppression are nothing more than the "negative moment" in a dialectical progression toward the eventual emergence of a "raceless" working class revolution (49). Having been invited to contribute to the anthology as a "friend of the colored peoples" (Fanon, *BSWM* 112), Sartre takes the opportunity to condescendingly proclaim that *négritude* "is not sufficient in itself" and that it constitutes little more than "anti-racist racism" (49, 48). He appeals to Hegelian logic in order to sublimate the "concrete and particular" notion of blackness into the "universal and abstract" notion of class consciousness: "the subjective, existential, ethnic notion of *negritude* 'passes,' as Hegel says, into that which one has of the proletariat: objective, positive, and precise" (49, 48, original emphasis). Rather than lending his intellectual support to the movement by engaging in constructive critical dialogue, Sartre simply declares the end of *négritude* before it ever really has a chance to develop its own course: "Negritude is *for* destroying itself, it is a 'crossing to' and not an 'arrival at,' a means and not an end" (49, original emphasis). When Sartre redefines *négritude* as the preliminary stage in a larger and more significant struggle, he implicitly reasserts Europe's position as the embodiment of universal values, as a model to be emulated by the rest of the world. Commenting on Sartre's betrayal of the movement, Reiland Rabaka writes, "What Negritude lacked, from the Sartrean point of view, was precisely what blacks lacked: an openness to assimilation, which actually meant an openness to Europeanization parading under the guise of modernization" (77). Regardless of whatever good intentions he may have had, Sartre's essay reveals his bias toward a

Eurocentric notion of historical progress and his blindness to the latent racism within the narrow universals offered by Marxism.

Even though Fanon himself was thoroughly critical of many aspects of *négritude* poetics, his reaction to Sartre's essay in *Black Skin, White Masks* expresses anger and disappointment. While Fanon considered Sartre an intellectual ally in many respects, he strongly lamented the latter's failure to look beyond the horizon of Western modernity and to recognize the necessity for modes of racial decolonization that are not predetermined by a European master narrative of history. By proclaiming the end of *négritude*, by stating that it must necessarily be superseded by a universal (i.e., white working-class) struggle, Sartre recolonizes the black intellectuals whose effort it is to issue a challenge to white supremacism and to liberate their own consciousnesses. Just as Fanon had experienced himself as "fixed" by the gaze of whites in the colonial social order, he again finds himself in a similar position with Sartre: "What is certain is that at the very moment when I endeavored to grasp my being, Sartre, who remains 'the Other,' by naming me shattered my last illusion ... he reminded me that my *négritude* was nothing but a weak stage. Truthfully, I'm telling you, I sensed my shoulders slipping from this world, and my feet no longer felt the caress of the ground" (*BSWM* 116-17). The principal fault in Sartre's thinking on *négritude* is not merely that he finds the poets' rehabilitation of African identity insufficient on its own, as Fanon makes this same point in different ways in his own work. Rather, Sartre's defect is the paternalistic arrogance with which he predicts the final outcome of the movement, and his failure to see it as anything more than a prefiguration of a hegemonic telos with its basis in European norms. Fanon almost certainly would agree in principle with the idea that the

revalorization of blackness does not itself constitute a revolutionary reconceptualization of the human, but he nonetheless perceives the necessity for blacks themselves freely and collectively to reconstruct black consciousness, which had been deeply wounded through centuries of racial oppression. He argues that this process could not be theorized in terms of any predetermined logic of historical progress, for this would place inherent limits on what is intended to be a liberatory experience. Fanon harshly criticizes Sartre for his attempt to subsume *négritude* into a purely proletarian struggle. “For once,” Fanon writes,

this friend [i.e., Sartre], this born Hegelian, had forgotten that consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute, the only condition for attaining self-consciousness. To counter rationalism he recalled the negative side, but he forgot that this negativity draws its value from a virtually substantial absolutivity. Consciousness committed to experience knows nothing, has to know nothing, of the essence and determination of its being.

Whereas Sartre’s analysis effectively imposes a time limit on the efforts of black intellectuals to explore the possibilities of *négritude*, Fanon rejects the notion that the need for a reinvention of the racialized self could be reduced to a “moment” that precedes a more historically significant process. To experience liberation through black consciousness, one must be allowed to invent history anew, to leave behind the history of colonization and bring to life a new history. This is what it means to find oneself in the “night of the absolute.” In this space of nothingness, one is freed from all conceptual determinations and forced to reassemble the self from immediate phenomenological

experience. A new humanism is born at the moment consciousness forgets itself and “knows nothing.” Sartre’s vision of black consciousness as a stage preceding a Marxist revolutionary class consciousness imposes a determining structure of liberation which supersedes lived experience. According to Fanon, the decolonization of black subjectivity has its own intrinsic value that should not be subordinated to other forms of liberation: “black consciousness is immanent in itself. I am not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. There’s no room for probability inside me. My black consciousness does not claim to be a loss. It *is*. It merges with itself” (*BSWM* 114).

Fanon’s position regarding the necessity of an open-ended process through which colonized blacks explore and reimagine their own sense of being, their own lived experience, sets up further discussion of the role of pre-colonial history and traditions in building a decolonial future. Sartre’s narrative of dialectical progression is premised upon appropriating the past, present, and future of colonized peoples for the purpose of theorizing universal history. But Fanon reminded Sartre that his Marxist concept of the universal was thoroughly blind to the lived experience of colonial and racial oppression: “Without a black past, without a black future, it was impossible for me to live my blackness. Not yet white, no longer completely black, I was damned. Jean-Paul Sartre forgets that the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man” (*BSWM* 117). Fanon’s revolutionary humanism theorizes the conditions of possibility for decolonial futures presently unimagined by hegemonic discourses, and this involves cultivating a sense of the historicity of dominated peoples. What Fanon rejects in Sartre, i.e., the predetermined logic of narrow liberal universalism, is also related to that which

he rejects in the uses of history posited by some strains of *négritude*. When Fanon declares, “I am not a prisoner of History,” he is rejecting the idea that the pre-colonial African past should confine or determine the shape of black identity in the present or future, and he refuses “to look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction” (*BSWM* 204). Readings of history that purport to reveal the precise path that revolutionary blacks should take, or to predict the forms of subjectivity that are waiting for them in the future, merely serve to restrain the agency of the colonized. Fanon maintains that the development of historical consciousness does not simply constitute a shared essence or a unified socio-cultural identity, but rather serves as a means of empowering and liberating subjectivities, allowing different possibilities of identification according to the needs and desires of the present. He writes, “Sartre has shown that the past, along the lines of an inauthentic mode, catches on and ‘takes’ en masse, and, once solidly structured, then gives form to the individual. It is the past transmuted into a thing of value. But I can also revise my past, prize or condemn it, depending on what I choose” (*BSWM* 202). *Négritude*’s engagement with the past must remind blacks that their ancestors had their own modes of defining themselves before Europe’s cultural imposition, but it should not become focused on activating a reified version of blackness that supposedly lies dormant at the center of every black man and woman’s consciousness: “It is not the black world that governs my behavior. My black skin is not a repository for specific values” (*BSWM* 202). For Fanon, the pre-colonial past does not determine the future directions of the decolonial and anti-racist liberation struggle. The function of looking back is to “to rework the world’s past from the very beginning” since the new humanism must be dedicated to constructing a new history of the human (*BSWM* 201).

In his analysis of the function of historical consciousness, Fanon diverges in many significant ways from the “nativist” principles of cultural history articulated by some of the *négritude* poets, particularly Leopold Senghor. However, the profound influence on Fanon’s thought of one of the movement’s key figures, Aimé Césaire, cannot be overlooked. For some critics, Césaire’s conceptualization of *négritude*’s relationship to the pre-colonial African past does not differ much from what Sartre had identified as the “objective” mode of articulating blackness, i.e., one which urges the rediscovery of an immutable essence shared between modern blacks and their ancestors. Some, like J. Michael Dash, assert that Césairean poetics is driven by “a nostalgia for a prelapsarian, mythical past” and that it advocates “the negation of history and the return to a primordial time before time” (70, 63). In Césaire’s work, according to Dash, “the discourse of ethnogenesis manifests itself in an anxiety for origins, the need for foundational myths, and the lure of the ideal of an organicist fantasy, outside of the contradictions of history” (18). This reductive interpretation of Césaire’s poetic vision of the past fails to engage with the decolonial motivations that orient his creative efforts. In his 1955 essay, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (*Discourse on Colonialism*), Césaire explains and defends his views on the relationship between contemporary struggles against colonialism and the pre-colonial cultures of Africa and other colonized lands. He describes his mode of discursive resistance as an effort to make a “systematic defense of the non-European civilizations” (7). This does not mean merely positing an “appreciation” of the achievements of African and other civilizations (according to Western criteria) but rather involves taking account of the ways in which the “value of our old societies” lies in the challenge and resistance they pose toward Western conceptions of social reality and history (7).

Césaire draws on the history of “anticapitalist ... democratic ... cooperative ... fraternal societies” in an effort to illustrate the kinds of alternate conceptions of social reality that motivate revolutionary decolonial struggle in the present and future (7). At no point does Césaire advocate a naïve notion of a regression to pre-colonial purity, and he specifically addresses this misconception when he writes, “they pretend to have discovered in me an ‘enemy of Europe’ and a prophet of the return to the ante-European past. For my part, I search in vain for the place where I could have expressed such views, where I ever underestimated the importance of Europe in the history of human thought; where I ever preached a *return* of any kind; where I ever claimed there could be a *return*” (7, original emphasis). Césaire’s *négritude* is fundamentally about revolutionary change, about building a decolonial future. “For us,” he writes, “the problem is not to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past but to go beyond. It is not a dead society that we want to revive” (11). The notion of a return to the past is a misreading of Césaire’s project. It can be more accurately understood as a rediscovery of the revolutionary potential of the past with an aim to reshape the future: “It is a new society that we must create, with the help of all our brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with the fraternity of olden days” (11).

The poetic and political project that Césaire brought into being proposes a way out of a condition of social alienation in which colonized blacks find themselves both rejected by the white world—the only “real” one—and unwilling to be a part of the colonial black world which has been constructed for them. Resolving this split requires a reconnection with the world of African cultures that pre-exist the racist formulations of blackness that Europe has invented to dehumanize colonial subjects. Contrary to Dash’s

contention regarding the desire to reunite black folk with a pure, organic form of blackness, Césaire's work advocates breaking open restrictive notions of black consciousness and allowing the decolonial struggles against oppression to produce unimagined ways of being. Négritude does not imply a settling down of the sources of identity, but an intensification of the search, questioning, exploration, and examination of the heritage freed from the denigrating stereotypes and alienating Manichaeism of white civilization/black barbarism. In an interview in 1967, Césaire declares that négritude was a "violent affirmation" of African heritage, primarily intended as part of a struggle against alienation (29). But he also asserts that he has never perceived négritude as a programmatic or ideological model for the development of individual consciousness: "everyone has his own Negritude" (30). Furthermore, he reaffirms that the movement was not solely concerned with the life-worlds as they existed in the past: "We asserted that our Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values could still make an important contribution to the world" (30). Césaire's turning to the past is a mode of critical engagement with history as it is articulated in the contemporary disciplinary practices of narrativizing the accomplishments of humanity, but with an insurgent politics that is explicitly counter to racialization and colonization. As Benita Parry remarks, "[Césaire's] négritude is not a recovery of a pre-existent state, but a textually invented history, an identity effected through figurative operations, and a tropological construction of blackness as a sign of the colonized condition and its refusal" (230). The purpose of revivifying Africa's past cultures is not to romanticize and reify them, but to examine how they can inform and orient contemporary decolonial resistance, and to precipitate the re-writing of history

from a subaltern perspective. Rather than a nostalgic imagining of a single and ontologically complete black essence, Césaire, like Fanon, argues for a critical re-engagement with the lived historicity of a black past as a means of approaching a revolutionary shift in consciousness in the present and toward the future.

1.3 Theorizing the Decolonial Subject of Pluriversal Histories

Although it is never formulated definitively or systematically, Fanon's critical philosophy of history constitutes one of the cornerstones of his thought, and it has justifiably been examined in detail by many of his interpreters. Among the most prominent themes in discussions of this aspect of Fanon's work is the question concerning his supposed argument that true decolonization necessitates a conceptual break with the past. Making reference to this issue in an early article, first published in 1970, titled "Rescuing Fanon from the Critics," Tony Martin draws a connection between Fanon's theory of history and his relationship with Marxism. Martin argues that Fanon's future-oriented vision takes shape from within a Marxian understanding of historical development. He places particular emphasis on a passage from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* that serves as the epigraph for the concluding chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*:

The social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past. Earlier revolutions relied on memories out of world history in order to drug themselves against their own content. In order to find their own content, the revolutions of the nineteenth century have to let the dead bury the dead. (Marx qtd. in Fanon, *BSWM*)

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For Martin, Fanon's affinity to Marx is the key to understanding his philosophy of history, and this instance of direct citation confirms the centrality of the theoretical "leitmotif" of leaving the past behind to forge a revolutionary future (Martin 86). Martin perceives Marx's influence throughout Fanon's mode of historical analysis, particularly in the dialectical dimension of his approach, describing it as "a deterministic conception of history which nevertheless requires human involvement to realize the goals to which historical necessity is pointing" (86). Fanon's declaration that "Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill or betray it, in relative opacity" serves as evidence for Martin that the Fanonian theory of historical progress follows Marx closely in that the outcomes are "pre-ordained by history, but it is up to individual initiative to discover and fulfill history" (Fanon *WE* 145; Martin 86).

Martin acknowledges that the principle of breaking with the past appears to come into conflict with Fanon's cautious appreciation for the modes of re-engagement with African cultural traditions proposed by the *négritude* movement. But from Martin's perspective, Fanon's position is one that ultimately rejects the movement because "he perceives the adherents of *négritude* overreaching themselves and going to the other extreme of completely whitewashing the past, so that what emerges tends uncomfortably toward a blind mystification of the past and a 'banal exoticism'" (98). By laying emphasis on Fanon's philosophical grounding in Marxist modes of historical analysis, Martin attempts to resolve the "apparently contradictory position" that is ascribed to Fanon regarding the past's relevance to revolutionary struggle in the present (98). He asserts that even while Fanon recognized the rehabilitation of the past as a valuable aim,

his position subordinates the historical and cultural projects of *négritude* to the more urgent goal of “progress for the present generation [which] must be made in terms of contemporary realities (98-99). This reading of Fanon contains a number of misconceptions. First, it wrongly suggests that Fanon did not differentiate between the *négritudists*’ diverse approaches to African cultural history. Martin creates a false opposition between a naïve “*negroism*” embodied by the *négritude* movement as a whole and a more realistic position which acknowledges “the heterogeneity of black cultures” (99). Fanon himself, through his reading of Césaire, understood perfectly well that *négritude* suggests multiple ways of developing black consciousness, not all of which involve taking a monolithic or essentialist view toward African peoples. Second, Martin’s analysis does not perceive how Fanon conceptualized the interdependence of the projects of re-imagining the past and building a new future. Leaving the past behind, for Fanon, does not mean merely prioritizing the present and future over the past, but rather extricating oneself from the history of colonization and reconstructing the past as a crucial and necessary component of the ongoing struggle toward decolonization. Martin’s effort to bring coherence to the Fanonian theory of history by interpreting it through the lens of Marxism may provide significant insight into the depth of Marx’s influence on Fanon, but there are some equally important lapses in Martin’s analysis where he fails to do justice to Fanon’s insistence on moving beyond Marx, on leaving even him behind to bury the dead.

