

Catholic Social Teaching: Toward a Decolonial Praxis

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Abstract: The claims to universality in the thought of Jacques Maritain and Catholic social teaching present a problem: they tend not to perceive their own entanglement in modernity and its hidden underside of colonial oppression. First, I explore this problem by drawing upon the scholarship of Catholic social ethicist Mary E. Hobgood to underscore the internal contradictions between three different social models in Catholic social teaching: feudal organic, liberal orthodox, and radical liberationist. I situate Maritain's work within these social models. Second, I utilize Sylvia Wynter's appropriation of Frantz Fanon's sociogenetic approach as a way of understanding how people and institutions are malformed by dominant modern epistemologies. I argue that the Roman Catholic Church lacks a coherent and credible praxis of transformation. Finally, I suggest three starting points to initiate shifts toward a decolonial ethic of Catholic social teaching.

This essay confronts a predicament in Catholic social teaching (CST): the Roman Catholic Church inaugurated a catastrophic metaphysical transformation of power, knowledge, and being in the 15th century that is nothing less than a counter scandal to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹ By “metaphysical catastrophe,” I mean the ways the church divided the world, peoples, and diverse ways of thinking and being into “degrees of being human.”² This concerns not only the violences inflicted upon peoples deemed less human; practitioners of CST should heed Aimé Césaire's admonition to “study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral

¹ I am deeply thankful to the reviewer who provided thorough and comprehensive comments on the initial draft of this essay.

² Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality,” Fondation Frantz Fanon (October 23, 2016), 13, fondation-frantzfanon.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/maldonado-torres_outline_of_ten_theses-10.23.16.pdf.

relativism.”³ Utilizing the terms of decolonial praxis, I refer to the intersecting domains of global racial, class, gender, sex, and epistemic hierarchies as the colonial matrix of power (CMP).⁴ “We are all in the matrix,” writes cultural anthropologist Walter Mignolo, and “each node is interconnected with all the rest, and the matrix cannot be observed and described by an observer located outside the matrix that cannot be observed—that observer would be the God of Christian theology or the Subject of secular Reason.”⁵ The Roman Catholic Church and its social teaching are embedded in the epistemologies and structures of the colonial matrix of power, and the church tends to lack self-critical consciousness of its complicity in the CMP.

The Roman Catholic Church and its social teaching tend to operate in an hermetically sealed bubble of Western, Eurocentric epistemologies. Even when Jacques Maritain or particular enunciations of CST claim to critique modernity, they are not immune to Eurocentrism or the CMP. Not unlike modern social theory within Western thought, CST and Maritain seem blind to mythologies that perpetuate the violent predicament of our epoch, that is, the CMP. Theologian M. Shawn Copeland frames our epoch this way:

Despite its reverence for Being and beings; despite its intense sacramental, and, therefore symbolic character; despite its intimate knowledge of, irrevocable relation to flesh—racialization of flesh has shaped Christianity, and thus Roman Catholicism, almost from its origins: women, Jews, people of color (especially, indigenous and black peoples) have undergone metaphysical violence.⁶

The epistemological claims to universality, as enunciated through the hierarchy’s articulation of its social teaching, hide its complicity

³ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review, [1972], 2000), 35, emphasis in original. I do not update Césaire’s language to maintain his clarity while acknowledging that patriarchal language is constitutive of the CMP.

⁴ Anibal Quijano is credited with originating the term “patrón colonial de poder.” See Anibal Quijano, “Colonialidad y modernidad-racionalidad,” *Los Conquistados: 1492 y la población indígena América*, ed. Heraclio Bonilla (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo/FLASCO, 1992), 437–447.

⁵ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 16.

⁶ M. Shawn Copeland, “Anti-Blackness and White Supremacy in the Making of American Catholicism,” *American Catholic Studies* 127, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 6–7, doi.org/10.1353/acs.2016.0038. Copeland cites philosopher Gianni Vattimo for the phrase “metaphysical violence” as the attempt to master the real by force from “Towards an Ontology of Decline,” in *Reading Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, ed. Giovanni Borradori (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 64.

in the origins of colonialism.⁷ Decolonial perspectives, however, interrogate the “locus of enunciation, that is, the geo-political and body political location of the subject that speaks.”⁸ Too often, the church and CST tend to assert universal claims from its unspoken, Western perspective. The church has yet to sufficiently acknowledge its role in the CMP, much less enact an enduring decolonial shift in its ecclesial enunciations and praxis.

I proceed in three steps. First, drawing upon the scholarship of Catholic social ethicist Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, I underscore the internal contradictions between three different social models present in Catholic social teaching: feudal organic, orthodox economic, and radical liberationist. I situate Jacques Maritain’s social philosophy within these conflicting paradigms. Second, drawing upon Frantz Fanon’s sociogenetic analysis of Western coloniality, appropriated through Sylvia Wynter’s hybrid account of humans as eusocial storytelling and biologically implemented living systems, I utilize sociogenesis as a way to interrogate the Roman Catholic origins of coloniality and the pathologies, especially white supremacist, from which it has yet to extricate itself. Finally, I conclude by suggesting three starting points to initiate shifts toward a decolonial ethic of CST and democracy.

This ethic is incommensurable with social change approaches that maintain or only seek to reform the colonial matrix of power.⁹ By incommensurable I mean that the church and white¹⁰ Catholic settlers must relinquish innocence, initiate processes of unlearning dominant modern epistemologies and pathologies, and take up the Gospel call that the first be last and the last first (Matt 20:16). The overturning of the dominant order is a “‘way’ of relinquishing what has failed (which we are likely to treasure) and *receiving* what God will give us.”¹¹ This essay builds upon my *Unlearning White Supremacy: A Spirituality for*

⁷ Samuel Rayan, “Decolonization of Theology,” *Jnanadeepa* nos. 1–2, (1998): 142, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4255241.

⁸ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms,” in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, ed. Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (London: Routledge, 2013), 67.

⁹ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

¹⁰ I am following the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) style guide for use of upper or lower case when referencing Black and White people and Indigenous communities. Not all Black people are African American so I use a person’s preference or specific identity where possible. The NABJ does not use upper case “white” when referencing racist terms or actions, so, for example, I do not capitalize white supremacy or white settlers. I do not change upper or lower case where sources I quote use another style. The NABJ style guide is here: nabjonline.org/news-media-center/styleguide/.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th anniversary edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2018), 132.

Racial Liberation where I argued that unlearning supremacy and all forms of domination entails “beginning the work of acknowledging, gaining consciousness of, and undoing the many ways we have been malformed and deformed by a society that idolizes whiteness.”¹² A critical piece of the process of unlearning and undoing modernity/coloniality, I believe, are rituals of biblical lament.¹³ Ultimately, that means creating conditions of possibility for relinquishing, and dying to, much of what the Roman Catholic Church and white settlers of faith value that perpetuates colonial dominations and pathologies, including relinquishing land, power, and privilege and initiating processes of reparation.¹⁴

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: THREE CONFLICTING SOCIO-ECONOMIC MODELS

In her authoritative examination of three conflicting paradigms in Catholic social teaching, Mary Elizabeth Hobgood illuminates conflicts internal to the church’s social teaching since Leo XIII’s papacy. Hobgood’s analysis unsettles assumptions that Catholic social teaching has progressed beyond premodern organic social theory and that the last century of social teaching represents a “neither liberal nor socialist” “third way.”¹⁵ I situate Jacques Maritain’s Thomistic approach within Hobgood’s analysis.

