ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF GLOBAL MODERNISMS

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ABSTRACT

As art history begins to take seriously the imperative to decolonize, one of the most vexing areas of resistance to change is the conventional periodization of art historical epochs. Even while acknowledging that spatial divisions like West and Non-West are deeply problematic, as are geographic divisions per se, we continue to honor the "history" in the discipline's nomenclature by insisting on temporality as a primary organizing category. The period commonly designated as "modernist" (roughly 1860 to 1960) is particularly difficult to divorce from Western ideals of progress as defined both by technological "advances" and by the heroization of artistic "innovation". When the modernist moment attempts to open itself up to global narratives, its structuring undercurrent is a particular vision of the art of the West. In this essay, I read the conventional narrative of modernism through a decolonial lens and revisit the reception of Impressionism in the 1910s and 1920s in Mexico to consider how an artistic idiom widely seen as retrograde at that moment became the basis for a radical rethinking around the democratization of art. My analysis exposes how, because of its championing of novelty and its inherent Eurocentrism, the category of modernism obscures and suppresses artists and narratives that fall outside of its limited purview.

KEYWORDS

Impressionism; Modernism; Global modernisms; Mexican art; Decolonizing art history; Critical race art history; Modernity/coloniality.

Monet is only an eye, but good god, what an eye![1]
Paul Cézanne, ca. 1905

You once told me that the human eye is god's loneliest creation. How so much of the world passes through the pupil and still it holds nothing. The eye, alone in its socket, doesn't even know there's another one just like it, an inch away, just as hungry, as empty.[2]
Ocean Vuong, 2019

I. The Gaze of Modernism

Among the best-known epigrams around French Impressionism, Paul Cézanne's backhanded compliment encapsulates a crucial assumption of Western art from the Renaissance into the twentieth century: that the artist is an individual of extraordinary talent. While Cézanne recognized Monet's gift as worthy of awe and acclaim, in his own practice he approached painting as a mental process that synthesized perception with intelligence. In his words, "I conceive [of art] as a personal apperception. I situate this apperception in sensation, and I ask the intelligence to organize it into a work."[3]

Apperception is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as "introspective self-consciousness" and, also, "the process of understanding something perceived in terms of previous experience". This approach distinguishes itself from Impressionist painting, which sought to capture the fleeting moment. By invoking the intellect, Cézanne contributed to the attitude, pervasive in modernist art discourse, of Impressionism as lacking conceptual heft – the movement's popularity among collectors and museum publics notwithstanding.[4] In the seminal text *On Cubism* (1912), Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes belittled Impressionism for "promot[ing] a feeble and ineffectual quality of drawing" and for allowing the retina to "predominat[e] over the brain".[5] Marcel Duchamp would follow suit, denigrating Impressionist paintings as "mere visual products".[6]

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In French, "Monet, ce n'est qu'un œil, mais bon Dieu, quel œil!" Ambroise Vollard, *Paul Cézanne*, Zurich 1919, 118.

2
Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, New York 2019, 12.

3
Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, Introduction. The Letters of Cézanne, in: id. (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles/London 1968, 11–15, here 13.

4
See Tatiana Flores and Rebecca Uchill, 'Strong Modernism' and Its Global Others. The Barnes Foundation's Production of Modernity, in: Martha Lucy (ed.), *The Barnes Then and Now. Dialogues on Education, Installation, and Social Justice*, Philadelphia 2023, 146–171.

5
Albert Gleizes and Jean Metziger, On Cubism (1912), in: Chipp, Theories of Modern Art, 207–219, here 208.

6
Marcel Duchamp, Painting … at the Service of the Mind (1946), in: Chipp, Theories of Modern Art, 392–396, here 394. See, as well, Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles 1993, 164.

This manner of stylistic one-upmanship would characterize modernism, which has been understood as a period, originating in France in the late nineteenth century, of technical and conceptual advances diffused from centers to peripheries. Within a generation, Impressionism came to be seen in narrow terms: a painterly approach of broken brushstrokes attempting to capture transitory visual experience that had been surpassed.