Martin concedes that Fanon was never merely a devoted Marxist acolyte who “adhered rigidly to every word that came down to us from Marx’s pen” (87). Instead, Martin writes, “[Fanon] accepted Marx’s basic analysis of society as given and proceeded

from there to elaborate on that analysis and modify it where necessary to suit his own historical and geographical context” (87). While Martin gives relatively little weight to the differences between the two thinkers, his reference to the need for contextual “modifications” of Marx serves as a reminder of Fanon’s acute awareness of the limitations and shortcomings of Marxian philosophy. The inadequacy of Marx’s thought for critical engagement with racism and colonization is a major concern throughout Fanon’s writings, but perhaps the clearest statement on this issue is found in the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* when he declares that “Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue. It is not just the concept of the precapitalist society, so effectively studied by Marx, which needs to be reexamined here” (5). The paradigm for understanding Fanon’s theory of history must not be limited by the pre-established boundaries of Marxist models, as Fanon demonstrates critical awareness of Marx’s Eurocentric blindness to the historical intersections between capitalism and racial colonization. Fanon consistently underlines the need for the damned of the earth to develop their own forms of historical consciousness through critical theory and revolutionary practice specific to the lived experience of racial oppression. With this differentiation in mind, Fanon’s often-cited pronouncement, “I am not a prisoner of History” (*BSWM* 204), needs to be followed up with questions such as, *Which History? Whose History?*

In *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, Lewis Gordon’s examination of Fanon’s philosophy from an existential-phenomenological standpoint considers how the weight of history on individual and social consciousness is reconceived within Fanon’s theorization of a new humanism, opening possibilities for engaging with the question of

pluriversal histories. The problem that concerns existential philosophers, explains Gordon, has to do with forms of individual and institutional bad faith that discourage recognition of the human role in creating the historical conditions of consciousness. Bad faith of this kind obscures perception of the social processes that lead to the formation of human values, identities, and ways of being. As Gordon puts it, “humanity becomes an effect of history instead of its maker” (25). In the context of racial colonization, bad faith is what allows the racist to deny his or her role in constituting the negative value that is ascribed to racialized subjects. By the same token, the socio-historical forces which contribute to the production of the Manichaean structures of coloniality are ignored or misrepresented in order to remove all human responsibility. In Gordon’s words, “the ‘nature’ of antiblack racism is to see the world according to the expectations of a racist ontology” (24). The “truth” about the negativity of blackness, as it appears in a white supremacist world, exists independently of human involvement, i.e., as a naturally inherent value, and thus it can be accepted without skepticism. Fanon made the rejection of this ontological explanation one of the central premises of his critical theory, calling on blacks and whites “to have the courage to say: It is the racist who creates the inferiorized” (*BSWM* 73). Fanon conceptualizes decolonization in terms of a new humanism that requires individuals to take action to counter these forms of bad faith in order to realize their own capacity to create new modes of consciousness, new authentic ways of being human. Gordon’s analysis explores how this decolonial outlook necessitates rethinking historical consciousness in order to properly account for the emergence of the authentic black self.

From the colonial perspective, the historical being of blacks is precluded by the

racist conception of being human; the usual forms of self-consciousness and recognition that constitute the human's historical subjectivity are not applicable to the black experience. Gordon examines how this aspect of the colonial condition is challenged by Fanon's retheorization of the process of *becoming historical*. Considering that "blackness" as a category of identity has been invented by the colonizer and, from Fanon's perspective, has no ontological value, Gordon takes up the question of whether through decolonial struggle blacks can achieve historical self-consciousness *as blacks*. In the Hegelian sense, History (with a capital *H*) is defined as the domain of *Geist*, where the "globally dominant culture is located" (Gordon 28). Gordon points out that for Hegel, *Geist* signifies the embodiment of universal subjectivity through historical self-awareness: "In history, its [i.e., *Geist's*] act is to gain consciousness of itself as Geist, to apprehend itself in its interpretation of itself to itself" (Hegel qtd. in Gordon 28). Hegel's exclusion of Africa from History is based on a racist preconception of black Africans as lacking the capacity to recognize themselves consciously and independently as Historical subjects, as humans with the ability to shape freely their own way of being. With the Hegelian criteria for historical consciousness in mind, Gordon poses the question, "Does this preclude black self-consciousness outside of the framework of a white conception of blackness?" (28). In other words, does the historical burden of racist definitions persist and negate the possibility of a truly autonomous and unmediated development of black consciousness in the present?

Of course, Gordon answers this rhetorical question with a definitive "No", but by raising the issue, he draws attention to the need for a critical re-evaluation of the criteria of historical consciousness from a decolonial perspective. When faced with the reality of

widespread black consciousness movements and liberatory struggles for decolonization, Gordon writes, those who deny blacks' Historical being on Hegelian grounds "would have to show that although blacks may make themselves objects of their own consciousness, and hence become self-conscious, this does not constitute, in their case, their embodying *Geist*" (29). As an antidote to such fallacious reasoning, Gordon identifies at least two general ways in which blacks would be able to overcome the dead weight of pre-established derogatory conceptions of blackness. In one instance, they would "become Historical through recognition of their own History, in which case there would be at least two Histories," and in the other, "they would be Historical through recognizing themselves in a way that is equivalent to the History that has already emerged. The former affirms blackness; the latter marks its elimination" (29). Fanon's work addresses both modes of becoming Historical—affirmation and elimination of blackness—and it is apparent that he considers them to be neither mutually exclusive nor counteractive. The specific conditions of an individual's lived experience of racial oppression, and the local requirements of the decolonial struggle will determine whether one proceeds toward historical consciousness through affirmation or elimination of blackness. Both processes are means to the same future goal, which is not simply a world without "blackness", as some interpreters of Fanon suggest, but rather a world in which humans are free to determine their own modes of historical being without the restrictions and limitations created by racist ideologies.

Gordon introduces the phenomenological concept of "microcosmic history" as an intervention which helps to illustrate the colonized individual's relationship to the History of oppression, and how one registers his or her own capacity to become

Historical outside of this framework. As he explains, this conception of history is “rooted in daily life” and focuses on unique subjects in their confrontations with history as “*his* or *her* story” (29). It is the unwritten account of each human being’s personal struggle with bad faith, that is, his or her decision about “how to stand in relation to oppression, of whether to live as a being subsumed by oppression or to live as active resistance towards liberation, or to live as mere indifference” (29). Becoming historical, from this perspective, has nothing to do with the embodiment of *Geist* or any form of transcendent subjectivity, but rather involves “the recognition of how one’s actions unfold into one’s identity in relation to the socio-temporal location of one’s experience” (29). The lived history of the individual racialized black subject can thus be conceived as the border that separates History from its exterior, or perhaps as the line that divides multiple histories, while at the same time forming a potential starting point for a new historical trajectory. Historical being, as Gordon would have it, depends on the individual’s ability both to perceive the relationship between his or her own lived experience and the dominant conception of macrocosmic History, and to acknowledge one’s own responsibility to take liberatory action from within the conditions of that relationship. To illustrate his point, Gordon offers the example of Frederick Douglass. He explains how Douglass’s act of physical resistance against the brutal slaveholder Covey unfolds in relation to his position within the Historical situation of slavery in the U.S.: “He [Douglass] simply knew the world that mattered to him in specific ways that limited his options but not his choices. His options were factual, mediated, and ‘objective’ (Historical), but his choices were transcendent, immediate, and ‘situated’ (historical)” (31). The History of oppression and domination conditioned the options available to Douglass, but this did not preclude his

own awareness of his human capacity for action that would reshape his way of being.

Gordon's analysis of the lived experience of oppression and the individual's decision to become actional outside the framework of racist conceptions of historical being illuminates many complex aspects of Fanon's existential-phenomenological critique of history. However, the emphasis Gordon places on individual action perhaps does not grant enough attention to Fanon's deep preoccupation with mass movements of revolutionary consciousness. Fanon insists that accomplishing the historical transformation of the human through decolonial theory and praxis requires the collective action of entire communities, societies, and nations in order to have global effects. Gordon's existential definition of the individual subject as "freedom in the flesh" does not provide a particularly useful standpoint for thinking about the forms of collective liberation that are a primary concern in Fanon's later works (19). It is certainly true that much of Fanon's project is concerned with compelling individual men and women to cease denying their own roles in history. Yet he was also intensely aware of the need for collective praxis that can actually produce lasting socio-historical transformations and allow new forms of historical consciousness to develop over time. Standing alone against powerful forces of oppression can be an alienating experience, and for this reason, Fanon continually stresses that true decolonization marks the end of individualism: "Personal interests are now the collective interest because in reality everyone will be discovered by the French legionnaires and consequently massacred or else everyone will be saved. In such a context, the 'every man for himself' concept, the atheist's form of salvation, is prohibited" (*WE* 11-12). Where Gordon uses the example of Frederick Douglass to support his point that "It is bad faith to deny one's role in history" (31), it should be

added that, in Fanon's view, an individual's refusal to hide from her or his responsibility can be ineffectual or result in deeper alienation if it is not nurtured with the discovery of a spirit of collective struggle and with common efforts to realize new forms of social and historical consciousness.

For Fanon, the figure who best exemplifies the problem of isolation and ineffectual resistance is the colonized intellectual. The educated individual who experiences dehumanization and social alienation within European and colonial societies because of his or her skin color, yet who has been socialized to accept Western cultural values and norms, occupies a central place in Fanon's decolonial theory. In terms of his critique of history, Fanon argues that colonized intellectuals face particular challenges when it comes to fulfilling their potential as active participants in the development of new modes of historical consciousness. He warns of the many possible pitfalls and dead ends that threaten the intellectual on his or her path toward becoming actional within the context of decolonial struggles and the birth of national independence movements. Of special concern to Fanon is the colonized intellectual's relationship to the pre-colonial past and to the cultural traditions that have been upheld mostly by rural peasants. History becomes perhaps the most significant gateway for the colonized intelligentsia as they attempt to reconnect with the national culture and incorporate themselves into the popular resistance. As Fanon observes, "The recognition of a national culture and its right to exist is their favorite stamping ground" and they invest a great deal of their passion and energy in "debunking ... the colonialist theory of a precolonial barbarism" (*WE* 147). While acknowledging that a revalorization of indigenous culture does nothing to change the situation of the poor and destitute populations in colonized countries, Fanon stresses that

it “triggers a change of fundamental importance in the colonized’s psycho-affective equilibrium” (*WE* 148). The colonized intellectual, deeply alienated by having imbibed strictly Western conceptions of history in which the past of African and other non-European societies is distorted and denigrated, suddenly discovers that it is possible to re-establish a bond with his or her own people through a shared cultural history.

This intense search for an historical framework in which the intellectual can culturally integrate himself or herself with the masses leads to several significant theoretical obstacles. Fanon argues that the colonized African intellectual needs to overcome the effects of colonialism’s racist construction of blackness in order to make a real contribution to the formation of a new historical consciousness. Since European colonial racism was constructed on the basis of “placing white culture in opposition to the other noncultures” (*WE* 150), Fanon perceives that the initial reaction of dissident African intellectuals is to respond with a rehabilitation of blackness that follows the same logic. In other words, Europe’s denigration of Africa as a continent produces the need for African intellectuals to affirm a shared continental history and culture. This consequence is embodied most thoroughly by the *négritude* movement. I have already discussed several of the theoretical issues that emerge out of Fanon’s engagement with *négritude*, but it worth contextualizing his position in relation to the question of national culture. He writes that the “historical obligation to racialize their claims, to emphasize an African culture rather than a national culture leads the African intellectuals into a dead end” (*WE* 152). The “limitation” that *négritude* comes up against is its inability to integrate “those phenomena that take into account the historicizing of men. ‘Negro’ or ‘Negro-African’ culture broke up because the men who set out to embody it realized that every culture is

first and foremost national” (WE 154).

Fanon’s emphasis on national culture is one of the keys to understanding his critique of history and the centrality of collectivity in his re-conceptualization of historical consciousness. The use of the term “nation” in Fanon’s writing does not refer simply to the geopolitical entity that is constructed by nationalist elites and former colonizers in the epoch after an agreement is reached to grant independence to a given territory. Fanon dedicates a significant portion of *The Wretched of the Earth* to differentiating between two distinct ideas of the nation: the first is merely an instrument of neocolonialism that allows the segments of the indigenous bourgeoisie to serve as the subordinate agents of First World powers in a new global economy of exploitation; the second sense of the word refers to a shared history, a collective identity and experience, an awareness of mutual attachment among people whose fate is either to struggle together or be destroyed together. This second definition of the nation in many ways embodies the essence of Fanon’s theory of history, since this version of the nation only exists where individuals are living with a coherent and active consciousness of their responsibility for their own collective being. In the context of decolonization, the nation is formed everywhere through local struggles and spontaneous popular uprisings against foreign occupiers and oppressors. The existence of the nation becomes unmistakable when armed insurrections emerge in the hinterlands: “The rash of revolts which break out in the interior testify to the nation’s substantial presence in every quarter. Every colonized subject in arms represents a piece of the nation on the move” (WE 82). The sense of the nation within decolonization is forged above all else in the struggle against a common oppressor. As Fanon writes, “They are governed by a simple doctrine: The nation must be

made to exist. There is no program, no discourse, there are no resolutions, no factions. The problem is clear-cut: The foreigners must leave. Let us build a common front against the oppressor and let us reinforce it with armed struggle” (*WE* 83). Fanon also makes specific claims about the nation in the period following the struggle against the colonizers, but they follow the same basic principles:

Since individual experience is national, since it is a link in the national chain, it ceases to be individual, narrow and limited in scope, and can lead to the truth of the nation and the world. Just as every fighter clung to the nation during the period of armed struggle, so during the period of nation building every citizen must continue in his daily purpose to embrace the nation as a whole, to embody the constantly dialectical truth of the nation, and to will here and now the triumph of man in his totality. (*WE* 141).

The threat at this stage of the nation’s development no longer comes directly from the colonizer, but rather from bourgeois nationalist elites whose political shortsightedness allows them to envision little more than shallow mimicry of European norms. The consciousness of national belonging that is conceived collectively by colonized subjects through the period of struggle is fundamentally distinct from the apparatus of nationalism constructed by bourgeois elites in the period of independence. While the former fosters solidarity and a sense that liberty must be shared, the latter can easily breed chauvinism and tribalism. For the nation to continue to embody the collective historical being of the people, Fanon writes, nationalism must “very quickly turn into a social and political consciousness, into humanism” (*WE* 144).