Hobgood identifies three conflicting economic paradigms in Catholic social teaching since the publication of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891.¹⁶ These models are 1) premodern, feudal organic social theory;¹⁷ 2) modern orthodox economic or liberal theory that “promotes the free agency of autonomous individuals who seek their financial self-

¹² Alex Mikulich, *Unlearning White Supremacy: A Spirituality for Racial Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), xix.

¹³ Mikulich, *Unlearning White Supremacy*, 94–96 and 102–106.

¹⁴ I suggest a set of practices to prepare for and enact repair in chapter five of *Unlearning White Supremacy*. The “p/reparations” I suggest include truthful remembering and listening, racial equity practice, Maafa, and embodying a “blues hope.”

¹⁵ See, for example, John A. Coleman, “Neither Liberal nor Socialist: The Originality of Catholic Social Teaching,” in John A. Coleman, ed., *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 25–42. Coleman wisely situates his interpretation of the church’s social teaching within a broad spectrum of movements that claimed grounding in the tradition.

¹⁶ Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory: Paradigms in Conflict* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991).

¹⁷ See also Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, revised and enlarged edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books and Dove Communications in collaboration with The Center of Concern, 1988), 32–34.

interest in a world presumed . . . to function in a rational and harmonious way”¹⁸; and 3) radical, liberationist theory.¹⁹ There is no decolonial model in the magisterial body of CST. I sketch the use of the models by Leo XIII and Pius XI, John XXIII and Paul VI, John Paul II, and through Latin American, US, and Canadian episcopal statements.

The church’s premodern organic social model is heavily indebted to Thomas Aquinas and European feudal relations. It is called “organic” because of the way Aquinas appropriates Aristotle’s analogical continuum between the social and natural worlds.²⁰ Organic social theory compares society to the human body in which the whole body has priority over individual parts, so the good of society has priority over the needs of individual members. This theory stresses harmony in hierarchical relationships of feudal societies, including dualism between lord-serf, husband-wife, and rich-poor. This hierarchical understanding of feudal relationships applies dualism to the cosmos as well, meaning that the spiritual and eternal hold dominance over the material and historical.²¹ Hobgood notices that organic social theory predisposed the church to critique the individualism of “economic man” in liberal theory, and yet, it also predisposed the church toward accepting the ways capitalism and liberal social theory support hierarchical arrangements.²²

The church’s appropriation of Aquinas’s articulation of commutative and distributive justice affirmed his assumption that feudal social arrangements were divinely sanctioned and thereby good. Aquinas’s interpretation of distributive justice assumes a natural inequality that maintains social ranking and the “obligation of privilege.” The church “taught that endangering one’s status disadvantaged the whole society.”²³ This assumption, which maintains hierarchy and emphasizes paternalistic charity is, however, at odds with the patristic teaching of the Cappadocian fathers on property.²⁴

¹⁸ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 5. Holland and Henriot refer to this model as “liberal” (*Social Analysis*, 34–37).

¹⁹ Holland and Henriot also call this model “radical” (*Social Analysis*, 37–40).

²⁰ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 98.

²¹ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 98.

²² Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 98.

²³ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 99. Hobgood cites Clement of Alexandria’s treatise *The Rich Man’s Salvation* arguing that wealth is not an obstacle to God as long as the “wealthy person is concerned with its paternalistic use.” See note 13, 124.

²⁴ Brian E. Daley, “The Cappadocian Fathers and the Option for the Poor,” in *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel G. Groody (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 77–88. The bishops known as the Cappadocian fathers—Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus—all took the view that “the goods of the world that

The organic sensibility of property relations in Catholic teaching “was, and still is, premodern.”²⁵ An enduring assumption of Catholic social teaching, grounded in the feudal, organic model of society, is that the privileged are capable of benevolence. The organic model assumes the justness of male and class privilege in the patriarchal relations of the family, church, labor unions, and the state. Thus, it aims at preventing social equality because equality would violate the natural law and supposedly lead to anarchy.²⁶ From the perspective of the feudal, organic model, the church must be deeply troubled by Enlightenment liberalism or socialist movements that clamor for alternatives to capitalism.

Yet Leo XIII and Pius XI also offered structural analyses that reflect the radical model. They both acknowledged the relationship between economic power and political control that created conflict between the interests of capital and labor. Pius XI extended Leo’s thought by connecting class conflict and war (*Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 108). Pius argued that charity was not enough to remedy structural exploitation within capitalism; changing structures was necessary for justice and peace (*Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 137). However, Leo XIII and Pius XI pursued social change strategies at odds with their radical analyses. They assumed that economic conflicts would erode if people accepted the universally valid teaching of the church (because it had access to eternal truth not mediated by the world).²⁷ Hobgood explains that their commitment to a premodern, organic social theory “allowed them to ignore their own analyses and assumed that Church teaching and a nonmilitant labor movement would be able to convince elites” to serve the common good.²⁸

Hobgood finds in Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI a very similar dualism between their respective analyses and the model of social change they employ. Pope John XXIII and Paul VI both utilized elements of radical social theory, especially in their concern with global poverty and in qualifying the use and purpose of property. Returning more solidly to early church teaching and Aquinas, they argue that the destination of the earth’s resources is first to serve the sustenance of human beings prior to the rights of private property (*Mater et Magistra*, no. 43; *Pacem in Terris*, no. 22; *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 69). Following Pius XI, Pope Paul VI closely links peace with

supply our needs are gifts of a beneficent creator, intended for the support of all creatures.”

²⁵ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 100.

²⁶ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 101.

²⁷ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 102. Hobgood cites *Quadragesimo Anno*, nos. 11 and 19.

²⁸ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 229–230.

economic justice (*Populorum Progressio*, nos. 49, 55, 76, 83, 87). Paul VI and Vatican II also advocated worker ownership and control, and democratic control of production at every level of society (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 68; *Populorum Progressio*, nos. 34, 65, and *Octogesima Adveniens*, no. 47). However, the change strategies of John XXIII and Paul VI were often in conflict with their radical prescriptions. Both consistently employed the “organic” assumption that governments, international agencies, and power elites were willing and “capable of voluntary responsibility for the domestic and global commonweal (*Mater et Magistra*, no. 54; *Pacem in Terris*, no. 98; *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 65, 70, 71, 74, 83; *Populorum Progressio*, nos. 23, 61, 48–49; *Octogesima Adveniens*, nos. 18, 23; *Justice in the World*, nos. 68, 70).”²⁹

Pope John Paul II’s *On Social Concern* and the US Catholic bishops’ *Economic Justice for All* acknowledge widespread injustice throughout the world. Both aspire to a strategy in which the majority of workers may be owners and/or managers of the instruments of production (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 14; *Economic Justice for All*, no. 300). Yet these documents reflect the prevailing orthodox or liberal economic paradigm “exclusively or almost exclusively.” *On Social Concern*, Hobgood argues, “completely lacks any analysis that can be aligned with the radical model.”³⁰ Similarly, the US bishops insisted that capitalist development was capable of eradicating poverty, and they advocated liberal methods of social change through regulatory and welfare agencies of the present system so that businesses and government could increase jobs, affirmative action, education, and investment policy (*Economic Justice for All*, nos. 92, 110, 163–166).

