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BOOK PROFILE: *AGAINST WAR: VIEWS FROM THE UNDERSIDE OF
MODERNITY*, BY NELSON MALDONADO-TORRES

A profile of *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*, by Nelson Maldonado-Torres. Duke University Press, 2008. 360 pp. Cloth, \$84.95; Paper, \$23.95.

In *Against War*, Nelson Maldonado-Torres develops a polemic against the Eurocentric bias in modern philosophy that is tied to “a peculiar death ethic that renders massacre and different forms of genocide as natural” (xi). Drawing on W.E.B. DuBois, Maldonado-Torres calls for a de-colonial turn in contemporary phenomenology that is marked by a skepticism towards all attempts to justify the racist, genocidal, and colonial abuses in Western civilization, the primacy of the ethical over freedom, autonomy, and equality, and a recognition of the experiences of the enslaved and colonized as crucial for epistemology. While the majority of the book is devoted to a critique of the naturalization of war in European thought, underlying this critique is the construction of a radically humanistic phenomenology grounded on close readings of Emmanuel Levinas, Frantz Fanon and Enrique Dussel.

The argument is divided into three sections, each of which is structured around one of the three seminal figures crucial to Maldonado-Torres’ project. In this first section Maldonado-Torres analyzes the usefulness of Emmanuel Levinas’ work for a liberationist phenomenology. Drawing on Levinas, Maldonado-Torres levels a critique against French liberalism, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Husserl, all of whom in some manner have legitimated warrior ideals and the non-ethic of conquest. His critique of Husserl is particularly interesting. Maldonado-Torres sees Husserl as repeating the error of the Greeks who subdued the particular to the universal. He claims that the identification of the universal with European phenomenology inevitably leads to an expansionist, missionary philosophic position that implicitly rejects authentic communication and the epistemic contributions of the colonized in favor of a continuation of Eurocentric, master morality that can be used to justify the paradigm of war. In place of Husserl’s detached search for truth, Maldonado-Torres undertakes a de-colonial retrieval of Levinas’ ethical reduction that “labors to show the faces behind impersonal systems of meaning and to call attention to an ideal of justice beyond mere fairness” (83).

Maldonado-Torres criticizes Levinas for not adequately connecting the ethical with the political, and seeks to remedy this weakness in Levinas by drawing on Frantz Fanon. In Fanon he finds a fuller account of the “lived experience” of the dehumanized and a de-colonial reduction that privileges coloniality as a

“fundamental axis of reflection,” an emphasis missing in the Eurocentric work of Levinas. This de-colonial reduction is a practice of skepticism toward the projections, rhetorics, and strategies employed by the colonizer to maintain the position of the master. In a creative reading of Feuerbach, Maldonado-Torres argues that in an imperial world, God becomes the privileged Other projected by the master in order to sustain the identity of Imperial Man and the colonized order. In a secularized world, the market and the nation state often function as a substitute for God, and the modern social sciences have frequently proved more effective than theology in legitimizing the abuses of empire. Playing off Kierkegaard, Maldonado-Torres finds in Fanon’s ethico-political praxis a teleological suspension of identity and universality that culminates in radical acts of love that show a preferential option for the dehumanized. Maldonado-Torres uses the term “altericity” to identify this stance of unequal concern toward the Other.

In the final section of the book Maldonado-Torres offers a reading of Enrique Dussel, focusing especially on *Philosophy of Liberation*. While Maldonado-Torres criticizes Dussel for applying Levinasian categories to social realities while discarding phenomenology, he finds Dussel to offer a historical depth and emphasis on geopolitical positioning which complements and enhances the phenomenologies of Levinas and Fanon. He adopts Dussel’s concept of transmodernity as an alternative to Habermas’ Eurocentric view of modernity and to a postmodern skepticism of reason. Transmodernity refers to the affirmation of the best of Enlightenment values and methods “from the perspective of liberating reason” and “the critical affirmation of the liberating aspects of the cultures and knowledges excluded from or occluded by modernity” (232-233).

Dussel recognizes three insurmountable limits to the modern project: ecological destruction, destruction of humanity, and the impossibility of subsumption of the peoples it has attacked and excluded. While Maldonado-Torres treats the latter two limits in detail, the first is only briefly mentioned. While the scope of the book prevents a thorough ecological critique, more links could be made between master morality, the plight of the dehumanized, and the degradation of the planet. Overall, however, this is an innovative, passionate and provocative work that carefully synthesizes excellent close readings of several important thinkers. *Against War* is a significant contribution to the liberationist tradition and should attract attention across philosophy, theology, and ethnic studies.

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