Returning to the figure of the colonized intellectual and his or her relation to the

collective being of masses as the “living expression of the nation” (*WE* 144), we can now begin to perceive how Fanon’s decolonial theory illustrates a need for the role of the pre-colonial past to be reformulated within a new conception of historical consciousness. The challenge the intellectual must face is to avoid reifying the past in his or her efforts to achieve a cultural reunification with the people. Fanon identifies a harmful tendency in which the intellectual, seeking out national culture, clings to an “inventory of particularisms” without realizing that this “visible veneer” is merely “a reflection of a dense, subterranean life in perpetual renewal” (*WE* 160). Such attachment to the outward expressions of culture poses the risk of a disconnection from the inner processes, the “many, and not always coherent, adaptations of a more fundamental substance beset with radical changes” (*WE* 160). From this perspective, traditional knowledge rooted in the people’s past must be understood as intertwined with the present moment. Sacrificing attention to the present reality of the nation for a vision of cultural history isolated in its pristine state puts the intellectual “out of step” with the collective historical consciousness of the people (*WE* 161). In order for the colonized intellectual not to remain trapped by a fetishized version of history, he or she must embrace national consciousness, the local histories of people’s collective struggles and accept them as his or her own. Cultural traditions must be perceived not merely as a window into the glorious time before colonization, but rather as a vital and dynamic archive of knowledge gathered in the process of collective struggles. This approach allows one to appreciate how new and ever-changing meanings are attributed to traditional practices. Within the context of a liberation movement, Fanon insists, “tradition changes meaning” (*WE* 160).

The fundamentally unstable nature of constantly shifting cultural traditions does

not mean that they provide no sense of continuity with the past. It is apparent that Fanon sees culture as a powerful source of resistance to Westernization throughout the period of colonial domination. He explains that the systematic efforts by the colonizers to eliminate indigenous cultural practices force them to become clandestine, but this does not imply that they fall out of touch with the collective consciousness of the people. Since cultural practices themselves become targets of the oppressor and weapons for the people in their struggle, the vitality of the nation is preserved precisely through the continuation of its traditions through generations of colonial domination: “The persistence of cultural expression condemned by colonial society is already a demonstration of nationhood” (*WE* 172). For as long as colonization continues, the people will face the possibility of cultural dislocation, stagnation, and ossification. But as the level of domination increases, so too does the people’s drive toward collective organization and violent struggle for self-liberation, which Fanon views as synonymous with the deepening and renewal of national culture: “One cannot divorce the combat for culture from the people’s struggle for liberation” (*WE* 168).

1.4 Concluding Remarks

I have undertaken to examine Fanonian decolonial theory with the intention of illustrating the challenges it poses to dominant conceptions of history that efface the radically divergent modes of historical consciousness which have been realized by people involved in decolonial struggles. The argument for the necessity of a perspective that looks beyond the colonial horizons of historical being is a fundamental component of Fanon’s critical philosophy of history. His concern is not merely to address the colonial distortions of non-Western cultures and their pasts, but to demonstrate that histories of

resistance and their corresponding subjectivities are shaped outside the limits of hegemonic Western concepts of historical being. Whereas the European colonizer is confident in the belief that his or her actions constitute singular and definitive historical reality, the colonized subject resisting domination never loses sight of the existence of an *other* history, an *other* way of being. “The colonist makes history,” writes Fanon,

His life is an epic, an odyssey. He is invested with the very beginning: ‘We made this land.’ He is the guarantor for its existence: ‘If we leave, all will be lost, and this land will return to the Dark Ages.’ Opposite him, listless beings wasted away by fevers and consumed by ‘ancestral customs’ compose a virtually petrified background to the innovative dynamism of colonial mercantilism. (*WE* 14-15)

The colonial conception of historical being depends fundamentally on the erasure of the possibility of alternate perspectives. The illusion of universality and progress conceals the narrowness of the colonizer’s vision and allows him to consolidate his faith in the permanence and totalization of the West’s historical vantage point. Fanon’s theorization of the colonized subject holds that lived experience of oppression and struggle produces an intrinsic awareness of the self-deceit of the colonial perspective. This knowledge of the limitations inherent in the colonial mode of historical being allows the colonized subject to apprehend the contingency of his or her situation. The paralysis induced by colonization, Fanon argues, is merely a condition of the dominant historical reality and vanishes as a direct consequence of the actualization of the collective desire to live an *other* history: “The immobility to which the colonized subject is condemned can be challenged only if he decides to put an end to the history of colonization and the history

of despoliation in order to bring to life the history of the nation, the history of decolonization” (WE 15).

The modes of historical being that Fanon perceives as emerging from the context of decolonial struggles are fundamentally distinct from the West’s dominant conception of historical subjectivity. The importance of theorizing these differences is a crucial task since national independence does not mean an end to the imposition of colonial norms and ideologies. The bourgeois nationalist elites of formerly colonized nations easily appreciate that their hold on power is threatened by a process of decolonization that continues into the era of national independence. For this reason, the West’s modern/colonial concept of universal History remains deeply embedded throughout much of the world. Fanon counters this vision of a singular History by illustrating the decisive difference that comes from maintaining a space for *pluriversal* histories, whose perspectives do not always cohere but whose subjects collectively resolve to conceive of critical forms of historical co-existence. One of the greatest shortcomings of the nationalist politics in newly independent nation states, Fanon writes, is the failure to construct a place for plurality within the history of nation: “Instead of integrating the history of the village and conflicts between tribes and clans into the people’s struggle, the history of the future nation has a singular disregard for minor local histories and tramples on the only thing relevant to the nation’s actuality” (WE 68). The history of decolonization needs to be comprised of multiple local and minor histories that do not lose their distinctness when conceived as part of a national or universal human history. The transition from national consciousness to international consciousness depends upon the development of a pluriversal historical perspective that recognizes the multiplicity of

divergent ways of being human collectively comprised by the nation.

The question of how diverse modes of historical being can co-exist within a shared framework of non-Eurocentric modernity – or what Enrique Dussel calls “transmodernity”¹⁴ – is one that I attempt to address in the next chapter, where I discuss the model of universal history that developed out of Marxism and the challenge posed to it by Dipesh Chakrabarty’s project to “provincialize” Europe. Karl Marx’s philosophy posited that capitalist modernity was defined by an internal instability and fundamental contingency that made its dominance inherently limited and contestable. This aspect of Marx’s thought helps to explain why Marxism’s influence on anti-colonial nationalist movements has been so profound, but one of the major shortcomings of Marxist models of historical subjectivity has always been its inability to provide a convincing account of forms of insurgent historical consciousness that do not correspond to the precepts of Eurocentric reason and class identity. Chakrabarty’s reading of Marx tries to uncover elements of his thought that might contribute to a decolonized concept of history that does not place European epistemological norms at its center and therefore opens itself up to the inclusion of diverse modes historical being and knowing. I find Chakrabarty’s project of “Provincializing” Europe and the larger paradigm of historical epistemology embodied by the Subaltern Studies collective more generally to be a useful corrective to critiques of modernity based on Marxian socio-historical analysis.

¹⁴ Dussel’s concept of transmodernity offers a vision of a new social order that moves beyond the limits defined by Eurocentric thinking and incorporates a critique of the violent irrational myth of modernity. It is widely discussed in his own works as well as in those of his commentators. See for example Dussel’s “Eurocentrism and Modernity” as well as his more recent work “Transmodernity and Interculturality.” Also see Linda Martín Alcoff’s article “Enrique Dussel’s Transmodernism.”

2. Locating Historical Difference: Marx, Chakrabarty, and the Contradictions of Universal History

2.1 Disputing Historical Necessity

My discussion in the last chapter ended with some reflections on Fanon's call for a new paradigm of history capable of rejecting the colonial impulse toward totalization. Fanon conceptualizes a decolonial ideal of pluriversal histories by contending that the collective struggle against oppression need not result merely in the realization of a mode of national consciousness which corresponds to the Western liberal humanist model of universal subjectivity. Bringing to life the history of decolonization, as Fanon suggests, must involve moving beyond the epistemic boundaries established by Western colonial rationality. A pluriversal perspective such as the one that emerges out of Fanon's critical philosophy of history opposes abstract universals which seek both to efface local differences and to subsume colonized subjects as Eurocentric modernity's internal difference, i.e., as coloniality. Pluriversality is not a project that rejects the contributions of Western modernity, but one that opposes the exclusion of diverse epistemologies and subjectivities rooted in traditions exterior to the West. My analysis of Fanon's theorization of history attempted to illustrate how he conceives decolonization as a struggle to break out of a Eurocentric model of historical being and to move towards a new model of subjectivity founded on the collective experiences of lives lived at the borders of Western modernity. The conception of a new mode of historical consciousness capable of transcending the boundaries of the current hegemonic regime stands as one of Fanon's most obvious theoretical continuities with Marx. But in order to answer the question of how a revolutionary rupture with the history of domination can also detach

itself from the epistemic hegemony of Eurocentric imperialist reason it is necessary to “stretch” Marx’s thought beyond its inherent limitations. In this chapter, I trace Marx’s universal categories of history through their elaboration in some of his major texts, and I examine how Dipesh Chakrabarty’s critical appropriation of these categories helps to illustrate the need for a new decolonial account of European modernity’s relationship to its exteriority.

One of the most consistent and central themes in Marx’s early and later works is that of the fundamental historical contingency of the governing logic of capital, and certainly this aspect of his thought has been a continuous source of discussion and debate among his critics and followers right up to the present day. For Marx, the rational organizing framework of capitalist society is *merely* hegemonic. That is, the capitalist conception of reality, along with its ability to make itself appear to make sense, is simply the current state of affairs; it is intrinsically bound to the present moment in time. As he writes (with Engels) in *The German Ideology*, the “ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (*Marx-Engels Reader* 172). Marx argues that one of the principle effects of capitalism is a mystification of the fact that, just as other regimes of sense have risen and fallen in the past, it (i.e., capitalism) is itself subject to a radical historical contingency and, far from representing the conclusive fulfillment of humanity’s potential (as bourgeois economists often claim), it too will eventually give way to something else. My effort in the first half of this chapter is to investigate two interrelated problems which surround Marx’s thesis concerning the dependent and transitory condition of capitalism, both having to do with temporality and history. The first problem is epistemological and is related to the historian’s ability to know and describe the past from her position in the

present. Marx's philosophy of history argues that one should be able to perceive how capitalist ideology is inherently bound to a particular stage of social development by examining it relative to previous historical stages. Yet he also makes it apparent that the conditions for knowledge of the historical past are themselves determined by the current state of affairs, so the question remains as to whether (and how) the historian can avoid retrospectively projecting his own epistemological categories onto the past as an historical object. The second problem I deal with here has to do with the underlying concept of historical development that is presupposed in Marx's argument regarding capital's contingency, i.e., his theory of historical materialism. The fact that Marx bases his critique of capital on a progressive-evolutionist model of history has been the source of perennial debates among Marxists and scholars of Marx's thought. My exploration of the relations between these two problems attempts to pose critical questions to Marx's theory of the universal structure of historical knowledge, time, and progress.

One set of concerns that motivates my exploration is that which emerges from the tensions in the relationship between Marx's theory of historical development and decolonial critiques of modern Eurocentric epistemology. Even as Marx undertakes a radical theoretical undoing of the bourgeois ideology of capitalist modernity, he does so from a locus of enunciation which is undoubtedly Eurocentered. The importance of Marx to non-Western philosophers and critics who theorize and enact resistance to capitalist imperialism cannot be overstated, but there is nonetheless a problematic disjuncture between the foundational significance of his thought and his failure to consider the struggle against global capitalism from the perspective of the colonized. As Walter D. Mignolo has remarked, "Marx's unquestionable contribution to the analysis of the

functioning of capitalist economy should not be confused with Marx's sightlessness when it came to the location of 'the other' ... and the exteriority of the system" (177). For Mignolo and many other decolonial thinkers, Marx's blind spots become especially acute in his conceptualization of historical materialism and the notion of a single line of progression from "pre-capitalism" to capitalism. It is with these issues in mind that, in the second half of the chapter, I take up some of Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on subaltern historiography in India and his arguments as to whether it is possible to reconcile Marx's universalist categories with the theories of difference and plurality that have become so vital to conceptualizing decolonial critiques of the hegemonic globalization of capital. Chakrabarty argues that the Subaltern Studies project must "situate itself theoretically at the juncture where we give up neither Marx nor 'difference'" ("Marx after Marxism" 1096), and I examine how his reading of *Capital* (among other texts) emphasizes the plural and heterogeneous histories of capitalism's confrontations with its exteriority rather than the universal linear narrative of social transformation. Finally, I end the chapter by considering how Mignolo's theorization of the "colonial epistemic difference" (6) suggests possibilities for moving beyond history as a disciplinary framework of knowledge dependent on Eurocentric rationality.

2.2 Problems of Historicism in Marxian Philosophy

Analysis of Marx's conception of the progressive movement of historical time often begins with discussions about the famously programmatic outline of historical materialism found in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), for it is in this text that Marx provides some of his most straightforward declarations regarding the stages of history and how they occur in a single line of

succession in accordance with technical and scientific development in the material forces of production and the social revolutions that necessarily result from these changes. As part of his schema, Marx invokes particular categories that provide the means for reading history from a scientific (i.e., dialectical materialist) perspective. He explains that the “productive forces” of a society (i.e. the materials, technical abilities, and machines “productively” employed in the labour process), give rise to the “relations of production” (i.e., the organization of society as it related to labour and production considered as a totality), and that the two categories taken together as a whole constitute the “economic structure of society,” i.e., the “real foundation,” or what is sometimes referred to as “the base” (*Marx-Engels Reader* 4). The counterpart to the base is the “superstructure,” which consists of legal and political systems as well as “definite forms of social consciousness” (*Marx-Engels Reader* 4). For Marx, an historical epoch is defined by the correspondence between the material productive forces and the relations of production. Changes that occur at the superstructural level can influence the economic base, but the development of the material productive forces appears to be the ultimate determining factor in the transition from one epoch to another. The key moment of revolution occurs when the forces of production and the relations of production, the two components of the base, fall out of sync with one another. Marx writes,

At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters.

Then begins an epoch of social revolution. (*Marx-Engels Reader* 4-5)

Through successive social revolutions, history proceeds through four definitive stages that can be identified by the mode of production that constitutes the economic structure of the society at a given moment in time. These are, in order, “Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois” (*Marx-Engels Reader* 5)¹⁵. This is the basic schematic of historical materialism that Marx provides in this text which is the source of a great deal of debate and internal divisions within Marxism.