The radical model is most employed by Latin American and Canadian bishops drawing upon liberation theology. The Latin American conferences at Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1979 were the first to embrace an explicitly radical social model. These documents announced structural transformation of society as integral to the work of social justice, developed a theme of “integral liberation,” and even called the church to take sides with the marginalized and divest from its privileges to become a converted church. However, Hobgood finds both the organic and orthodox economic models at work in these documents, in conflict with the predominant radical model.³¹

Among the hallmarks of Jacques Maritain’s legacy, one must include his contribution to the development of Thomism prior to Vatican II, his influence on the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, his unique articulation of integral

²⁹ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 232.

³⁰ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 233.

³¹ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 163–164.

humanism (particularly in the form that developed after Vatican II),³² and his pragmatic advocacy of a Christian animated democracy. Gustavo Gutierrez, in his classic *A Theology of Liberation*, highlighted Maritain's enunciation of a "New Christendom" and his "distinction of planes."³³ While Gutierrez applauds Maritain's attempt to extricate the church from its medieval shackles, ultimately, Maritain's categories "were not able to shake off the traditional mentality, as we can better see with the help of hindsight."³⁴

I draw upon Gustavo Gutierrez to emphasize both that Maritain's Thomistic categories helped modernize the church's moral theology and social teaching and, simultaneously, maintain a European organic social model. While Maritain's updating of Thomism, especially through his understanding of the relationship between the person and the common good, as well as his Christian-inspired democracy (critical of its bourgeois variant), move him distinctly away from a feudal order, he nonetheless maintains a distinctly Catholic, hierarchical, organic social model. Even if Maritain's approach makes significant strides beyond a feudal order, it still attempts to unify society from the basis of a Eurocentric, Catholic Christian vision of a harmonizing, hierarchical order of family, nation, and society. While his "open Thomism" contributes to the "liberal turn" at Vatican II, he writes that he feels compelled to be anti-modern "because of the spirit of all modern things that have proceeded from the anti-Christian revolution."³⁵ Being anti-modern, it must be noted, does not decolonize ontology or epistemology; does not shift the geopolitical or the geo-body politics of knowledge, to which I turn with the example of Frantz Fanon below. As decolonial anthropologist Walter Mignolo explains, "denunciation within the colonizer's society, while important, is not sufficient itself. It is necessary for dissenting actors to join projects of decolonization (political and epistemic) that are, at once, *articulated by the colonized yet not a project of the colonized elite*."³⁶

³² Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1983), 207–232.

³³ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th Anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 34–38.

³⁴ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 35.

³⁵ Thomas F. O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 179. O'Meara quotes Maritain in *The Angelic Doctor*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Dial, 1931), xi–xii.

³⁶ Walter Mignolo, "The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-coloniality," in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, ed. Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (New York: Routledge, 2013), 312, emphasis in the original.

James Baldwin points to the need to decolonize CST in his review of Maritain's *The Person and the Common Good*:

The gin-soaked, Benzedrine-ridden children of our violent age are inclined—not without some reason—to hold philosophers in some doubt as being irritatingly serene watchers of a bloodbath; their rules and their conclusions may all be rather impressive, but of what relevance are they, how can these presumably hard-earned precepts do anything to make more bearable, the daily, urgent life?³⁷

Baldwin found Maritain's argument "obscured by dogma," "circular," and concluded that it is "unhelpful to be assured of future angels when mysteries of the present flesh are so far from being solved."³⁸ Baldwin's review underscores the need for decolonizing CST. Hobgood demonstrates that as long as Catholic social teaching employs tripartite models of social analysis and "continues to employ social change strategies primarily within the orthodox model, its social analysis will be internally incoherent."³⁹ More importantly, in terms of living the Gospel, the church "seeks economic security, and racial and patriarchal privilege, and is more comfortable with the orthodox model that supports its own interests."⁴⁰ Instead, I now turn to a model of social analysis and transformation—the decolonial option—that does not yet exist in CST discourse.

FRANTZ FANON'S SOCIOGENETIC ACCOUNT OF COLONIALISM

A fundamental problem for CST is not constructing the most true and objective definition of "man" or clarifying "justice" but, rather, unveiling its own entanglement in coloniality. CST needs to unlearn coloniality and relearn from the perspectives of the *damnés*—the body politics of knowledge, so that the *damnés* may re-exist on their own terms. The body politics of knowledge is a critical epistemological dimension of decoloniality. Frantz Fanon describes his physical, bodily experience of recognizing that French society viewed him as less than human and that this dominant, racist view is inhuman. Viewed from a decolonial or Fanonian perspective, the lack of a body politics of knowledge in CST reveals its Eurocentric, white supremacist worldview.

³⁷ James Baldwin, "The Person and the Common Good by Jacques Maritain," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon, 2010, originally published as "Present and Future," *New Leader*, March 13, 1948), 264.

³⁸ Baldwin, "The Person and the Common Good," 264–266.

³⁹ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 243.

⁴⁰ Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory*, 252.

I began to learn the body politics of knowledge when I was involved in a grassroots anti-poverty initiative in San Francisco in 1992. In the wake of the Rodney King verdict, I joined a group of African Americans protesting the April 29, 1992, acquittal of three police officers for their beating of Rodney King. At the corner of Golden Gate Avenue and Jones Street, then one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, our group quickly found ourselves surrounded by police fully equipped with armor and weapons who, it seemed, were prepared to use deadly force against us. My Black American friends and colleagues let me know that the threat of violence I was experiencing was their daily existence. For me, it was only the beginning of bodily co-sensing how the US American democracy colonizes Black bodies and spaces.

This is when the Stanford University philosopher Sylvia Wynter wrote an open letter to her colleagues entitled “‘No Humans Involved.’”⁴¹ Wynter describes a radio news report she heard stating that “public officials in the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely use the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos. N.H.I. means ‘no humans involved.’”⁴² Her letter begins with a discussion of how classification systems order human behavior. Everyone, including minorities, is equal in this classificatory schema, Wynter explains, “except in one category—that of peoples of African and Afro-mixed descent who, as Andrew Hacker points out in his recent book, are *the least equal of all*.”⁴³

This raises the question: whence did this classification system come? How did these highly educated—college and law school educated—judicial professionals “conceive of what it means to be both *human* and *North American* in the *kinds of terms* (i.e., to be white, of Euroamerican culture and descent, middle class, college educated, and suburban) within whose logic, the jobless and usually school drop-out/push-out category of young Black males can be *perceived*, and *therefore behaved towards*, only as *Lack* of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American?”⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, would not most, if not all, highly educated judicial professionals profess belief in universal human dignity?