Cézanne's quip stands in stark contrast to the passage from Vietnamese-American author Ocean Vuong's 2019 novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Structured as a letter from the narrator to his mother, the narrative comments on alienation in diaspora communities – both from the dominant host culture but also within families, where children born of first-generation immigrants often lack a sense of belonging to their parents' homeland. Here the heroic individualism of the Western artist gives way to the aloneness of the human condition. The eye is no longer an extraordinary organ but an unhappy little sphere that does not recognize its twin mere centimeters away. How wrenching is this image of a single eye, unaware that it is not alone! Vuong's evocation of singularity as impoverished in perception and lacking in consciousness provides an entryway for rethinking the values and limits of Western art in a world marked by colonization and its fraught afterlives.

The designation "global", applied to terms such as "modernisms" or "contemporary art", is often taken as an indication of a more open and inclusive art history,[7] when, actually, it functions as a euphemism that masks the power relations that structure the art world, where the West continues to set the terms of knowledge production along with the standards of value.[8] Both the modern and the contemporary are temporal constructs, and as Walter D. Mignolo persuasively argues, "'time' is a fundamental concept in building the imaginary of the modern/colonial world and an instrument for both controlling knowledge and advancing a vision of society based on progress and development".[9] Control of time goes hand in hand with dominion over space. Accompanying the spatial hierarchies that center the West are what historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot termed "North Atlantic universals", or "words that project the North Atlantic experience on a universal scale that they themselves

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A forceful argument on this point is made by Amelia Jones, who writes, "Most curators who sign up to produce 'global' exhibitions are forced to participate (or do not realize they are participating) fully in the global commodification of world visual culture – the neoliberal joining of disparate works from around the world as art, contributing to the flourishing of tourism – through an entirely European system and Euro-American standards and values." Amelia Jones, Ethnic Envy and Other Aggressions in the Contemporary 'Global' Art Complex, in: *Nka. Journal of Contemporary African Art* 48, 2021, 96–110, here 97.

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For a deeper discussion of this point, see Arturo Escobar, Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise. The Latin American Modernity/Decoloniality Research Program, in: *Cultural Studies* 21/2–3, 2007, 182–183.

9
Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, NC/London 2011, 161.

helped to create [...] particulars that have gained a degree of universality, chunks of human history that have become historical standards".[10] While Monet's eye is constructed through this faux universalism, Vuong's eye – lonely as opposed to heroic – serves as an apt metaphor for other possible narratives about art becoming transformed through the recognition of community and the introduction of dialogic and relational modes of expression. For these histories, variously described as "alternative" or "other", to take hold, the Western model needs to be diminished or, to use Dipesh Chakravarty's terminology, "provincialized".[11] The debates within European modernism are a case in point, projecting themselves as capacious when they were, in fact, narrow and local.

At face value, provincializing implies thinking differently about space, away from the center-periphery model that dominated discussions of art and aesthetics in the twentieth century. Geographer J. M. Blaut summed up the dominant paradigm as follows: "Europe eternally advances, progresses, modernizes. The rest of the world advances more sluggishly, or stagnates: it is 'traditional society.' Therefore, the world has a permanent geographical center and a permanent periphery: an Inside and an Outside. Inside leads, Outside lags. Inside innovates, Outside imitates."[12] Beyond reconsidering spatial hierarchies, Chakravarty's challenge to provincialize also calls for a rethinking of assumptions about time. He posits that "discomfort about periodization based on a Eurocentric idea of modernity is now global".[13] Building on existing groundwork, he explains that terms like "modernity" or "medieval" "imply value judgments from which most contemporary historians want to distance themselves" and that "modernization" and "modernism" "are also tainted words today".[14] Chakravarty claims, wishfully, that contemporary scholars "cannot any longer think in such terms without encountering political, that is to say moral, criticism".[15] This is hardly the case in the humanities where periodization based on the Western idea of time as a linear continuum is still very much

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Michel-Rolph Trouillot, North Atlantic Universals. Analytical Fictions, 1492–1945, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101/4, 2002, 839–858, here 847.

11
See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ/London 2000.

12
J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World. Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*, New York 1993, quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman, Periodizing Modernism. Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies, in: *Modernism/Modernity* 13/3, 2006, 425–443, here 429.