It is important to take note of the way in which, even in what is intended to be a diagrammatic description, Marx nonetheless introduces some of the most fundamental epistemological dilemmas that emerge from his scheme. Consider the following passage:

With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. *Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the*

¹⁵ Elsewhere in his work (e.g. Ch. 26 of *Capital*, Vol. 1), Marx expresses the same structure of the successive diachronic modes of production with the terms primitive, slave-owning, feudal, and capitalist. Furthermore, it is important to note that he also includes a fifth mode of production, socialism, which follows the proletarian revolution and completes the historical teleology.

contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production. (*Marx-Engels Reader 5*, emphasis added)

Marx raises the question of how it is possible to possess objective knowledge of a given historical epoch while one is actually enveloped within the ideological constraints of that epoch (or, for that matter, of a different epoch). He points to the necessity of drawing a distinction between the historical changes to superstructural elements of a society, which are by nature ephemeral, and those transformations occurring at the level of the material forces of production, which exist in concrete reality and can therefore be known with the objective exactitude of “natural science.”

There are at least two problems that can be identified at this point. The first is how a historian can actually know whether she is examining the material forces of production in isolation from ideological epiphenomena, i.e., whether she is practicing real science or merely projecting her own ideological consciousness onto her object of study. The second is related to the fact that the conditions for scientific knowledge are themselves dependent on the historical stage of development that a society finds itself in at a given moment. In other words, it appears that the conditions of possibility for attaining a form of knowledge that is valid beyond its own historical horizon arise only at a certain stage of historical development. In the Preface, Marx puts it this way: “mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions of its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation” (*Marx-Engels Reader 5*). Broadly speaking, both of these problems can be grouped together as

problems of historicism, and the tensions that emerge from them continue to reverberate throughout Marx's work, particularly in *Capital*, and as we shall soon see, they have particular importance for Chakrabarty's project of decolonizing Indian historiography.

The problem of Marx's historicism is taken up by Louis Althusser in a key chapter of *Reading Capital* entitled "Marxism is not a Historicism." Althusser's main concern in this section of the text is to refute, or at least problematize Antonio Gramsci's (mis)reading of Marx, which "sees in Marxism a historicism, and the most radical historicism, an '*absolute historicism*'" (119; original emphasis). The principle arguments that Althusser musters with regard to Gramsci are outside the scope of the present discussion, but an overview of some of his points will help to clarify what is at stake. In the well-known discussion of commodity fetishism from the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx writes, "Reflection on the forms of human life, hence also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to their real development. Reflection begins *post festum* [after the feast], and therefore with the results of the process of development ready to hand" (*Capital* 168). The presupposition of a single evolutionary line of historical development means that the historian who examines the past is always in a position of knowing what was *bound* to happen. The past appears only as part of the necessary evolutionary process leading up to the present moment; in other words, history is *given* to the present. The outcome of history is always "ready to hand," i.e., it is a constituent component of the historian's lived experience and is therefore given in her consciousness. Thus, all knowledge of the historical past is conditioned by the form of consciousness corresponding to the historical stage of development in which the historian is situated. As Althusser puts it, "every science of a historical object (and political

economy in particular) applies to a given, present historical object, an object that has evolved as a result of past history. Hence every operation of knowledge, starting from the present and applied to an evolved object is merely the projection of the present onto the past of that object” (122). The unavoidable necessity of retrospection that stems from the historian’s position in the present seems to suggest that objective scientific knowledge of the past is elusive, but Marx overcomes this problem by positing the possibility of a form of consciousness that is self-identical with science and is therefore able to perceive the empirical reality of past. However, this possibility is not open to all subjects at all times; it is fundamentally determined by the present historical epoch (i.e., modern bourgeois society). The idea that a “task ... arises only when the material conditions of its solution already exist” finds new expression in Marx’s discussion of the “scientific discovery” of the commodity form of value, or the value theory of labour. The abstract knowledge of how commodities contain reified quantities of living labour is, for Marx, an objective and universal scientific truth valid for all historical epochs, but it cannot be discovered until the commodity form becomes generalized in a society:

The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion. This however becomes possible only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labour, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities. (*Capital* 152)

If earlier social historians and theorists of economy were unable to *perceive* the truth

regarding the source of value, it is largely because their own empirical experience did not *present* this truth to them; they could only reflect their own experience of reality in their knowledge. Althusser explains that, for Marx, the condition for moving beyond this solipsistic retrospection is the self-criticism of the present, a condition which exists only within the specific circumstances of bourgeois modernity. Adam Smith and David Ricardo were able to conceive their versions of the labour theory of value only because the conditions for self-critique were already given in the form of consciousness corresponding to relations of production of their society: “what distinguished their living and lived present from all the other *presents* (of the past) was that, for the first time, this present produced in itself *its own critique of itself*, and that it therefore possessed the historical privilege of producing the science of itself precisely in the form of a self-consciousness”(Althusser 123; original emphasis). Althusser’s thesis that Marxism is not a historicism concerns itself with illustrating that Marx’s intervention into the work of classical economists constituted an epistemological break rather than a Hegelian dialectical progression or evolution. From Althusser’s point of view, Marxist analysis actually achieved more than to simply reflect the new ideological conditions of the present historical epoch. The revolution embodied by Marx’s work is that it succeeded in becoming scientific knowledge.

The most pressing question that follows from this idea is whether one can indeed distinguish between objective scientific knowledge and subjective experience under the ideological conditions of bourgeois society. Interpreting Marx’s answer to this question is one of the main philosophical preoccupations in debates on Marxist historicism. On the one hand, Marx argues that the phenomenon of commodity fetishism (i.e., the

representation, or replacement, of social relations by “autonomous” relations between commodities) retains its mystificatory power over bourgeois consciousness even after the discovery of the labour theory of value: “The degree to which some economists are misled by the fetishism attached to the world of commodities, or by the objective appearance of the social characteristics of labour, is shown, among other things, by the dull and tedious dispute over the part played by nature in the formation of exchange-value” (*Capital* 176). Here, Marx calls attention to the forms of analysis practiced in political economy which fail to break from the dominant epistemological models of modern bourgeois Europe. Even when economists inhabit a historical epoch in which the function of labor in producing value is wholly apparent, they may not be able to formulate the problematic of value from a scientific perspective. For this reason, they remain trapped by ideologically determined concepts which lead them, for example, to locate the ultimate source of exchange-value in the raw natural materials that are used to produce commodities. On the other hand, it is also apparent that Marx perceives a direct link between the attainment of objective truth and the form of social consciousness that takes shape in a bourgeois economy. He writes that the “scientific conviction” that commodities derive their values merely as a result of being the concrete manifestations of human labour will emerge “*from experience itself*” in a society dominated by commodity exchange (*Capital* 168; emphasis added). Althusser makes this paradox a central component of his attack on Gramsci’s conception of Marxism as “absolute historicism.” He defends Marx against the claim that his discoveries rely on a teleological Hegelian framework based on the dialectical development of absolute knowledge in history, but he does not contend that Marxism avoids a historicist outlook entirely. For the purposes of

this discussion it suffices to say that, according to Althusser, Marx's work shows that the *conditions* for the discovery of universal objective truth are found only in a society in which the capitalist mode of production is firmly established and well advanced. Althusser explains as follows: "history has reached the point and produced the exceptional, specific present in which *scientific abstractions exist in the state of empirical realities*, in which science and scientific concepts exist in the form of the *visible* part of experience or as so many directly accessible *truths*" (124; original emphasis). In other words, the scientific truth of Marxism comes as result of immediate experience in a society dominated by commodity exchange. The "visible part of experience," i.e., our subjective consciousness of the world, contains within it the key to an objective understanding of its underlying structure.

It is significant that Althusser emphasizes the relation between the "abstract" and the "empirical" since this connection is perhaps the most crucial component of what he calls Marx's conceptualization of the "*legitimate epistemological primacy of the present over the past*" (Althusser 125; original emphasis). There are several passages from *The Grundrisse* which express how the direct correspondence between abstract theory and concrete reality arises only in what Marx sees as the most advanced societies. At one point, he explains that "abstraction of labour" is a phenomenon inherent to societies with a high degree of "indifference towards specific labours," i.e., highly industrialized capitalist economies where workers are frequently forced to move from one branch of industry to another, as opposed to agricultural or artisan economies where workers practice a single form of labour for much of their lives (*Marx-Engels Reader* 241). He writes,

Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society—in the United States. Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category “labour,” “labour as such,” labour pure and simple, *becomes true in practice*. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves *practical truth as an abstraction* only as a category of the most modern society. (*Marx-Engels Reader* 241; emphasis added)

Abstraction in a capitalist society, as Marx conceptualizes it here, is not merely what philosophers do when they devise models and theories to explain empirical reality. Rather, abstraction is necessarily a part of everyday concrete experience since individual workers grow increasingly aware of the fact that their labour-power is interchangeable with that of everyone else in society. Furthermore, the dependence of the production process on an increasingly complex division of labour makes abstraction all the more present and perceptible. For these reasons, Marx argues that abstraction of labour in a bourgeois economy becomes “true in practice,” or what could also be called a *real abstraction*. The empirical reality perceptible to bourgeois consciousness is simultaneously a form of abstraction, and this is what creates the conditions for the accessibility of scientific truth. The abstract categories developed in a capitalist society are “true in practice” and thus have more legitimacy as knowledge than those which could be formulated under the social conditions of any less advanced mode of production. As Marx repeatedly emphasizes, “Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most

complex historic organization of production” (*Marx-Engels Reader* 241). Following the schema outlined in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx sees the capitalist mode of production as the culmination of the history of human social relations (at least until the beginning of communism, which marks the inception of a *new* history). The analytical category “abstract labor,” as is conceptualized from the perspective of bourgeois consciousness, captures the transhistorical essence of labour. All past economies (and their corresponding systems of social relations) can now be theoretically known in the capitalist present. As Marx puts it, “Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape” (*Marx-Engels Reader* 241).

2.3 Histories of Difference

It is not difficult to understand why Marx’s approach to history has become problematic from the perspective of scholars and critics working to challenge the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemologies. The application of abstract categories such as “labour” and “capital” to global history produces seemingly unavoidable teleological narratives organized around what Chakrabarty calls “the theme of historical transition” (*Provincializing Europe* 31). When Marx introduces terms like “pre-bourgeois” and “pre-capitalist” in his work (e.g. *Marx-Engels Reader* 259-61), there emerges the strong implication that history should be read through the lens of the European experience, that the master narrative of history guarantees that all societies will develop in identical progressive stages regardless of local conditions. On top of the underlying presuppositions built into the thesis of historical progression, Marx also makes some especially troublesome claims regarding the role of British colonialism in India, as when he writes, “whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool

of history” (*Marx-Engels Reader* 658). But Marx’s relative blindness to the realities of imperialism is not really the most important issue for Chakrabarty. He is more concerned with the way in which the narratives of transition from “pre-modern” social forms to “modern” ones have become normalized and hegemonic within the disciplinary practices of history, such that “insofar as the academic discourse of history—that is, ‘history’ as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university—is concerned, Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on” (*PE* 27). And this is not only a matter of discursive structures being forcibly imposed onto the non-Western world through imperialism. It is widely acknowledged that so-called Third World nationalist movements in the twentieth century played an important role in translating the principles of the Marxist model of historical progress out of their “home” in Western bourgeois societies and in forging acceptance of the transition narrative as a means of legitimating the struggle for independence and statehood. But Chakrabarty argues that histories which emphasize themes of development, citizenship, and the nation can only be articulated through a “metanarrative ... [whose] theoretical subject can only be a hyperreal ‘Europe,’ a Europe constructed by the tales that both imperialism and nationalism have told the colonized” (*PE* 41).

It is this subalternization of India to an imagined or constructed version of European modernity within the very practices of historiography that provokes Chakrabarty’s project of “provincializing Europe.” As he stresses, this does not mean a simplistic rejection of the modern, nor a return to “cultural relativism” which would posit that the modern belongs only to Europe (*PE* 42-43). Furthermore, he acknowledges the

paradoxical premise of his project, which involves working within the hegemonic disciplinary confines of history which are fundamentally linked to European modernity. Nonetheless, he argues that the effort of provincializing Europe is essential to better understand and critique the relations between modernity/capitalism and its exterior. He writes, “To attempt to provincialize this ‘Europe’ is to see the modern as inevitably contested, to write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of ‘tradition’ that ‘modernity’ creates” (*PE* 46). For Chakrabarty, a critical re-engagement with Marx contributes important insights to this project.

The reasons behind this effort by Chakrabarty (and many other non-Western historians) to “rescue” Marx seem somewhat contradictory at first. If the ultimate goal is to dislodge European perspectives from their position of dominance, why devote one’s intellectual energy to the contributions of a thinker like Marx who examined history through an ardently Eurocentric lens? I believe the explanation lies in part with a desire to show that Eurocentrism cannot simply be replaced by another narrowly focused ethnocentric outlook but rather needs to be critically undermined from a pluritopic standpoint. Through its travels and translations, Marx’s critique of capitalist modernity may have re-inscribed the totalizing narrative of Eurocentric history in many ways, but it has also created opportunities for transcultural dialogue and critical reflection not only on the hegemony of theories that move from geopolitical centers to peripheries, but also on how such movements can be re-thought from subaltern perspectives.

Chakrabarty suggests that in order to perceive and understand the significance

of historical contestations of modernity, the historian must move beyond the disciplinary tendency of taking the past as a unified object whose developments can be charted on a homogeneous time-scale. Marx's critique of capital provides many helpful possibilities for formulating the conceptual framework for this approach to historiography, despite what appears to be a strong propensity toward historicism within his thought. Chakrabarty's reading of Marx is primarily concerned with challenging the predominant accounts of capital's encounter with historical difference. He finds that although there are various ways of conceptualizing capitalism's status as a global phenomenon, all of them "share a tendency to think of capital in the image of a unity that arises in one part of the world at a particular period and then develops globally over historical time, encountering and negotiating historical differences in the process" (*PE* 47). Most narratives of capitalism understand it as unified force which ceaselessly works to eliminate any and all historical specificity external to itself, and even in those accounts which seek to show differences between particular instantiations of capital, the underlying logic is "ultimately seen not only as single and homogeneous but also as one that unfolds over (historical) time, so that one can indeed produce a narrative of a putatively single capitalism" (*PE* 48). In those places where capitalism has not yet fully manifested itself, i.e., in zones of so-called uneven development, the narrative of capital is still one which depends on the passage of quantifiable amounts of homogeneous historical time for the inevitable maturation of *real* capitalism with the process of real subsumption. In contrast to these readings of Marx, Chakrabarty's effort is to "show how Marx's thoughts may be made to resist the idea that the logic of capital sublates differences into itself" (*PE* 48). In other words, his project is to underscore how the history of capital, as conceived by Marx, is

not primarily one of domestication of difference, but is rather comprised of internal contradictions and heterogeneous struggles that do not give themselves over to predetermined outcomes nor conform to a homogeneous temporality, and for these reasons, perhaps does not properly belong to existing hegemonic notions of “history” at all.