This is an unsettling question for Roman Catholic social teaching. Even as the Roman Catholic hierarchy, Catholic social teaching

⁴¹ Sylvia Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” in *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 1–17.

⁴² Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved,’” 1.

⁴³ Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved,’” 1. She cites Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Scribner’s, 1992).

⁴⁴ Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved,’” 1–2, emphasis in original.

advocates, and theologians may profess values of universal dignity and justice, that does not contend (by itself) with the ways in which all of us have been malformed by the colonial matrix of power (CMP). As theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher reminds us, “It was in the academic spaces of theological training that ideas of Christian supremacy were manufactured as knowledge, to be put to the project of conquest, colonization, and conversion as they made their way from lecture hall to pulpit to legislative assemblies.”⁴⁵

How might we begin to take up the question “where did the system of classification that categorizes Black people as less than human originate?” Sylvia Wynter focuses attention on the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s work on autopoiesis, which defines living organisms “not as they are objects of observation and description, nor as interacting systems, but as self-contained unities whose only reference is to themselves.”⁴⁶ The orthodox assumption in the 1960s was that the frog’s *environment determined* what the frog could see. Maturana and Varela were thinking outside the orthodox paradigm. It is not coincidental, she notes, that Maturana and Varela were taking part in 1960s protests that helped them recognize how ignorant they were of social injustices.⁴⁷ Maturana and Varela revealed that, rather than the environment determining what the frog could see, the frog *specifies on its own* what is to be known in the environment; in other words, they discovered how biological organisms are “*autonomously functioning, living,*” that is, autopoietic systems.⁴⁸

Wynter is not suggesting that humans are biologically determined; she recognizes that systems like the beehive are “purely biological eusocial systems.”⁴⁹ By contrast, human eusocial systems “are instead

⁴⁵ Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 9. For a more in-depth examination of how the violence of colonialism has shaped US higher education, see Sharon Stein, *Unsettling the University: Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022). See also Theresa Ambo and Theresa Rocha Beardall, “Performance or Progress? The Physical and Rhetorical Removal of Indigenous Peoples in Settler Land Acknowledgements at Land-Grab Universities,” *American Educational Research Journal*, 60, no. 1 (2022): 103–140, doi.org/10.3102/00028312221141981.

⁴⁶ Robert S. Cohen and Marx W. Wartofsky, “Editorial Preface,” in Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), v.

⁴⁷ Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as a Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 27–28. Wynter invites readers to notice and reflect on the ways social uprisings “have tremendous links to the transformation of knowledge.”

⁴⁸ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 28.

⁴⁹ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 28.

hybrid language cum storytelling (if biologically implemented) living systems; but they function according to laws analogous to those regulatory laws of the supra-autopoietic system, which is the beehive.”⁵⁰ Wynter thus refers to these laws of *hybrid human auto-speciation* as autopoiesis.

Highlighting the dynamic interconnection between our genetic and non-genetic codes as “our first set of instructions” (the biological), Wynter interrelates “our second set of instructions” (what she refers to as our narrative mode of being) to the biological set. Her short terms for these instructions are *bios* and *mythoi*. The problem is: how do we become aware of the systems within which particular groups of people construct particular *genres* of the human? Wynter uses the term *genres*, as a play on gender, to highlight how humanness is not only *bios*, but also the stories we tell about our origins that also construct species-specific groupings of race, class, tribe, sexuality, etc.⁵¹ Importantly, *genres* of the human are “enacted *outside* our conscious awareness—even though we ourselves have always rigorously and behaviorally adhered to them as indispensable to our genre-specific praxes of being hybridly human!”⁵²

How do we become aware of our subjective sense of self and of the “referent-we” in which “we,” for example—North American white settlers— reinscribe our sense of place and kin as a process of autopoiesis? Who is and is not included in specific use of the referent-we? The “abyssal line” is one way to sort out who is included or excluded. In his development of Fanon’s description of *les damnés*, and the “zone of nonbeing” or subhumanity oppressed peoples inhabit, Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes the “abyssal line,” as marking “the radical division between forms of metropolitan sociability and forms of colonial sociability that has characterized the Western world since the fifteenth century.”⁵³

White settlers on the colonial side of the abyssal line will likely be unable, on their own, to become self-reflective in response to the

⁵⁰ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 28, emphasis in original.

⁵¹ Wynter and McKittrick, *Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?*, 79, note 58. McKittrick explains that “Wynter put forward this hypothesis, revolving around ‘gender’ and ‘genre,’ in the paper ‘Gender or the Genre of the Human?,’ presented at a symposium held in honor of Sherley Anne Williams. A writer, poet, and professor of literature at UC San Diego, Williams first invited Wynter to join the faculty in the Department of Literature there.”

⁵² Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 28.

⁵³ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 20.

question because of *where* and *how* we live.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the question concerns the most pressing life and death predicaments today. There is an existential need to become aware of our origin myths in an epoch where, as “an already *postnuclear* cum post-cracking-the-code-of-our-genome species, we are now faced with an additional climate crisis situation in which it becomes even more imperative that these laws, for the first time in our species’s history, be no longer allowed to function *outside our conscious awareness*.”⁵⁵

Wynter draws heavily upon W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon to reveal the geopolitical and paradoxical ways people socially-historically constructed as subhuman gain conscious bodily awareness of hybrid human auto-speciation or autopoiesis. I have drawn upon W. E. B. Du Bois’s lived experience of double-consciousness in *Unlearning White Supremacy* as a gift⁵⁶ whereby white settler Christians might recognize, and begin to undo, a 500 year history of internalized supremacy and anti-Blackness. Here I draw upon Frantz Fanon, who described his own lived bodily experience of double consciousness within French colonialism that created an epistemological and ontological division between who counts and who does not count, as fully human. Wynter’s reading of Fanon through Maturana and Varela informs my approach.

Fanon described his lived experience of an ontological division in *Les Damnés de la Terre*. Fanon wrote that “decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation . . . continued at the point of the bayonet and under cannon fire.”⁵⁷ Fanon responds directly to Roman Catholics when he argues that “by calling on humanity, on the belief in dignity, on love, on charity, it would be easy to prove, or to win the admission, that the black is the equal of the white. But my purpose is quite different: What I want to do is help the black man free himself from the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment.”⁵⁸ The church has played a key role in establishing the

⁵⁴ Alex Mikulich, “White Habitus: The Ecosystem of Anti-Black White Supremacy,” in *Unlearning White Supremacy*, chapter three.

⁵⁵ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 28. Original italics.