13
Dipesh Chakravarty, The Muddle of Modernity, in: *The American Historical Review* 116/3, 2011, 663–675, here 663.

14
Ibid., 663–664.

15
Ibid., 664.

operative, as affirmed in the article "Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time" by literary scholar Eric Hayot. The author asserts that "concepts of period tend [...] to narrate the history of the aesthetic in European time, emplotting beginnings, middles, and ends in a manner that is not [...] merely neutral".[16] The culture of the West continues to be deemed normative and universal, and the art historical canon is the standard through which to evaluate whether a given cultural product may be deigned to be considered art. Art historian Ruth E. Iskin points that "the term 'canon' is associated with the idea of universality and timelessness, implying that it is detached from any particular interests, art-world institutions, the art market and geopolitics".[17] This seeming neutrality is hardly innocuous, conceiving of "time as an abstract, homogeneous measure of universal movement along a singular axis", and delineating who are the agents and who are the receivers.[18]

While often admitting to the problems inherent to this model of diffusion, art history has been loath to grapple with just how much such attitudes have been crucial in cementing a world view premised on white supremacism. Literary scholar Warren Montag writes that "the very form of human universality itself" is "the concept of whiteness".[19] This line of thought meshes well with philosopher George Yancy's argument that "the meaning of whiteness, as universal, contains within itself an obfuscated parasitism that reduces the Black body to a wretched particularity. It is this sense of damned particularity that implies hierarchical *difference*, a form of difference that is defined through the normative structure of whiteness that defines itself as ontologically self-sufficient."[20] Functioning as a closed system operated by the logic of self-referentiality, the Western canon aligns with Yancy's phrase of "ontologically self-sufficient". Iskin notes the distinction between universal and particular as constitutive of the canon: "as long as the Western canon is considered universal, alternatives to it are always particular – whether local, regional, national, ethnic, gender-based and so on. And while counter-canons serve significant purposes, they are always already

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Eric Hayot, Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time, in: *New Literary History* 42/4, 2011, 739–756, here 745.

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Ruth E. Iskin, Introduction. Re-envisioning the Canon. Are Pluriversal Canons Possible?, in: ead., *Re-Envisioning the Canon. Perspectives in a Global World*, London/New York, 2017, 1–42, here 23.

18
Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Durham, NC/London 2017, 2.

19
Quoted in John T. Warren, Performing Whiteness Differently. Rethinking the Abolitionist Project, in: *Educational Theory* 51/4, 2001, 451–466, here 458.

20
George Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, the Black Body as Disgust, and the Aesthetics of Un-suturing, in: Sherri Irvin (ed.), *Body Aesthetics*, Oxford/New York 2016, 243–260, here 245.

positioned as 'other' relative to the main (Western male) canon."[21] Indeed, the "lie" that whiteness is "un-raced and universal", which took root in the Americas before absorbing the global, makes all others into minoritized subjects.[22]

A solution Iskin proposes is adopting "pluriversal" canons, borrowing a term from the scholarship on decoloniality and the writings of Arturo Escobar, Mignolo, and others, to describe "a plurality of narratives and canons that are interrelated in multiple and complex ways, not linearly and not uni-directionally".[23] Mark Rifkin similarly calls for thinking of time "as plural, less as a temporality than temporalities".[24] Within this pluralizing framework, however, it is important to acknowledge that "modernity" is not one temporality among others. As Mignolo argues, "modernity is neither an entity nor an ontological historical period, but a set of self-serving narratives" that validate Eurocentrism: it "has been conceived in one line of time, universal time and universal history".[25] One of Mignolo's signature arguments is that modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive: "modernity has always been figured as if it were universal and therefore shall be extended globally: it was assumed that the rest of the planet was going through a similar unfolding of history in the inexorable march toward modernity, and that at some point it would go through the same periodization as Europe. Western Europe and more recently the U.S. were the point of arrival for the rest of the planet."[26]

The viability of pluriversal canons is challenged by the institutional histories of museums and markets, which depend on the unitary framework of modernity. The discipline of art history would need to abandon its faith in the universal as defined by the Western canon and Eurocentric periodization according to a single, linear temporality, while also grappling with the structural racism of

21
Iskin, Introduction, 24.

22
Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 245.