As we have already seen in the selections from *Capital* examined above, the sublation of difference is a key element of Marx’s understanding of the “secret” of the commodity form. That is, the possibility of commodity exchange is predicated on the “equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general” (*Capital* 152). The concrete specificity of diverse forms of labour must be abstracted into the analytical category “labour,” which can then serve as the common denominator of value. Differences in *real* labour are thus rendered commensurable and homogeneous by the discovery of *abstract* labour. Of course, this “discovery” must not be imagined as the result of the intellectual effort of any individual or group, but rather as both cause and consequence of a stage of development in the means of production that creates the conditions for “*real* abstraction.” Accordingly, abstract labour is never totally separated from its concrete form, but rather exists in complex dialectical tension with it:

On the one hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour power, in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim, and it is in this quality of being concrete useful labour that it produces use-values. (*Capital* 137).

By the same token, the concrete and specific forms of labour can never be conceived apart from their abstract value as “labour,” at least, that is, once the society has already reached the stage of the capitalist mode of production. Chakrabarty argues that because of the inherent duality of labour, abstraction is never totally self-evident and therefore must be performed: “abstract labor is perhaps best understood as a performative, practical category. To organize life under the sign of capital is to act as if labor could indeed be abstracted from all the social tissues in which it is always embedded and which make any particular labor—even the labor of abstracting—concrete” (*PE* 54). The clearest expression of this performativity is found in the practices of factory discipline. The single-minded excesses of machine-driven production are directed toward the absolute reduction of the worker’s social being to a set of pure abstract categories, individual movements that can be organized and quantified in accordance with the division of labour. Factory production produces “the technical subordination of the worker to the uniform motions of the instruments of labour” (Marx, *Capital* 549). The discipline of mechanized production is performative precisely in that the workers are never totally reducible to an abstract existence. In the always insufficient effort to transform the workers’ labour into one more abstract element of the factory’s production environment, the disciplinary structures reveal the incapacity of capital to achieve the ideal of total abstraction. From here, we can begin to think about how capital is incessantly forced to contend with the irreducibility of its human objects.

According to Chakrabarty’s argument, the factory is also where capital most visibly encounters the limits of abstract labour as a category. In one sense, the power of abstraction frees capital from all constraints by making different forms of labour

commensurable and homogeneous, but the codes of factory discipline reveal the extent to which “capital is constantly compelled to wrestle with the insubordination of the workers” (*Capital* 490). According to Chakrabarty’s reading of Marx, the despotic tendencies of capital indicate that resistance is embedded in the logic of capital itself, since it must always confront *living* labour: “Marx’s critique of capital begins at the same point where capital begins its own life process: the abstraction of labor. Yet this labor, although abstract, is always living labor to begin with. The ‘living’ quality of the labor ensures that the capitalist has not bought a fixed quantum of labor but rather a variable ‘capacity for labor,’ and being ‘living’ is what makes this labor a source of resistance to capitalist abstraction” (*PE* 61). Capital’s ceaseless efforts to replace its variable portion (i.e., living labour) with constant capital (i.e., automated labour) are precisely what Marx believes will lead it to its own dissolution. The worker’s resistance and the portion of his or her life-world that is inassimilable to capital therefore constitute an internal necessity to capital’s continued reproduction, and this is the paradox which informs Chakrabarty’s take on history in Marx in terms of how the totalizing narrative of capitalist modernity can never be fully closed. Difference always exceeds capital’s ability to internalize it.

It is important for Chakrabarty that, in order to formulate a description of the past that lies beyond the beginnings of capital, Marx distinguishes between two aspects: capital’s *Being* and its *Becoming*. The “Being” of capital is that which defines its rational structure once it manifests itself as the dominant mode of production in a given society. The “Becoming” of capital is the historical evolution which leads up to its formation, but not defined merely in terms of a sequence of events taking place in homogeneous time (i.e., a definite number of years or centuries), but rather as “the past that the category

[i.e., capital] retrospectively posits” (*PE* 62). It is only at the point of Being that capital can begin to analyze its own presuppositions and locate its preconditions historically. In *The Grundrisse*, Marx describes how the past, as it exists *before* capital comes into Being, vanishes in the aftermath of capital’s inception: “The conditions and presuppositions of the *becoming*, of the *arising*, of capital presuppose precisely that it is not yet in being but merely in *becoming*; they therefore disappear as real capital arises, capital which itself, on the basis of its own reality, posits the conditions for its realization” (*Marx-Engels Reader* 251; original emphasis). Capital must read its own preconditions into history, but it nonetheless requires a past prior to itself that is *other* than itself in order to fully exist in a state of Being. The *Being* of capital must logically be prior to any understanding of its *Becoming*. From this basic dilemma, Chakrabarty begins to theorize the possibilities of the plural histories of capital in order to question the predominant understandings of capital as a unified historical totality.

In the quote from *The Grundrisse* above, we can see that Marx identifies a difference between history as it is posited by capital (i.e., once it is in a state of *Being*) and the vanishing past comprised of the conditions for capital’s *Becoming*. The *Becoming* of capital is therefore an ambiguous entity; it is a zone of contestation where capital works out the logical presuppositions for its existence while struggling to suppress that which resists its hegemonic rational structure. Capital must therefore continually revise its own narrative of *Becoming* in an effort to neutralize this resistance. Chakrabarty describes the difference between these two aspects of *Becoming* as “History 1” and “History 2.” He defines History 1 as the history that capital posits for itself, “the universal and necessary history we associate with capital. It forms the backbone of the

usual narratives of transition to the capitalist mode of production” (*PE* 63). This is contrasted with History 2, which he describes as consisting of the “antecedents” of capital which are “not established by itself” and that do not belong to capital’s “life-process”; in other words, it is that which “does not contribute to the self-reproduction of capital” (*PE* 63). The immediate implication of this essential distinction is that of the existence of a multiplicity of histories that do not lend themselves to the formation of capital, or as Chakrabarty puts it, “the total universe of pasts that capital encounters is larger than the sum of those elements in which are worked out the logical presuppositions of capital” (*PE* 64). Chakrabarty cites two key examples that Marx gives of historical elements that could make up History 2: commodities and money. Both of these have existed in sets of social relations that did not give rise to capitalism, and Chakrabarty sees this heterogeneity of historical possibilities in constant tension with the attempts by capitalism to subjugate them to its own monological History 1. Despite its efforts, capital never manages totally to subdue this inherent plurality of possible histories. The difference that inheres in History 2 should not be imagined as either internal or wholly external to capital; it is never completely subsumed into History 1, but neither can it exist in isolation from capital. Chakrabarty explains that, “it lives in intimate and plural relationships to capital, ranging from opposition to neutrality” (*PE* 66)

Chakrabarty’s examination of the interaction between History 1 and various History 2s offers a theoretical intervention into Marx’s philosophical category of capital which posits that “historical difference is not external to it [i.e., capital] but is rather constitutive of it” (*PE* 70). Just as capital’s continued existence is always conditioned upon an inassimilable portion of the labourer’s life-world, so the totality of history can

only be conceptualized in terms of the (im)possibility of subsuming an exteriority that always escapes complete totalization. Under this perspective, the imperative to universalize historical time in order to chart capitalist modernity's global expansion can never fully overcome the disruptions and discontinuities that inhere within manifestations of capital at any particular time and place. This is not to suggest that Marx's critique loses all validity or that it is theoretically impossible to recognize features of capital that are identical across different socio-historical contexts. Marx's critique of capital depends on the possibility of conceptualizing it as a universal historical category, but what Chakrabarty attempts is "to produce a reading in which the very category 'capital' becomes a site where both the universal history of capital and the politics of human belonging are allowed to interrupt each other's narrative" (*PE* 70). When such interruptions become perceptible to historians and theorists of history, it is no longer feasible to explain diverse pasts across distinct geohistorical locations in terms of a homogenous, linear chronology marking the globalization of capital. Marx's "universal" categories need to be understood in complex relation to the particular histories of peoples whose pluriversal life-worlds cannot be reduced to the logic of capitalism. "Histories of capital," writes Chakrabarty, "cannot escape the politics of the diverse ways of being human" (*PE* 70). In the context of the historiography of Europe's former colonies, the efforts of historians to chart the non-European past in terms of a transition to Eurocentric modernity results in problematic distortions: "To think of Indian history in terms of Marxian categories is to translate into such categories the existing archives of thought and practices about human relations in the subcontinent; but it is also to modify these thoughts and practices with the help of these categories" (*PE* 71). The kind of translation

practiced by disciplinary modes of historiography is premised upon the notion that historical difference can be subsumed into equivalence through the mediation of abstract universal terms. Chakrabarty's reading of Marx argues for a rethinking of the categories of historical narration in order to take account of the local heterogeneous being of subjects whose consciousness is not in alignment with the global logic of capital.

What are some of the epistemological consequences of critiquing history from the subaltern perspective of life-worlds which are both inside and outside capitalist modernity? One answer to this question confronts the colonial conditions of knowledge production within the disciplinary boundaries of the modern academy. Chakrabarty finds that putting forward this critique effectively undermines the very foundations of modern historiography:

This is a history that will attempt the impossible: to look toward its own death by tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort at translation across cultural and other semiotic systems, so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous. This, as I have said, is impossible within the knowledge protocols of academic history, for the globality of academia is not independent of the globality that the European modern has created. (*PE* 45-46)

To continue to think from the modern disciplinary practice of history is to produce a form of knowledge that affirms the subalternity of the non-European world. For as long as Eurocentric modernity and rationality are conceptualized as universal categories, historical analysis will always be implicitly grounded in a European perspective, and the rest of the world will be observed, measured, and codified from this imagined site of

universality. In this sense, “provincializing Europe” means moving beyond the established disciplinary paradigms of history, delinking from the local categories that present themselves as universals; thus, the historian faces the “impossible” task of theorizing an end to his or her own framework of knowledge. For Walter Mignolo, this dilemma calls attention to the need to shift the geohistorical location of reason and to make intellectual investments in modes of “transcultural thinking” or “border thinking” (*Local Histories* 210).

Mignolo observes that Chakrabarty’s project ascribes a critical role to the practice of translation, such that the “death of history” marks the “beginning of translation as a new form of knowledge that displaces the hegemonic and subaltern locations of disciplinary knowledge” (*Local Histories* 205). History has functioned as a hegemonic methodology for interpreting non-European cultures to European modernity, making them intelligible through a mediating structure of rationality that erases relations of inequality and subalternity in order to make itself appear objective and disinterested. The possibility of de-centering historical knowledge, displacing it from its European “home”, emerges at the point when Europe becomes simply one local history among a diversity of others, none of which is a privileged site of thinking. Transcultural knowledge under these conditions will be produced at the epistemological borders between different geohistorical locations insofar as local modes of thinking can be translated to one another. For Mignolo, “*knowledge works as translation and translation works as knowledge*, that is, *trans-* rather than *interdisciplinary*, undermining disciplinary foundations of knowledge ... *Translation*, contrary to disciplines, doesn’t have a ‘home’” (*Local Histories* 208, original emphasis). The global totality of knowledge will no longer

be available within the terms of a particular, local concept of rationality taken as universal, but instead will only be conceivable as a discontinuous and heterogeneous series of relations between different local histories, i.e., as border thinking. Overcoming the subalternization of knowledge, writes Mignolo, requires moving beyond our present conception of the epistemic boundaries between universal and local knowledges:

[T]hinking is at the same time universal and local: thinking is universal in the very simple sense that it is a component of certain species of living organisms and it is local in the sense that there is no thinking in a vacuum, that thinking ... responds to material and local needs. Thus, this conception of thinking, at the same time local and universal, is a way of conceptualizing from the epistemological perspective of border thinking ... (*Local Histories*, 209)

In order for global history to become the product of border thinking, Europe's status as the source of universal modernity needs to be overturned and the "modern" itself needs to be subject to translation into pluriversal local concepts.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

From Chakrabarty's critical perspective, Marx's philosophy of history preserves an element of uncertainty and heterogeneity in the historical globalization of capital. While he is not willing to dismiss or forgive totally the tendencies toward historical determinism or stagism that Marx inscribed into his work, he nonetheless argues that Marx's thought remains relevant and necessary for contemporary struggles against capitalist hegemony, especially as they concern retheorizing the history of global modernity. One of the important questions that emerges from Chakrabarty's effort to

illuminate local historical difference within the universalist discourses of global modernity concerns how to mobilize the politics of pluriversal ways of being human toward new horizons of social reality. Chakrabarty writes, “What interrupts and defers capital’s self-realization are the various History 2s that always modify History 1 and thus act as our grounds for claiming historical difference” (*PE* 71). But the problem of how to use these claims to displace Europe’s epistemological dominance and the hegemony of a Eurocentric framework of historical being needs to be addressed in greater depth. Mignolo sees Chakrabarty as a member of a cohort of intellectuals (which includes Aníbal Quijano, Fernando Coronil, and Enrique Dussel) whose work calls attention to the possibilities of “border thinking,” that is, to “the basic need for subaltern epistemology and for thinking beyond the dichotomies produced by ‘Occidentalism’ as the overarching imaginary of the modern/colonial world system, an imaginary that magnified the achievements of ‘modernity’ ... and played down its darker side, ‘coloniality’” (*Local Histories* 208). I find that Chakrabarty’s work contributes significantly to revealing the capacity for pluriversal local histories to form the conceptual basis for a new decolonial framework of global knowledges.

The next chapter will examine how pluriversal histories are being mobilized in the cause of decolonial struggle in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. In the wake of the armed uprising by the indigenous rebel group *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) [Zapatista Army of National Liberation] in January, 1994, communities in this region have been organizing a resistance movement that focuses on constructing modes of self-governance, radically non-ethnocentric forms of identification, and communitarian democracy. I attempt to show that the Zapatistas’ politics of resistance is deeply informed

by an oppositional perspective toward the dominant totalizing historical framework of Western modernity. My discussion focuses on a recent documentary video project produced by members of a Zapatista community which illustrates an important decolonial dynamic within the movement. While contesting the long-standing Western historiographical practice of denying the coevalness of indigenous peoples, the Zapatista videos assert that although the movement has its roots in modernity's exteriority, it is also fundamentally shaped by its complex relations with modern cultures, politics, knowledges, and histories. In this sense, the Zapatista videos illustrate a concern with opening up modernity as a transcultural space where pluriversal histories can coexist.