⁵⁶ In addition to Du Bois’s gift of double-consciousness, I draw upon Fanon’s appropriation of Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship to articulate a decolonial shift toward “co-sensing” reality and practicing receptive generosity in *Unlearning White Supremacy*, 82–90.

⁵⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), 2.

⁵⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 30. Originally published in French as *Peau noire masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952).

pathology of white superiority and manipulation with which we must contend today.

Born in Martinique on July 20, 1925 and a decorated veteran of the Free French forces in World War II, Frantz Fanon attained his medical degree in psychiatry from the University of Lyons. He served a psychiatric hospital in Algeria before resigning and devoting his life to the decolonization of Algeria. He died of leukemia in 1961. Biographer David Macey enlists Lévi-Strauss's term *bricolage* to describe how Fanon wrote *Peau noire masques blancs*, eclectically integrating works by Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the emerging discourse of negritude,⁵⁹ and psychiatry.⁶⁰

Fanon describes colonization as a “zone of nonbeing” because the black man “is the result of a series of aberrations of affect; he is rooted at the core of the universe from which he must be extricated.” He continues to explain that he proposes “nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself. We shall go very slowly because there are two camps: the white and the black.”⁶¹ In the war between these two camps, “the black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level. . . . The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black in his blackness.”⁶²

The psychological inferiority complex is the result of a double process. This double process, he explains, is “primarily economic” and “subsequently, the internalization—or better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority.” He continues to elaborate through an often quoted, critical paragraph:

Reacting against the constitutionalist tendency of the late nineteenth century, Freud insisted that the individual factor be taken into account through psychoanalysis. He substituted for a phylogenetic theory the ontogenetic perspective. It will be seen that the black man's alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny . . . let us say this is a question of a sociodiagnostic.

What is the prognosis? “But society, unlike biochemical processes, cannot escape human influences. Man is what brings society into

⁵⁹ David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Life* (London: Granta, 2000), 181. The term negritude was implemented in the 1930s at a time when, as the Guyanese poet Leon-Contras Damas explained, the Black man “wanted to become a historical and cultural actor, and not just an object of domination or a consumer of culture. . . . The word ‘negritude’ was coined in the most racist moment in history, and we accepted the word *nègre* as a challenge.” Proponents included Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and Fanon, among others.

⁶⁰ Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 162–163.

⁶¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 8.

⁶² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 9.

being. The prognosis is in the hands of those who are willing to get rid of the worm-eaten roots of the structure.”⁶³ Sociogenesis reveals a geo-body political way to understand the social historical origins of race. Fanon opposes sociogenesis to *phylogeny*, the origins of species, and *ontogeny*, the development of an individual organism. Ontology does not help in understanding the origins of the double process because “Every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society. . . . The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.” Fanon goes on: “Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and which imposed itself on him.”⁶⁴ Fanon experiences bodily how Black people are simultaneously forced to see themselves through their own eyes, their “customs and sources,” and through the eyes of white colonialists who “wiped out” Black people’s customs and sources. He laments being unable to “make meaning for myself,” because “it was the meaning already there, pre-existing, waiting for me.”⁶⁵

Both W. E. B. Du Bois and Fanon, who procured higher education and were inculturated into white bourgeois Western European institutions and languages, perceived what it is to be normal—to be perceived as a “Man”—and to be Black, that is, necessarily less than a man and abnormal. Fanon reveals this division through his experience of being a French *évolué*, one who evolved beyond his “native” Martinique through his fluency in French language and culture. Among his black fellows in Martinique, he experiences normality. This abruptly changes when contact occurs with the white “mother” nation.

As a French *évolué*, Fanon experienced the colonial curriculum which casts islands like Martinique as part of the extended French family yet, at the same time, teaches that Africans are primitive and savage. The slightest contact with the white world ensures “a certain sensitizing action takes place” in which “the black man stops acting as an *actional* person” and only can find self-esteem through the white Other.⁶⁶ Fanon becomes sensitized to a “corporeal schema,” a “definitive structuring of the self and the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world.”⁶⁷ This corporeal schema begins to describe Fanon’s experience of the body politics of knowledge.

⁶³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 13.

⁶⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109–110.

⁶⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 134.

⁶⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 154.

⁶⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111.

Echoing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Fanon reflects on the example of all the movements he makes to begin smoking not out of habit but "implicit knowledge."⁶⁸ Mayra Rivera suggests that implicit knowledge is really "embodied knowledge."⁶⁹ In contrast to Merleau-Ponty's "open and dynamic, yet coherent structure of embodiment," Fanon "experiences constriction."⁷⁰ Perhaps the most famous example Fanon offers of his embodied experience of constriction is "the devastating experience" that "occurred on a cold day in Lyons when Fanon encountered a mother with her child."⁷¹ Fanon tells his now famous story like this:

"Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile. Look, a Negro! It was true. It amused me. "Look, a Negro!" The circle was drawing tighter. I made no secret of my amusement. "Mama, see the Negro! I am frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.⁷²

Fanon's embodied knowledge leads him to discover a "historico-racial schema" that undergirds the imposed corporeal schema. It was no longer a question of experiencing his body in "the third person but in triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places . . . I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected my body to objective examination; I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all: 'Sho' good eatin.'"⁷³ He concludes: "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning, in that white winter day."⁷⁴ The "historico-racial schema" is composed of "white mythologies" and "produces objectification and fragmentation."⁷⁵

White myths of innocence, as well as "an epistemology of ignorance" which, as Charles Mills explains, produces "*the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world*

⁶⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111.

⁶⁹ Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 120.

⁷⁰ Rivera, *Poetics*, 121.

⁷¹ Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 115.

⁷² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111–112.

⁷³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

⁷⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 113.

⁷⁵ Rivera, *Poetics*, 121.

they have made,”⁷⁶ are dysfunctions that hide white violence: “The dominant, Fanon never stops reminding us, have a relation to their own violence, that of which they are the authors, which generally passes via mythologization, that is to say, a discursive derealization, a discourse cut out of history. The function of the myth is to make the victims responsible for the violence whose victims they are.”⁷⁷ Fanon is clear that white colonial racism and objectification of Black people did not come out of nowhere, is not biological, natural, or transhistorical.⁷⁸ Racism in the form of anti-Blackness is a white colonial creation and endures because white society perpetuates mythologies that hide the violence within us. The white myth works, not only through an inverted epistemology (see Charles Mills in note 76), but also through a “bizarre emotional logic” in which racism operates as a way to defend “my lack” of something I want and, ultimately, my own insecurity.⁷⁹ The best way to “short circuit” my own self-realization that I am the source of racism is to project the other as the embodiment of evil and source of the threat.⁸⁰ White European society created Blackness, and especially Black men, as the “phobogenic object” with “all the attributes of malefic power.”⁸¹ White society created a racist imagery of the “Negro as sexual object [that] is the equivalent of an aggressive and frightening object, capable of inflicting abuse and traumas on his victim.”⁸² In the “twisted emotional logic of racism, I, the racist, hence become the victim of you, the ‘racial other’ who undermines and threatens my existence. You, on the other hand, become *my persecutor*, that which represents all that is threatening to me. Hence, I deserve protection against *you*, and *you*, on the other hand, *deserve punishment*.”⁸³ These psychological and political dynamics, as Fanon demonstrates, result in lynching and other forms of governmental regulation, policing, and vigilante violence that repeat, reiterate, and reinforce the sacramentalization of violence—necropolitics.⁸⁴ The church, CST, and its practitioners have yet to contend with the multiple ways sociopolitical and historical

⁷⁶ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18, emphasis in original.