3. Documenting a 500-year Struggle: History and Resistance through Indigenous Video

3.1 Pluriversal Histories, Transcultural Modernity

Chakrabarty's critique of Eurocentric historiography argued for a rethinking of the status of difference within the category of modernity. From his perspective, the epistemological break with capitalist ideology theorized by Marx actually offers some insights into how heterogeneous local histories resist the totalization imposed by abstract universal categories, e.g. capital. Imagining ways to produce knowledge of the past that is not confined by the epistemological boundaries of Eurocentric modernity constitutes one of the most basic aims of Chakrabarty's project to "provincialize" Europe. The possibilities for transcultural knowledges that emerge out of Chakrabarty's critical re-conceptualization of Marx's universal categories resonate strongly with the model of decolonial thinking that has been put forward by Latin American theorists such as Enrique Dussel and Walter D. Mignolo. These thinkers have sought to show that the category of modernity must be problematized from the subaltern perspective of coloniality in order to pave the way for a new paradigm of engagement between modern knowledges conceived within the dominant epistemic framework of the West and those knowledges rooted in cultural traditions external to the current centers of geopolitical power. Intellectuals have made many important contributions to this process, but there is also a powerful push to challenge the Eurocentric framework of modernity coming from popular social movements in Latin America, especially those which draw upon a history of indigenous struggle against colonial violence. Indigenous resistance in Latin America has often focused on re-configuring the terms of the relationship between modernity and

tradition, and this is especially true of the Zapatista movement in the Mexican state of Chiapas. In this chapter, I examine how recent documentary video projects produced by members of autonomous Zapatista communities reflect the decolonial desire to re-imagine modernity as a space where pluriversal histories can exist together in non-hierarchical, non-totalitarian, transcultural relationships.

Today, more than 19 years after the Zapatistas' armed uprising against the Mexican state, NAFTA, and 500 years of coloniality, the indigenous resistance movement in the highlands of Chiapas continues, albeit in a different shape. What started out as a military insurgency by the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de liberación nacional*) on New Year's Day in 1994 has evolved into an effort to build autonomously-controlled indigenous communities, governed democratically by their members. In 2003, the Zapatistas founded the *Juntas de buen gobierno* (Committees of Good Government), and their territories in various parts of the state of Chiapas in southeastern Mexico were organized into regional subdivisions known as *Caracoles* ("conch shells" or "snail shells") each comprised of multiple municipalities. There are five Caracoles inhabited by indigenous people from different ethnic groups. Members of each of the Caracoles are not necessarily native speakers of the same languages, and they may or may not speak Spanish. The Caracoles function as autonomous communities, separate from state and national governments, and they represent a form of collective social organization in resistance to hegemonic modernity but in accordance with a principle of cultural co-existence. One of their most significant projects has been to establish autonomous forms of media with the collaboration of *promotores de comunicación indígena* [promoters of indigenous communication], which has resulted in the development of a sustained effort

to produce videos documenting the resistance movement and representing ways of life in indigenous communities.

While the Zapatistas have worked to increase their visibility and promote dialogue with the Mexican nation and the world through strategies of self-representation, such as their video productions, the Mexican government and other adherents of hegemonic global modernity have made a systematic effort to erase the Zapatista movement from mainstream discourse and media. José Rabasa, in the introduction to his recent book, *Without History* (2010), demonstrates how hegemonic national discourse works to confine the Zapatistas “to legend, to ineffectual remnants of a past that has been archived as history” (7).

This kind of reductive representation of indigenous life-worlds, however, is by no means a new phenomenon. Five hundred years of resisting colonialism has given indigenous people a keen awareness of how their images have been manipulated to uphold the structures of domination. Within the context of the formation of Mexican national cinema (1930-50), the denigrating depiction of indigenous ways of life and the stereotypical roles given to indigenous actors speak to the myriad ways in which cinema was employed by the state as a powerful instrument of internal colonization. In the work of film director Emilio “El Indio” Fernández, whose focus was to create cinema to “Mexicanize the Mexican people” (Dever 22), the place of the indigenous population in post-revolution Mexico¹⁶ became a significant preoccupation. The growth of Mexican

¹⁶ The Mexican Revolution, which began as uprising against the dictator Porfirio Díaz in 1910, lasted for about a decade and was followed by a post-revolutionary period of nationalist consolidation mostly under the rule of what later became known as the PRI, or *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party).

nationalism in the post-revolutionary era spurred an increasing concern with the transformation of the country into a modern, industrial, progressive state. Depictions of indigenous peoples in the films of Fernández were highly stylized, employing stereotyped forms of dress and manners of speech, and they followed a normative narrative pattern that represented indigenous culture as backwards, whereas the hegemonic nationalist Mexican culture was portrayed as redemptive. Indeed, Fernández's films demonstrate how Mexican national cinema promoted the ideology that incorporation of indigenous people into the state rescued them from "barbarism, ignorance, despotic *caciques*, and wayward religious leadership" (Dever 60-61). That is to say, from their pre-modern ways of life.

The pre-modern as inscribed by Mexican national cinema is closely related to the way ethnographic documentaries have conventionally depicted indigenous people as a pre-historical artifact, a remnant of a lost age¹⁷. Generally speaking, these productions rely on the idea that time and progress, as framed by modernity, are universal and thus that the indigenous cultures belong to an ancient past. This view confines indigenous cultures to a museum, to a permanently lost pre-modern world. Furthermore, the ethnographic perspective often perpetuates the idea that the continued existence of the indigenous people in Mexico today is irrevocably corrupted or degraded, an inferior version of their grand—but unrecoverable—past.

How have indigenous people resisted these pejorative narratives and images? This question is central to my discussion of the Zapatistas and their self-modes of representation. Since the first day of the armed uprising in 1994, the movement has

¹⁷ One example of this type of film is *Mystery of the Maya*, a Mexican-Canadian production from 1995.

manifested itself and its message through diverse forms of mass media, including the internet and video productions, challenging the perceptions of a retrograde indigenous culture. How do the indigenous communities in the Caracoles contest detrimental representations of indigeneity in their own video productions? How do they integrate alternative conceptual relationships to the past into these productions? These are some of the questions I address in my analysis throughout this chapter.

A fundamental concern that underlies the questions framing my discussion in these pages has to do with the Zapatistas' conceptualization of history. One of the core principles of the movement is to oppose the hegemonic discourse which relegates indigenous cultures to the past, writing them out of existence in the modern world. For this reason, challenging the concept of history that supports this perspective, the Zapatistas define themselves precisely in terms which highlight the history of their resistance as part of their identity. In one of their earliest communiqués, "Declaración de la Selva Lacandona," they assert, "Somos producto de 500 años de lucha" [We are the product of 500 years of struggle] ("Declaración" 33). The roots of the insurgency lie in the history that indigenous communities themselves have memorialized, asserting a temporal continuity between their contemporary struggle and that of their ancestors which stands in opposition to the linear progressive model of Western history. From the perspective of Mexico's neo-liberal nation state, indigenous pasts are unconnected to the current conflicts which concern the economic, political, and social structures of modernity, but the Zapatistas' view their present-day struggle as inseparable from an on-going history of resistance to colonization. In this sense, the Zapatistas' continual re-integration of their past into the contemporary world stands in opposition to modernity's

colonizing impulse to confine indigenous cultural history to the stagnant inertia of a by-gone era. In another communiqué, the Zapatistas declare that “un pueblo con memoria es un pueblo rebelde” [a people with memory is a rebel people] (EZLN “Sobre avance” 222). History and resistance stand out as key components of the Zapatista movement, and this understanding will orient my discussion of the videos as I reflect on them as documents of a lived history of insurgency.

Considering the processes of video production and the modes of consumption practiced by audiences outside of the Caracoles poses several complex theoretical problems regarding the possibilities of communication between indigenous communities in resistance and the general public sphere in Mexico and elsewhere. What happens when the insurgent knowledges and perspectives of subaltern subjects are projected onto the screens of ordinary people living within capitalist modernity? Can the indigenous voice be heard beyond the discursive codes that are already pre-programmed into the modern/colonial consumption of media products? In her book *Indianizing Film*, Freya Schiwy argues that “using video as a tool for decolonizing knowledge ... raises questions about how it engages or resists mainstream cinematic codes that have inscribed colonial and patriarchal forms of seeing” (41). Along the same lines, Martinican philosopher Edouard Glissant frames the problem as follows: “Already the summoning of all those countries who had waited in the night, on the other side of the visible face of the earth, who had brought this far their load of unknown suffering, of undeclared privations, but who were soon going to enter the television of the world and cross that dividing line between night and day, invisible and visible, ignorance and knowledge” (qtd. in Britton 59).

Throughout my discussion I will approach this set of problems in the context of indigenous video production in the Caracoles and the videomakers' particular strategies of visual engagement with history and resistance, and history *as* resistance. Since 1998, video production in the Zapatista communities has been coordinated by the independent non-profit organization known as the Chiapas Media Project (CMP) or Promedios de Comunicación Comunitaria. Promedios has worked as an intermediary between the indigenous communities, the Mexican government, and the global media market (including universities and libraries to which most of the videos are distributed). The Promedios staff has provided the Zapatista communities not only with training in the use of video and editing equipment, but also with instruction in the conventions of the documentary. Thus, the question of whether or not indigenous perspectives on history and resistance remain decolonial when translated into mainstream visual language needs to be addressed in order to assess the significance of the videos coming out of the Caracoles.

In my effort to take up such questions, I will analyze one of the more recent videos released by Promedios entitled "Arte en rebeldía" [Art in Rebellion] (2007). This video, which documents the painting of several murals within a Zapatista community, engages with themes of resistance and history. While the cinematographic language follows closely the conventions of documentary, decolonial ideas on history are not silenced. I argue that the insurgent perspectives of the Zapatistas find an effective medium in the video, although the venue does impose limits on the possibilities for articulating decolonial politics. By addressing some of the first videos produced by the Zapatistas, I suggest that the videomakers are fully aware of the constraints of using the

conventional language of documentary to convey their decolonial ideas on history. My position is that these indigenous videomakers *critically* adopt the medium as a tool and strategy in continuing their 500-year project of resistance. I begin my discussion with some background information on Promedios, since this organization is a fundamental component in the production process, training, and distribution of the videos, as well as a source of documentary conventions, representational formulae, and liberal activist politics.

3.2 Promedios: Mediating the Indigenous Message¹⁸

The CMP/Promedios, also known as Promedios de Comunicación Comunitaria, started out as a bi-national U.S.-Mexico organization based in Chicago, Illinois, and San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. The project began as a response to the immense media attention generated by the 1994 uprising of the EZLN. As the international mass media converged on Chiapas following the events of January 1st, 1994, local indigenous communities found themselves with little or no control over how they were being represented to the world at large. Confronted with this lack of agency, members of the local communities sought out a means of producing and distributing their own stories in the media. The CMP was formed as a partnership to provide cameras, editing equipment, and other kinds of support to enable the communities to create videos that would communicate their own messages to the rest of the world.

In 2010, the Mexican branch of Promedios became part of the *Americas Media Initiative*, an organization that works with Cuban film producers and distributes the

¹⁸ Some of the information I present here was gathered during a research trip to San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, in the summer of 2012. I conducted several interviews with staff members at Promedios.

videos created by the Zapatistas, but also other independent media from Mexico. The offices of Promedios remain in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, and the organization continues to work with some of the initial project objectives established in 1998. In fact, some of the members have been part of Promedios since U.S. filmmaker Alexandra Halkin founded the organization. Francisco Vázquez (Paco) has worked with Promedios since its beginnings, and he continues to collaborate in the organization. In a conversation that took place in the Promedios offices in San Cristóbal in July, 2012, Paco explained that the initial workshops that began in 1998 have evolved from using VHS equipment to digital video technology. Within the Zapatista communities, the spaces used for video editing and production planning are called “Centros de Comunicación Rebelde Autónoma Zapatista” [Autonomous Zapatista Rebel Communication Centers]. Paco also stated that only four of the five Caracoles participate in video activities: Morelia, La Garrucha, Roberto Barrios, and Oventic. The members of Caracol La Realiad reached an internal agreement not to be involved in the project. The reasons behind this decision can only be known to those who were directly involved in the discussions, but it is important to take note that the video projects are not endorsed by all Zapatista communities.

Promedios continues to work directly with the Zapatistas, but since the communities each have their own promoters of communication, the role of Promedios is limited to distribution, post-production editing, technical support, and training (workshops are held approximately every two months). The Zapatistas produce videos for both internal and external viewership. According to Paco, the videos utilized internally within the Zapatista communities address local problems and also function as a tool to facilitate knowledge exchange, for example, agricultural techniques and medical

practices. Paco pointed out that such videos are not distributed outside the Zapatista communities, and therefore the Promedios staff is not directly involved and, in many cases, may never even view them. These videos tend to be long, often recorded in various indigenous languages, such as Tzeltal and Tzotzil, and produced without subtitles. The videos that are distributed outside the communities were first produced in Spanish, but over the years the Zapatistas began to produce them in the diverse indigenous languages spoken in the communities. The subtitles in Spanish are added either by a member of Promedios or by the Zapatista videomakers themselves. The subtitles in English or other languages are integrated by Promedios.

The distinctions between the videos which circulate outside the communities and those which are produced for internal use reflect some of the tensions between the Zapatista resistance and the role of a media activist organization like Promedios. Alexandra Halkin writes that “while the Zapatistas strategically use the media for international recognition, videos produced for local circulation demonstrate the integration of media into the Zapatista-Mayan cultural fabric” (56). The indigenous communities use video for a wide variety of purposes, but in order to maintain their access to equipment and training through Promedios, they must find ways of attracting outside attention to their cause, and this involves confronting the problem of how to represent themselves and their struggle to an international audience accustomed to highly stereotyped images of native peoples. Meanwhile, an organization such as Promedios, in order to survive, needs to gather funds and market the videos in ways that are faithful to the Zapatista’s political objectives. “At the beginning of the project,” Halkin explains, “we made the decision that we would only apply for grants as long as there were no

strings attached and no political agenda of the foundation that conflicted with our/the community's agenda" (72). This principle sometimes leads to difficulties since many philanthropic foundations impose certain expectations that do not cohere with the Zapatistas' collective decision-making process. More importantly, I want to stress that the focus for Promedios sometimes appears out of step with what the Zapatistas are actually accomplishing with their videos, since the priorities of the organization often have to do with fundraising and "marketing." One of the dangers is that the organization may become too dependent on support and acknowledgement centered in the U.S. and elsewhere in the First World without taking into consideration how this might undermine the political effectiveness of the message of autonomy and self-sufficiency (as opposed to calling for economic investment by the state or international capital) and resistance to hegemonic structures of modernity. Halkin herself acknowledges that her role has primarily been one of gathering funds and garnering recognition for the project outside of Mexico: "my most important contribution has been my ability to raise the initial funding that supported the creation of a permanent infrastructure and my current role in getting the videos distributed to the widest audience possible" (72). By presenting herself in a limited "support" role, Halkin perhaps refrains from thinking as critically as she could about how Promedios mediates the indigenous message. The underlying attitude expressed in her article is that First World activists are more or less benign in their desire to enable indigenous people to communicate "their own truths, stories, and realities to the outside world" (72). As I will attempt to show further on in this section, this failure to adopt a self-critical perspective imposes some significant limitations on the relationship between Promedios and the Zapatista communities it collaborates with. However, I also

want to acknowledge that Halkin and the Promedios staff are not totally blind to the potential for re-colonization in their work. This becomes especially apparent in their efforts to adapt their training workshops to the sociopolitical conditions of the Zapatista communities in resistance.

During the first years of the organization, Halkin noticed problems with having people from Chicago and other parts of the U.S. come to take part in training the indigenous videomakers. “In the beginning of the video training process,” she writes, “we were all aware of the pitfalls of bringing in temporary ‘outsiders’ to do the training, particularly as ‘instructors.’ Bringing in people from outside of Mexico would not work from either a sociopolitical or economic standpoint—we did not want to replicate the colonial model” (67). In order to distinguish their project from the “colonial model,” Promedios purposely sought to use indigenous trainers mainly from the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, for the Zapatista video workshops. However, even by taking such measures to avoid imposing a colonial relationship, Promedios could not, and still cannot, overcome every aspect of the discrepancy in power and knowledge that defines their roles as intermediaries and instructors. The fundamental issue here, as in almost all cases of collaboration between (mostly) middle-class liberal activists/intellectuals and subaltern communities, is whether the latter can ever be authentically represented in dialogue with the former. But rather than setting themselves upon the perhaps impossible task of eliminating every trace of colonization from their project, Promedios has charted the boundaries of coloniality with the Zapatistas over the years, modifying the orientation and objectives of their work with the purpose of challenging or appropriating colonial

venues of communication, always with the objective of keeping the Zapatistas' political agenda as well as that of Promedios alive.

Halkin explains that, over time, CMP/Promedios modified its structure and learned from the Zapatistas to organize themselves collectively (66). Paco confirmed this information, saying that he and the other members of Promedios staff continue to run the organization without a hierarchical structure. However, pressure to adhere to the economic logic of capitalist society is an ever-present condition. Promedios does not earn revenues from the sale of Zapatista videos, since all of these funds go directly to the Caracoles, so it must find other resources to support its own staff. These include grants and donations from NGOs and private institutions. The organization also takes on private contracts to film and document local events taking place in Chiapas as an alternate source of income.

Perhaps the most basic problem related to the colonial aspect of the collaboration between Promedios and the Zapatistas is the discrepancy that a Western perspective of history tends to highlight between modern media and communications technology and indigenous people. That is to say, a challenge exists for Promedios in its role as intermediary since it must work to overcome the perception that indigenous people are a relic of the past or an inferior version of the more authentic pre-Hispanic societies. They must confront the *otherness* that has been firmly imposed upon indigenous culture, the ideological forces that produce marginalization, and the belief that video technology is foreign to the people who live in indigenous communities. While economic realities normally prevent most people in the impoverished communities of the highlands of Chiapas from acquiring video cameras or other forms of digital recording technology,

they are nonetheless fully aware of the existence of these tools, and they generally have more or less the same level of knowledge of the functions of mass media as any other Mexican or U.S. American who watches television and popular films.

In some ways, Promedios does not always appear able to surmount these detrimental perceptions even in its own understanding of the collaboration. Halkin's stated motivation for creating Promedios reveals a condescending, or perhaps even colonizing perspective when she writes, "My primary vision of the CMP/Promedios came from my background as a documentary video maker/artist with my interest and curiosity in the question: *what kind of videos would the Zapatistas produce once they had the equipment and training?*" (66-67). Here, Halkin comes across as someone who sees herself as enlightened benefactor prompted by "interest and curiosity" to grant the indigenous people access to alien technology of which they lack deep understanding. From Halkin's perspective, knowledge and technical expertise in modern media is still *proper* to the Western world and therefore the Zapatistas' lack of access to technology functions as a sign of their indigenous non-coevalness. She positions herself as the principal agent of progress while the Zapatistas remain secondary or subordinate actors in their own project of resistance.

The divergence between the media activism of Promedios and the Zapatistas' decolonial resistance is easy to spot in one of the first video productions released by the Zapatistas and Promedios to the general public entitled "Proyecto de medios de comunicación en Chiapas" [Media Project in Chiapas]. In this video, released in 1998, indigenous men and women of the community of Morelia give testimonies on why they think media is necessary for their resistance. The reasons they give include the following:

to denounce the abusive behavior of paramilitaries, to denounce any kind of attack on their communities, to represent their struggle and problems in their own terms, to expose any capitalist exploitation of the natural world that surrounds them, to exchange knowledge among the different indigenous communities, and to keep a visual archive of their own culture and customs. The voices and images of the indigenous people are interrupted by written information explaining how Promedios has participated with the indigenous communities, providing them with video cameras and giving them training to use this equipment adequately and professionally. There are also messages on screen that are addressed to the audience, who are assumed to be neither indigenous nor economically marginalized by their own societies, asking them for their help either with equipment, volunteering, or money. These messages are accompanied by melancholic instrumental music. The testimony of the members of the community is thus framed by a discourse similar to television ads soliciting donations for charity organizations. By using the tone of humanitarian aid, this video manages to erase the agency in the indigenous voices and instead transforms them into victims dependent on the support and recognition of the outside world, or more specifically, the First World. These dynamics have changed through the years of experience that both Promedios and the Promoters of Indigenous Communication have gained. In “Arte en rebeldía” for instance, even though Promedios still intervenes with post-production and the Zapatistas speak in Spanish, they use the video and its conventions to get across their own understanding of resistance, history, and their non-modern perspective.

Although they continue to make “objective” and traditional documentaries, which are post-produced or “polished” by the Promedios staff, the Zapatista Promoters of

Indigenous Communication have developed new and diverse methods of inscribing their own subversive ideas into their work, especially with regard to history and their relationship to modernity and technology. I do not argue that the use of video should be understood as “proof” that the indigenous communities have integrated themselves into modernity, but that the use of this kind of technology has worked as a powerful tool precisely to counteract the perspective that regards them as primitive and backwards, as I will show in the analysis of “Arte en rebeldía.” In other words, through their video productions the Zapatistas make evident how, even though they have been ignored and denigrated for 500 years, they have been living in contact with modernity and resisting its hegemony all along. In this context, living next to modernity means maintaining their own forms of epistemology while critically engaging modernity with acts of resistance.

The experience the Zapatistas have gained producing documentaries has crystallized in the paths they have had to open to manifest their own understanding of exclusion from modernity not as a narrative of victimization, but as one of resistance. The idea that indigenous communities are defined by their victimhood under the domination of the Mexican state, capitalism, and modernity, and the belief that they only survive with external help, form a harmful conceptual and discursive framework, elements of which still persist in Promedios. By neglecting to critically engage their own role as intermediaries, Promedios risks falling out of step with, or perhaps even neutralizing the Zapatista message contained in the videos that resistance has been ongoing for 500 years. To stay relevant, the organization needs to deepen its awareness that new forms of communication are simply the continuation of that same struggle in another venue.

3.3 Theorizing History and Resistance from an Indigenous Perspective

By timing their armed uprising to coincide with the initiation of the NAFTA treaty in 1994, the Zapatista communities in resistance strategically counter-positioned themselves with respect to Mexico's transition into the era of neo-liberal globalization. By appropriating the rhetoric of the Mexican revolution¹⁹, they have signaled their critical engagement with the history of the nation state and the narrative of modernity, democracy, and liberation. And by emphasizing their ancestral memories and cultural traditions that have survived "500 years of struggle," the Zapatistas have called attention to the decolonial orientation of their politics of resistance. This conceptualization of their struggle within a global matrix of power emerges from a perspective located at the horizon of multiple histories of domination. The Zapatistas perceive their present condition of resisting oppression as fundamentally linked to several coexisting historical layers of struggle. Rather than thinking in terms of successive stages of history, the Zapatistas practice modes of memorializing the past that place it in continuous relation with the present. Whereas Western modernity defines itself against earlier epochs by using a historicizing perspective that confines knowledge of the past within epistemic parameters which privilege a model of progressive linear development, the Zapatistas' approach to history emphasizes a relational function which refuses totalization, allowing the past to be relevant to the present without being dominated by it. Thus, even as these indigenous communities confront and critically engage modernity from its exterior with

¹⁹ The Zapatistas named their movement after one of the most iconic figures of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata. In their marches and protests, the Zapatistas have always incorporated slogans and rhetoric reflecting the legacy of Zapata in particular, and the Revolution more generally.

traditional knowledges and cultural memories, they do not conceive their struggle as anti-modern, nor do they advocate a return to pre-colonial conditions. Rather, they mobilize the past for the purpose of envisioning transformation toward a world “donde quepan muchos mundos” [in which many worlds fit] (“Cuarta Declaración” 89). Sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, whose work focuses on indigenous resistance in South America, has described how some traditional cosmologies conceptualize a “past that is capable of changing the future, and that could reverse the lived situation” (27). She continues: “Isn’t this an aspiration currently shared by many indigenous movements everywhere who posit the validity of their ancestors’ culture in the contemporary world?”²⁰ A principal focus of the Zapatista movement is to reinscribe the present with the memory of past struggles to help foster a counter-hegemonic intervention into current geohistorical configurations of power: “a people with memory is a rebel people.”

The Zapatista insurgency is deeply informed by traditional indigenous cosmovisions oriented toward an ongoing effort of developing communal democratic practices capable of building alliances that extend beyond the limits of language, culture, and ethnicity. The establishment of autonomous zones of self-government within the state of Chiapas, along with the accomplishments of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno, represent the application of a long tradition of communalism to the needs and circumstances of contemporary society. The Zapatista Caracoles are comprised of people who speak

²⁰ “Un pasado capaz de renovar el futuro, de revertir la situación vivida. No es esta la aspiración compartida actualmente por muchos movimientos indígenas de todas las latitudes que postulan la plena vigencia de la cultura de sus ancestros en el mundo contemporáneo?” (27).

different languages and whose daily practices are rooted in diverse cultural traditions.

Walter Mignolo describes the Caracoles as

indigenous community assemblies that are connected with one another and work collaboratively with each other to “invent” ... their own forms of social, political, and legal organization. Their economic structures are based on reciprocity rather than on a competitive market. Their subjectivities are formed through collaborative practices rather than through competition. And, finally, they are creating a new subject tangentially related to the national subject promoted and controlled by the state in Mexico, while at the same time detached from the canonicity of national subject formation. It is a subjectivity of the border, as it were, in which national subjectivity is only a residual part. (*Idea* 125)

The modes of social organization in the Caracoles recuperate democratic practices that pre-date the history of the nation and have survived colonial disruption and suppression. But they also represent an effort to conceive and activate new forms of subjectivity that are relevant to the struggle against contemporary structures of domination that comprise the framework of nationhood and hegemonic modernity.

The work of José Rabasa, a U.S.-based scholar associated with the (now defunct) Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, offers an adept analysis of the Zapatistas’ evocation of the “compatibility of modern and nonmodern forms of culture and politics and not the celebration of some sort of pristine indigenous community” (43). For Rabasa, a subaltern studies perspective is one that offers the “possibility of interrupting narratives that end up in single histories” (5). He insists that it is essential to distinguish between the

notions of “premodern” and “nonmodern” in order to comprehend the existence of life-worlds beyond, or outside, the limits of modernity (5). He writes,

If the “premodern” carries a built-in teleology in the “pre-” that situates forms of life as “not-yet-modern,” the concept of “nonmodern” enables us to conceive of “elsewheres” not delimited in their definition to propositions about what is modern that one inevitably finds in the prefix “pre-,” or in the negation “anti-.” The nonmodern should be considered an elsewhere unbound by modern conceptions of history that privilege the institutions, historical events, and philosophical concepts that have defined the West. (5).

Rabasa’s understanding of subaltern insurgency is that it holds the capacity to continuously re-invent itself by remaining on the exterior of modernity but nevertheless adapting itself to conditions of domination under successive regimes of power. The Zapatistas, for Rabasa, embody “hybrid cultural and political practices that combine modern and nonmodern forms” (39).

By exploring the possibilities that arise from dwelling within both modern and “nonmodern” temporalities, the videos produced by Zapatista communities expose the limits of hegemonic history’s logic of narrativization. As Edouard Glissant has observed from the perspective of coloniality in the Caribbean, Western modernity’s self-conception as a “Totality,” from which the life-worlds, knowledges, and subjectivities of non-Western peoples are aggressively erased, is a function of its discursive practices in the field of History. In order for the West to produce and reproduce itself as the universal ideal of humanity, Glissant writes, “History is written with a capital H. It is a totality that

excludes other histories that do not fit into that of the West” (75). The hegemonic modes of narrating the historical past privilege and magnify the truths, values, and achievements of Europe, while denying the legitimacy (as knowledge) of other modes of registering and engaging with collective cultural memories. For Glissant, the West’s monopolization of modernity employs History as a colonizing instrument “to organize a Total System based on a discriminatory sequence (great civilizations, great states, great religions) indispensable in such a project” (76). He argues that taking account of the struggle against a totalizing notion of History must be a fundamental concern in understanding subaltern resistance and decolonization because marginalized peoples have never ceased their efforts to protect their pasts from the dominance of a singular History. He writes that it is against the “hegemony of a History with a capital H ... that peoples who have until now inhabited the hidden side of the earth fought, at the same time they were fighting for food and freedom” (76). The videos produced in the Caracoles enact their resistance at the colonial horizon of History, where the denial of indigenous coevalness is challenged through the Zapatistas’ critical engagement with modernity (technology, nation state, globalization, etc.), which simultaneously embodies non-modern perspectives on the past. Just as the Zapatistas reminded the Mexican government (and the rest of the world) in the “Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle” that “We are a product of 500 years of struggle,” the documentary videos function as an intervention into the supposedly universal historical narrative which modernity constructs. The representation of indigenous communities of resistance serves to expose the other side of modernity, that is, coloniality.

It is vital to emphasize that the representation of Zapatismo as a critical engagement with modernity (but from its exterior) is not a project that advocates for mere acceptance of indigenous life-worlds, languages, and cultures from the centers of national and global power. In their focalization through the perspectives of communities in resistance, the videos demonstrate that other modes of existence are possible and have been practiced on the borders of hegemonic modernity since its inception. As Mignolo writes in *The Idea of Latin America*, the effort of the Zapatistas is not to gain recognition or tolerance from the nation (or from other centers), but rather to radically transform the structures which work to undermine and erase the worldviews and knowledges constituted by indigenous resistance: “The question is not inclusion but inter-culturality, a shared project based on different ‘origins’ confronting the colonial wound and overcoming the imperial/national pride and interests” (*Idea* 124). For Mignolo, an inter-cultural perspective is one that goes beyond ethnic identities and traditions to conceive forms of knowledge that serve as epistemological bridges between groups of people. Recognition that is granted by the powerful to the powerless, as is most often the case in the neo-liberal models of multiculturalism, only preserves the current configuration of the geopolitics of knowledge that have upheld the global colonial matrix of power. The Zapatistas’ articulation of the 500-year history of their struggle brings into focus the possibility of living with multiple epistemologies and points to a process of building a world “donde quepan muchos mundos” [in which many worlds fit] (“Cuarta Declaración” 89).