⁷⁷ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 137–138. [First published as *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016).]

⁷⁸ Derek Hook, “Fanon and the Psychoanalysis of Racism,” in *Critical Psychology*, ed. Derek Hook (Lansdowne, South Africa: Juta Academic, 2004), 116. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 134.

⁷⁹ Hook, “Fanon and the Psychoanalysis of Racism,” 134.

⁸⁰ Hook, “Fanon and the Psychoanalysis of Racism,” 134.

⁸¹ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 134. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 155.

⁸² Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 134.

⁸³ Hook, “Fanon and the Psychoanalysis of Racism,” 134, emphasis in original.

⁸⁴ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 137–138. See also Hook, “Fanon and the Psychoanalysis of Racism,” 135.

circumstances of colonial domination interrelate with white pathological violence.

The historical racial schema reinscribes that Black people are perceived as abnormal and white people as normal and good. In other words, Fanon experiences in the Western colonial educational system that in order to be a normal human, an acceptable white bourgeois subject, he must also normally perceive Africans “as *savage, primitive, wicked*, and, as such, the predestined target villains, in French adventure stories, of a range of imperially civilizing French heroes!”⁸⁵

Paradoxically, in their respective lived experiences of double-consciousness, both Du Bois in early twentieth century imperial America and Fanon in mid-twentieth century French colonial Algeria utilize a self-questioning heuristic of mistrust⁸⁶ of their own self-consciousness to discover both the causality of their predicament, a way to critique it and, ultimately, a way to extricate themselves and others from it. Fanon discovered, explains Wynter, “from today’s hindsight . . . the hitherto unknown, unsuspected, yet law-likely functioning, non-physically, non-biologically *determined*, if itself biologically implemented, principle of causality. That principle alone . . . underwrites our *genre-specific* and hybridly instituted human orders of consciousness, together with their respective modes of mind/minding.”⁸⁷

Fanon observes how these dualistic dynamics are replicated in society. Childhood socialization, Fanon finds, is a case in point of this duality between being and nonbeing, man and not man, and “normal” and “abnormal.” He discerns a close connection between the structure of the French family and the nation. In every European country or every “civilized and civilizing” country, Fanon argues, the “family is a miniature of the nation.”⁸⁸ The child finds himself among the same laws, principles, and values and, as a “normal child that has grown up in a normal family will be a normal man. There is no disproportion between the life of the family and the life of the nation.”⁸⁹

Fanon’s sociodiagnostic, comparative analysis of French socialization with the socialization of African Pygmies, reveals an ironic paradox. “Conversely,” he wrote, “when one examines a closed society—that is, a society that has been protected from the flood of civilization—one encounters the same structures as those just

⁸⁵ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 55.

⁸⁶ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 52.

⁸⁷ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 52, emphasis in original.

⁸⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 142.

⁸⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 142.

described” of French society.⁹⁰ Drawing upon the scholarship of Father Trilles’s *L’âme du Pygmée d’Afrique*, Fanon argues that despite Trilles’s attempt to evangelize the Pygmies, Trilles describes conditions of worship, rites, and the survival of myths similar to the characteristics of French families. The characteristics of the family are projected onto the larger social environments in both the French and Pygmy families. If the family is the miniature of the nation in France, then the Pygmy family is a miniature of Pygmy society.

In terms of autopoiesis, Wynter explains that in both cases “they will come to subjectively experience themselves, reflexly in the respective terms of their own unquestioned, genre-specific, *normalcy of being human*.”⁹¹ Simply put, the Pygmies view themselves as humanly normal—they have no experience of being Black or inferior. In both cases therefore, “*normalcy* underwrites their respective societal orders’ status quo system of role allocations, as well as that of their also, always already autonomously invented, storytelling chartered and encoded, thereby auto-centered, genre-specific notions of the Self.”⁹² Wynter unpacks an ironic reverse paradox in Fanon’s comparative analysis. Fanon reveals that “in the everyday run of things—as in the transcosmogonic, transcultural cases of the auto-centered Pygmy and French bourgeois subjects—any questioning of their respective parts of their shared *reflexly subjectively experienced normalcy of being human* is law-likely foreclosed.”⁹³ In other words, it is highly likely that the French bourgeois subjective response of racial phobia is not arbitrary; rather, it is collectively conventional. In contrast, Pygmies subjectively perceive themselves as human.

Returning to the present, Western epistemologies that created modernity/coloniality have developed over more than five hundred years. Some scholars trace the roots of the Roman Catholic Church’s coloniality nearly back to early Christianity.⁹⁴ We must, at the very least, go back to the early 1400s.⁹⁵ After Columbus’s so-called discovery of the “New World,” Pope Alexander issued a series of bulls in 1493 that affirmed both Portugal’s rights to Africa and Spain’s rights to the lands and peoples of the “New World.”⁹⁶ The Catholic partition of the world begins with the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494,

⁹⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 142.

⁹¹ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 55.

⁹² Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 55.

⁹³ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 56, emphasis in original.

⁹⁴ Aloysius Pieris, “The Option for the Poor and the Recovery of Christian Identity: Toward an Asian Theology of Religions Dictated by the Poor,” in *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, 271–289.

⁹⁵ Pius Onyemachi Adiele, *The Popes, the Catholic Church, and the Transatlantic Enslavement of Black Africans 1418–1839* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2017).

⁹⁶ Adiele, *The Popes*, 349–354.

when the Pope draws a line that divides the north and south of the Atlantic ocean to settle a dispute between Portugal and Spain.⁹⁷ It is upon the basis of this treaty that Spanish administrators created a document in 1512–1513, named the Requisition, to “establish grounds of the legitimacy for the state’s expropriation of lands, and the sovereignty of peoples of the indigenous cultural worlds of the Caribbean and the Americas.”⁹⁸ Wynter draws the following quote from a report of the 16th century Centu Indians on the Requisition: “About the Pope being the Lord of all the universe in the place of God, and that he had given the lands of the Indies to the King of Castile, the Pope must have been drunk when he did it, for he gave what was not his . . . The king who asked for and received this gift must have been a madman for he asked to be given to him that which belonged to others.”⁹⁹ The Requisition, Wynter explains, created a new world system that legitimated the “dynamic transfer of wealth and resources from the rest of the world to Western European enclaves . . . that made the ‘real real’ and the ‘normal normal’ for the invading European Christians.”¹⁰⁰ The church and CST have yet to contend with this legacy of the “racialization of flesh” and “metaphysical violence.”¹⁰¹

THREE SHIFTS TOWARD DECOLONIZING CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND DEMOCRACY

Shift from Applying Abstract Universals and Philosophical Idealism to the Priority of Geopolitical Praxis with and for les damnés.