3.4 Documenting a History of Resistance in “Arte en rebeldía”

“Arte en rebeldía” is a video produced in 2007 in the Tzotz Choj region of the Caracol of Morelia, and it now forms part of *Compilation XIX* in the Promedios collection. In a conversation with another staff member of Promedios, Mario Najera, I learned that the videos were compiled in chronological order as well on a thematic basis. Each compilation contains up to three videos from more or less the same period and with some thematic links between them. Promedios has published a catalogue of the video collection on their website, and it provides basic information (e.g. locations and dates) for each of the videos along with a short description or synopsis of the content. These descriptive paragraphs have been written by Promedios staff members and are addressed to potential buyers. “Arte en rebeldía” forms part of a compilation with two other videos, “Letritas para nuestras palabras” [Little Letters for our Words] (2005), and “El camino de la nueva salud” [The Path of New Health] (2007). The descriptions in the catalogue focus on the content, but they also suggest that these documentaries have an expository or didactic purpose. For instance, the description of “Arte en rebeldía” reads as follows: “los camarógrafos zapatistas documentan la realización de un mural comunitario. Jóvenes muralistas y autoridades autónomas comparten la experiencia de esta trabajo colectivo y hablan de la importancia y el significado de los murales en las comunidades en rebeldía” [Zapatista videographers document the completion of a communal mural. Young muralists and members of the autonomous assembly share the experience of this collective work and speak about the importance and significance of the murals in the communities in resistance] (Promedios “Catálogo” 14). One of the underlying implications apparent in the text is that the video was produced to be viewed outside the

Zapatista communities in order to relate, explain, and provide examples of their collective projects, and how they are organized. The “marketing” material of the videos illustrates the practical necessity of crafting a political message in terms that are recognizable to viewers within the established conventions of the documentary form, and this reflects how the video project’s goal of indigenous self-representation must be achieved through a visual language largely constructed by mainstream media.

Inseparable from the Zapatistas’ politics of self-representation is the production process through which the Zapatistas plan, record, and edit their videos. As I mentioned previously, video making in the Zapatista communities is a collective project, and “Arte en rebeldía” is not an exception to this, as is reflected at the end of the video in the credits. The production credits list only the first names of those who participated in the making of the video. About twenty people are listed as muralists, five as camera operators, and three as editors. The participants’ identities as they appear in the credits link them to their membership in community. By using only their first names, the videomakers suggest a sense of familiarity, camaraderie, and cohesion. The music used in “Arte en rebeldía” also denotes communal solidarity, as the songs “Himno Zapatista” and “Durito y yo” are productions of Radio Zapatista Insurgente, another Zapatista collective organization. “Arte en rebeldía” is a video that emphasizes a collective process inscribed with human, material, and epistemological elements that comprise the politics and identity of Zapatismo²¹.

²¹ The word Zapatismo is used to refer to the Zapatista movement as a whole, including the elements of armed struggle as well as the efforts to construct collective, democratic, and autonomous communities.

“Arte en rebeldía” disrupts the structure of the conventional expository documentary insofar as the people who both produce the video and are the subjects of it share the same subaltern position and perspective. That is, instead of using a conventional omniscient or journalistic standpoint to mediate between the audience and the subjects being documented, “Arte en rebeldía” speaks with a collective voice. This is achieved in several ways, including the lack of a single narrator, the reliance on testimonies of community members to transmit the message, and the active camera which includes candid moments as well as planned shots. The collective voice of the video eliminates the question of individual authorship since the points of view that are expressed cannot be attributed to a particular director in the conventional sense. Further, the videomakers do not base their perspective on any claims of objectivity or neutrality. They are transparent about the fact that their political agenda informs their decisions about what to film, how, when and where. Film scholar Erick Barnouw, in his well-known book, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, writes that “Documentarists make endless choices: of topic, people, vistas, angles, lenses, juxtapositions, sounds, words. Each selection is an expression of a point of view, whether conscious or not. Any documentary group that claims to be objective is merely asserting a conviction that its choices have a special validity and deserves everyone’s acceptance and admiration” (344). The Zapatista videomakers are fully aware that their indigenous voices are generally not heard within global modernity and that their knowledge, ideas, and perspectives are considered retrograde at best, and pre-modern, infantile, or primitive at worst. They are conscious of the fact that their subaltern position inscribes their message with an intrinsic lack of validity from the hegemonic perspective. By explicitly politicizing their videos instead of

adopting a tone of objectivity, they implicitly question the “ideal” documentary discourse of impartiality and detachment, which in many cases conceals a point of view that serves the interests of power.

“Arte en rebeldía” is a documentary video of about 25 minutes in length which examines its subject (i.e., Zapatista communal art projects) primarily through the testimony of the artists and community members and by means of footage of different stages of the muralists’ work, from initial discussions and planning through to its completion. But as I have been trying to suggest, the video also goes beyond its stated subject matter and functions as part of a larger project concerned with critically adapting the visual language of documentary in order to put forward a resistant politics and of indigenous self-representation and historical consciousness. Certainly, the work of the muralists has significant conceptual overlaps with the work of the videomakers, since both are dealing with questions of representation. The principal difference, of course, is that the murals are intended primarily for the Zapatista community itself, while the videomakers have an external audience in mind. The video makes a number of significant gestures that signal how the murals are framed by the same political structure as the video itself. In the opening scenes, for example, the videomakers show a group of three young people working on a small mural (Fig. 1). Immediately afterwards, it becomes apparent that the mural actually serves as the title screen for the video (Fig. 2). In this way, the videomakers visually suggest a concrete correspondence between their own project and the one being documented. Furthermore, they use visual strategies to make it clear to the audience that these collective efforts form part of a shared project of autonomy and resistance. Directly following the title screen, the videomakers insert an image of a

warning sign that is commonly placed near the outskirts of autonomous indigenous communities in Chiapas (Fig. 3). This image addresses the audience, suggesting to them that the video intends to represent subject matter that moves beyond the boundaries of hegemonic modernity. The warnings force the audience to reflect on their own positionality relative to global and state structures of power, asking them to consider how this informs their reception of the Zapatistas' message. The videomakers emphasize even more clearly that their perspective takes shape at the border between modernity and its exterior when they show a large mural that says "Bienvenidos," literally welcoming the spectators into the autonomous Caracol (Fig. 4). The mural also includes the name of the Caracol in written in Tzeltal, an indigenous language of the region. The combination of warning and welcome, coupled with the emphasis on the local history of indigenous resistance, provides an important introduction to the video's politics.



Figure 1: Muralists at work in the opening scene of "Arte en rebeldía."



Figure 2: The video's title screen appears painted as a mural.



Figure 3: A warning sign shown in the opening sequence. Signs such as this one are a common sight in the highlands of Chiapas. The text can be translated as follows: "You are in Zapatista Territory in Rebellion. Here the People rule and government obeys."



Figure 4: This mural is featured in the opening sequence of the video. The word "Bienvenidos" means "Welcome." The figure on the left is Emiliano Zapata, a famed leader of the Mexican Revolution, and the namesake of the Zapatista movement. The text surrounding Zapata translates as "Land and liberty. The land belongs to those who work it." On the right side of the mural, the name of the Caracol is written in Spanish and Tzeltal, and can be translated as "Whirlwind of Our Words." This is another name given to Caracol IV Morelia.

Some of the testimonies in the first part of the video explain the background of the mural painting project. The Zapatistas began painting murals almost at the same time they started producing videos, a few years after their uprising in 1994. As the movement grew more organized, there was a greater need for buildings and structures to accommodate different community projects, and these buildings then became a venue for communal artworks that represented the collective efforts of the people. The diversity of the themes of the mural reflects the collective decisions from which the designs originate. One of the members of the municipal council interviewed in the video explains the decision-making process. Sometimes an individual member of the community makes a proposal for a mural, and other times the murals are requested by assemblies or by the representatives of the Junta del buen gobierno. Either way, the idea for a mural is presented in a meeting and discussed with different organizations within the communities. The council member sums up the process by saying, "Es decisión de todos" [It's everyone's decision]. The people who participate in the actual painting of the murals

are mostly youths, some of whom are inexperienced and others who have had more practice in drawing or painting. One of the purposes of appointing people with different degrees of experience and exposure to painting is to encourage and produce collaborative learning-teaching environments and experiences.

In general terms, the murals share some visual features. For example, the drawings or figures in the murals usually lack perspective, depth, light, and shadows. In “Arte en rebeldía” we see murals from different periods of time. The newest ones represent the current organizations in the Caracoles, and each one of them has its own promoters. These organizations or assemblies include Health, Education, Production, Women, and La junta de buen gobierno. An important goal of the video is precisely to explain and show the steps that were taken in 2006 when the older murals in the Caracoles were replaced with new ones. This replacement of murals is literal, i.e., the old murals were erased and new ones were painted. The explanation given in the video for replacing the murals is simply that they are old (See Fig. 5 & 6). They were painted around 1998, and that new murals are needed to represent the current stage and organization of the Caracoles, especially of Morelia, since the production comes from this community.



Figure 5: Example of an older mural



Figure 6: Example of an older mural



Figure 7: Example of a newer mural, showing a woman working

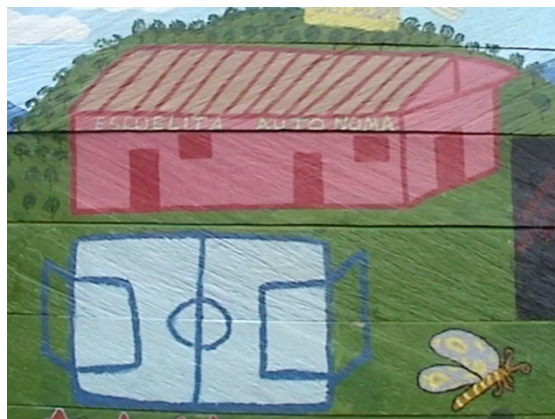


Figure 8: Example of a newer mural, showing an autonomous school

The new murals, as I have already pointed out, depict the current centers that organize important aspects of the social, economic and political organization of the caracoles. One of the images above (Fig. 7), for instance, shows a women working on the fields, and it represents the collective work that the Zapatistas engage when producing crops and also the organization that coordinates this kind of work. Another image (Fig. 8) shows a “little autonomous school” (“escuelita autónoma”). The Zapatistas continue to resist the Mexican system of education that teaches Spanish to the indigenous people with the purpose of integrating them to the national body of Mexican society. In the autonomous schools, subjects are taught in indigenous languages and the students study from textbooks produced in the communities rather than those published by the state²².

The most recent murals reflect the ways in which the Caracoles continue to resist the hegemonic politics of the Mexican nation, modernity, and globalization. They do this throughout their autonomous collective organizations and centers. Part of their resistance comes from their statements on technology and modernity. The indigenous Zapatistas

²² The program of autonomous education is the subject of another video production “Letritas para nuestras palabras” [Little Letters for Our Words], which forms part of the same compilation with “Arte en Rebeldía.”

portrayed in the murals of the centers and organizations show that so-called customs and traditional forms of communication, structures of work, and economic organization exist in relation with so-called modern techniques. A clear example of this can be seen in the mural on the health center (Fig. 9). A promoter of health explains that in this center they use natural medicine and that the people who work in the center collect the medicinal plants which are available within the region where the Zapatista communities are located. This is portrayed in the mural with drawings of bottles inside the clinic, which, as the promoter explains, contain “plantas medicinales,” but also doses of chemical medicine.



Figure 9: Detail of the mural on the health center

This is one of the ways in which the murals show the indigenous communities are not alien to modernity, but engaged with it from the exteriority. The painting of new murals, more than emphasizing a rupture with the past and a narrative of progress, reflects a concern with a continuation of the past in the present day. This continuity as a narrative of resistance informs the act of erasing the previous murals in order to paint new ones that reflect the current state of the Caracoles. The older mural that stated clearly, and in Spanish, “500 años de Resistencia,” has been replaced by other images which are still informed by the same ideas of resistance crystallized in the organization of

the autonomous communities. Along the same lines, the older mural showing armed Zapatistas wearing black ski masks reflected the need for violent resistance at the beginning of the uprising. In the Caracoles, not all of the members belong to the EZLN, which works as a separate organization, but they nonetheless share the same politics, and the unity between them is reflected in the new murals with the images of figures in black ski masks. In one of the new murals, for instance, we see a woman wearing a black ski mask while farming the crops.

The murals reflect the current state of affairs and modes of organization in the Zapatista communities. In this sense, the murals are a continuation of the Zapatista's political agenda, especially in terms of rebellion and resistance. In order to sustain this, older murals are erased and replaced with new ones to reflect turning points in the Zapatista movement. This erasure of art and history is a direct attack on hegemonic modes of representing indigenous cultures and peoples. Such depictions tend to freeze the indigenous and their representations as fossilized in the pre-Columbian past, as though they belonged in museums. In contrast, the Zapatista murals present a dynamic temporality, where the past is constantly incorporated into the present.

The rebellion in Zapatista art as shown in the video is inseparable from the voice and agency of the movement that declares its continuity alongside the hegemonic modernity that denies its relevance. The videos are evidence of the knowledge and skill of the community members in appropriating the techniques and conventional language of documentary to promote their own project of resistance. In this way, the Zapatistas use video to form their own discourse that contests the dominant narratives that would render them invisible.

Conclusion

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon asserts that, “When the colonized intellectual writing for his people uses the past, he must do so with the intention of opening up the future, of spurring them into action and fostering hope” (167). In this instance, Fanon seems to suggest the possibility of a new form of historical knowledge, one that reflects the dynamics of decolonial struggle and the potentiality of a new humanism rooted in this knowledge. Recourse to past societies cannot be informed and structured by a monotopic hermeneutics which reads and interprets from a purportedly ahistorical, disinterested, or objective vantage point. The purpose is not to replace the Eurocentric conception of history with a similarly narrow and restricted epistemology. Rather, the effort needs to be to mobilize local history to critically engage Eurocentrism in ways that reveal the violent assimilation of non-Western peoples’ pasts and historical cultures into a version of history that relegates them to the status of myth, folklore, or non-history. The histories of African societies, for instance, should be Afro-centric, but this re-centering does not imply another monotopic hermeneutic of history. On the contrary, it signals the importance of recognizing the multiple *locals* that the global hegemony of modernity attempts to subdue. Eurocentric histories of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other parts of the world do nothing to reflect their own positionality. The task of decolonizing history is to reflect critically on plural loci of enunciation, to highlight the places of writing or reading, and to strengthen the ethical commitments that inform each local history and the vision of liberated futures that emerges from it. The decolonial historian must situate herself at the border between hegemonic and subaltern

versions of the past, and she must find the means to draw upon this situation to conceive new pluriversal histories.

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