The “seeds of alienation have been sown among the colonized,” Frantz Fanon wrote, by “Christianity and this should come to no surprise to anyone.” He went on to say that the “Church in the colonies is the white man’s Church, a foreigner’s Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor.”¹⁰² In this context of the church’s complicity in coloniality, prioritizing the call of historical struggle is most important for witness to the truth of the Gospel. As Gustavo Gutierrez has never tired of declaring:

⁹⁷ Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 79.

⁹⁸ Sylvia Wynter, “The Pope Must Have Been Drunk, The King of Castile a Madman: Culture as Actuality, and the Caribbean Rethinking Modernity,” in *The Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada*, ed. Alvenia Ruprecht and Cecilia Taiana (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 19.

⁹⁹ Wynter, “The Pope Must Have Been Drunk,” 18–19.

¹⁰⁰ Wynter, “The Pope Must Have Been Drunk,” 19.

¹⁰¹ Copeland, “Anti-Blackness and White Supremacy,” 7.

¹⁰² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004, first published in English in 1967), 7.

The first stage of theological work is the lived faith that finds expression in prayer and commitment. To live the faith means to put into practice, in light of the demands of the reign of God, these fundamental elements of Christian existence. . . . The second act of theology, that of reflection in the proper sense of the term, has for its purpose to read this complex praxis in the light of God's word.¹⁰³

M. Shawn Copeland extends Gutierrez's point by clarifying that our role as theologians means sinking deep roots into the ground of spirituality and practice where we "collaborate fundamentally in bringing about a different world in the here and now."¹⁰⁴ She elaborates that our ultimate commitment can never be to any "system or structure, person or group, church or university, but only to the God of Jesus Christ."¹⁰⁵ It is the witness of prophetic praxis "that demonstrates the risk and meaning of a life lived in prayerful hope."¹⁰⁶ For CST, that means Catholic social justice institutes and centers are not the starting point or core of living the Gospel. Theologians, ethicists, and activists engaged in decolonial movements need to unlearn how we have been malformed in the midst of imperial domains and humbly live in recognition of James Cone's insight that we can meet Jesus only in the "crucified bodies in our midst," where we may yet remember the real scandal of the cross.¹⁰⁷ Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls our attention to the ways Eurocentric knowledges tend to be "monuments" of written and archival knowledge. Decolonial praxis includes opening to diverse ways of knowing and being. CST, I contend, needs a "demonumentalizing intervention" to recognize that the written body of CST is not the purpose of our work; rather, becoming "open to other ways of knowing [that] may be able to show their possible contribution to a more diverse and profound understanding of the world and a more efficient and widely shared progressive social transformation."¹⁰⁸

A decolonial prophetic praxis means joining in local struggles for global liberation, learning from these contexts, and learning how to

¹⁰³ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxiv. See Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), xiii.

¹⁰⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, "Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian," *Spiritus* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 26, doi.org/10.1353/scs.2002.0008.

¹⁰⁵ Copeland, "Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian," 26.

¹⁰⁶ Copeland, "Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian," 26.

¹⁰⁷ Alex Mikulich, "Authentically Catholic and Truly Black: On the Condition of the Possibility of a Just Peace Approach to Anti-Black Violence," in *A Just Peace Ethic Primer: Building Sustainable Peace and Breaking Cycles of Violence*, ed. Eli McCarthy (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 121.

¹⁰⁸ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 187.

become fully human with and for peoples re-existing on their own terms.¹⁰⁹ In decolonial terms, re-existing means epistemological and ethical disobedience to modernity/coloniality and its genres of the human, and re-linking with “legacies one wants to preserve in order to engage in modes of existence with which one wants to engage” to live and thrive.¹¹⁰ For example, African *ubuntu*,¹¹¹ Andean *sumak kawsay* or *vivir bien*,¹¹² or the Abenaki common pot,¹¹³ far from being idiosyncratic, “are constitutive of pluriversal polyphony, a polylectal, rather than idiolectal, conception of cultural and political imagination.”¹¹⁴ These are examples of the legacies with which diverse peoples are re-linking to re-exist. In this way, the *damnés* emerge as the primary agents of social transformation, “to affirm their own selves and to create a world *in which many worlds can fit*.”¹¹⁵ These are concrete ways CST needs to move from Western pluralism to relearn through pluriversal perspectives.¹¹⁶

Last, but not least, decolonial praxis is both an eschatological and historical reality. As Joseph Drexler-Dreis suggests, this does not necessarily mean changing the orientations of liberation theologies, but it does entail “investing in new forms of analysis and continuing to ground theological language more strongly in historical realities while doing so in light of the imagination and commitment to the sacred.”¹¹⁷ A decolonial moral imagination is fostered in the midst of praxis “toward social transformation in the direction of the Reign of God with its justice, equality, freedom, and peace. . . . Eschatological freedom demands that we work to change things now.”¹¹⁸ Eschatological freedom means taking responsibility for the roles we play in reifying white pathologies and violence. People on the colonial side of the abyssal line need to unlearn coloniality and relearn what it means to be human so others may thrive through their own ways of

¹⁰⁹ de Sousa Santos, *End of Cognitive Empire*, 220.

¹¹⁰ Walter Mignolo, “Coloniality is Far from Over, and So Must Be Decoloniality,” *Afterall* 43, (2017): 41, dx.doi.org/10.1086/692552.

¹¹¹ de Sousa Santos, *End of Cognitive Empire*, 9–12.

¹¹² Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 64 and 306–312.

¹¹³ Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4 and 253–254.

¹¹⁴ de Sousa Santos, *End of Cognitive Empire*, 12.

¹¹⁵ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 230.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr, eds., *To Write the Africa World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2023, originally published in French as *Écrire l'Afrique-monde* (Dakar: Jimsaan, 2017).

¹¹⁷ Joseph Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 161.

¹¹⁸ Rayan, “Decolonization of Theology,” 149 and 151.

knowing and being. Otherwise, eschatology easily becomes a spiritualized individualism.

Shift from Anthropocentrism to a Primary Focus on Land and Earth Democracy

“For a colonized people,” wrote Frantz Fanon, “the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread, and naturally dignity. But this dignity has nothing to do with ‘human’ dignity.”¹¹⁹ Land is at the heart of decolonization struggles in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.¹²⁰ Decolonization requires repatriation of Indigenous land and life.¹²¹ This is not to claim that repatriation of land is an easy process; given the history of stolen lands, it is difficult to foresee anything but conflict. The work requires repatriation and recovering how “living cultures based on recovery of the earth identity create potential for reintegrating human activities into the earth’s ecological processes and limits.”¹²²

Earth democracy is fundamentally oriented to the earth’s cycles, recognizing that all beings have the right to sustenance and security within local ecologies interconnected with all other fragile ecosystems that no humans have the right to own.¹²³ Economic systems in earth democracy protect ecosystems and their integrity, and they protect people’s livelihoods and basic needs. Earth democracy means shifting from individual rights to acknowledging and protecting collective rights of Indigenous peoples and local ecosystems. In this way, a shift to earth democracy is really a return to the early church teaching of the Cappadocians—the goods of God’s creation yield abundance for all, in which our shared responsibility is for all of our human and non-human kin. Private property ownership must be re-oriented to a decolonial earth ethic so that Black, LatinX, and Indigenous peoples can re-exist. Shiva reminds us that the “earth economy is a living economy. It is based on sustainable, diverse, pluralistic systems that protect nature and people, are chosen by the people, and work for the common good.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Fanon, *The Wretched*, 9.

¹²⁰ Jakeet Singh, “Decolonizing Radical Democracy,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 18 (2019): 341, doi.org/10.1057/s41296-018-0277-5.

¹²¹ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 21, 25, 31.

¹²² Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2005), 7.

¹²³ Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 9.

¹²⁴ Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 10.

Theologian Melissa Pagán suggests two concepts that assist in challenging extractivist approaches to bodies and lands.¹²⁵ Her first practice “privileges a hermeneutics of *el grito*, which can be translated as ‘the cry.’”¹²⁶ She explains that “from a Puerto Rican perspective, a *hermeneutics of el grito* is rooted in *El Grito de Lares*, a rebellion against colonial rule and oppression that took place in 1868.”¹²⁷ Pagán integrates Frantz Fanon’s phenomenology of the cry, the eruption of grief and desire for recognition “within the space of colonial difference” with lament.¹²⁸ This is a way of “undermining the extractive view of persons and lands” to “facilitate growth of an integral ecology that authentically allows” an ecological approach to become a social approach that promotes hearing the cries of both the earth and the poor.¹²⁹ This organically leads to the second practice, that of *vincularidad*. *Vincularidad*, a core practice of the Amawtay Wasi, means co-relationality, but the Western translation misses its cosmological context as the center of all life-giving energies. In its Andean context *vincularidad* “is another way of expressing relationality and solidarity with the land and the cosmos *outside the one mode of knowledge and being*.”¹³⁰ It cultivates resistance to extractive zones and facilitates a decolonial way of people and non-human kin re-existing on their own terms.¹³¹

Shift from Exclusive Focus on Western Linear Time to Pluriversal Non-Linear Time

Too often, chronological Western time is taken as natural, neutral, and global. Walter Mignolo draws upon the work of Johannes Fabian to explain how Western time is a colonizing strategy, especially through the “denial of coevalness.”¹³² Fabian defines the “denial of coevalness” as a “persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.”¹³³ Fabian delineates an

¹²⁵ Melissa Pagán, “Cultivating a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology: Extractive Zones and the Nexus of Coloniality of Being/Coloniality of Gender,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 22, no. (2020): 6, repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol22/iss1/6.

¹²⁶ Pagán, “Cultivating a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology,” 20–21.

¹²⁷ Pagán, “Cultivating a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology,” 21.

¹²⁸ Pagán, “Cultivating a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology,” 21.

¹²⁹ Pagán, “Cultivating a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology,” 23. Pagán cites *Laudato Si'*, no. 49.

¹³⁰ Pagán, “Cultivating a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology,” 26.

¹³¹ Pagán, “Cultivating a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology,” 25.

¹³² Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 152. He cites Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, reprint, 2014, [1983]), 1.

¹³³ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 31.

intellectual history of anthropology's complicity in European colonialism rooted in both the Judeo-Christian Mediterranean conception of time and the Western notion of evolutionary time.¹³⁴

The result is that the colonial matrix of power (CMP) locates "barbarians" and "primitives" as behind and subordinate to superior Western knowledge. "Barbarians" and "primitives" are categorically in a lower chronological scale that "naturally" drives toward Western civilization.¹³⁵ The construct of Western chronological time implies that barbarian, primitive, and pagan ways of knowing are all subordinate to European knowledge. Evolutionary time, Mignolo explains, becomes "the beginning of time, the secular version of the beginning of the world and human beings." Mignolo's point is that "time was naturalized as both the measure of human history (modernity) and the time-scale of human beings (primitives) in their distance [from] modernity."¹³⁶ The redefinition of time through the denial of coevalness "contributed to holding together the colonial matrix of power imaginary from its emergence as part of the Atlantic circuit (in the sixteenth century) to the current consolidation of the North Atlantic (the United States and the European Union)."¹³⁷

Reexamining time is necessary because Western assumptions erase Indigenous knowledge. Consider feminist cultural critic Heather Davis's and Metis scholar Zoe Todd's reflection on the entanglements across time between other-than-human and human kin that herald Black and Indigenous ways of attending to mutually complex interrelationships between rocks, fish, and human kin.¹³⁸ They contemplate Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* where she invites readers to imagine the historical, hydrological wake of an Atlantic slave ship to co-sense the enslaved peoples deliberately drowned in the Middle Passage who endure through "residence time." The amount of time it takes a substance to enter the ocean and leave it is what scientists call "residence time." A colleague who is a marine geographer informs Sharpe that human blood is salty, and sodium has a residence time of 260 million years.¹³⁹

Sharpe then asks: "What happens to the energy produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which 'all is

¹³⁴ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 2–21.

¹³⁵ Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 153.

¹³⁶ Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 153.

¹³⁷ Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 153–154.

¹³⁸ Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME* 16, no. 4 (2017): 761–780, acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1539.

¹³⁹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 41.

now. It is all now.”¹⁴⁰ Residence time offers the possibility of learning from Black and Indigenous ancestors whose bodies endure in landmass and oceans as “oxygen, hydrogen, and atoms.”¹⁴¹

Returning to the opening of this essay, I contend that the Roman Catholic Church cannot adequately reckon with its complicity in the catastrophic transformation of power, knowledge, and being that began in the 15th century without decoloniality. Pluriversal ways of practicing decoloniality are available to local faith communities and the global church. Decolonizing Catholic social teaching is incommensurable with the feudal and orthodox social models because decolonization means returning stolen lands, healing wounds of genocide and slavery, ending racial capitalism, and providing reparations to local communities experiencing the oppressive legacies of the colonial matrix of power. Catholic social teaching needs pluriversal approaches to enfold an integral ecology, remember how coloniality endures in time and space, and attend to the ways decolonization of time demands healing of colonial wounds. Decolonizing CST begins with geopolitical praxis with and for people below the abyssal line, shifting from anthropocentric philosophical arguments to the priority of land and earth democracy, and re-orienting conceptions of time and space that prioritize the full thriving of all our human and non-human kin. **M**

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¹⁴⁰ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 41. Sharpe quotes Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 198.

¹⁴¹ David and Todd, “On the Importance of a Date.”