23
Iskin, Introduction, 24. See, as well, Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics. The Real and the Possible*, transl. by David Frye, Durham, NC/London, 2020. Iskin specifies that "[p]luriversal canons are not synonymous with a mere plurality of currently existing canons ([...] based on periods [...] or on nations [...] or on media)" and neither are they "synonymous with specific counter-canons" such as of African-American, Latinx, or women artists because these ultimately serve as "a supplement to the major authoritative canon" (Introduction, 25). For a critique of pluriversal canons, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Why Horizontal Art History Cannot Escape Computation, in: Agata Jakubowska and Magdalena Radomska (eds.), *Horizontal Art History and Beyond. Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, New York/London 2023, 195–205.

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Rifkin, Beyond Settler Time, 2.

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Walter D. Mignolo, What Does It Mean to Decolonize?, in: id. and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality. Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Durham, NC/London 2018, 105–134, here 110, 117.

26
Ibid., 118–119.

museums and their dependence on a system of patronage tied to the art market. The pervasive structures of capitalism have proven to stand in the way of achieving structural change on the art institutional level. Indeed, decolonizing gestures in US museums have had markedly public and costly effects – such as the controversies that ensued over the Art Institute of Chicago's decision to disband the volunteer docents' program (later reversed) or the Baltimore Museum of Art's plan for deaccessioning contemporary works by white male artists from its collection to expand its collection of women and artists of color.[27]

The authority of the museum for art history, between its public face, prestigious collections, and system of patronage, finds no parallel in other humanistic disciplines. Like whiteness itself, the museum has long been considered neutral and unmarked.[28] Simon Knell's scathing critique of the canon puts into question whether the concept could ever be instrumentalized towards different ends: "The canon is as much a result of institutionalized practice as it is of thought and, aided by the ambitions and limitations of the museum, it is by its very nature monumental, reductive, and essentialist."[29] Pluriversal canons and other decolonial approaches, then, are not merely a matter of expanding histories, recognizing entanglements, and embracing complexity. They require what amounts to a disciplinary reset, beginning with a necessary introspection to admit a discomforting sense of complicity, to check one's privilege and accept accountability, to question the temporal and conceptual frames through which we build knowledge and assign value, and to foster a steadfast commitment to anti-racism.

As Yancy describes it, the very act of looking – the essential aspect of our encounter with an art object – is inherently compromised. Neither innocent nor a given, the gaze is biased and conditioned to uphold white supremacy:

> White *gazing* is a violent process. It is not an atomic act or an inaugural event that captures, in an unmediated fashion, the bareness, as it were, of 'objects.' Indeed, white gazing is an historical achievement [...] the result of white historical

27 On the Art Institute of Chicago controversy, see Rebecca Zorach, Why the Art Institute of Chicago's New Docent Program Faces Whitelash, in: *Hyperallergic*, November 9, 2021. On the Baltimore Museum of Art controversy, see Alex Greenberger, Baltimore Museum Deaccessioning Controversy, Explained. Why a Plan to Sell $65 M. in Art Ignited Debate, in: *Art News*, October 28, 2020 (both last accessed October 11, 2022).

28 Against the myth of museum neutrality, LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski started the initiative "Museums Are Not Neutral" in 2017. See their website http://artmuseumteaching.com/2017/08/31/museums-are-not-neutral/ (March 10, 2024). See, as well, Sumaya Kassim, Museums Are Temples of Whiteness, in Tatiana Flores, Florencia San Martín, and Charlene Villaseñor Black (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Decolonizing Art History*, New York/London 2024, 128–138.

29 Simon Knell, Modernisms. Curating Art's Past in a Global Present, in: id. (ed.), *The Contemporary Museum. Shaping Museums for the Global Now*, New York/London 2018, 13–36, here 15.

> forces, values, assumptions, circuits of desire, institutional structures, irrational fears, paranoia, and an assemblage of 'knowledge' that fundamentally configures what appears and the how of that which appears [...]. In terms of white gazing, when white bodies look out upon the world, they not only see what has been put there for them to see, and see it in a specific way, but they cooperate consciously or unconsciously, with broader processes of normative and epistemic accretion, in assisting to bring certain objects into view in particular configured ways.[30]

This explanation harkens back to Monet's eye via Cézanne and Duchamp, reminding us that, whatever their quibbles, these artists belonged to a circumscribed circle of men who shaped the canon and set the terms for the "particular[ly] configured" artistic period we come to know as modernism. Their objects elicited a privileged, self-referential, temporally and spatially bounded gaze, not from Vuong's lonely and lowly eye, but from the eyes of communities that were born in whiteness, as it were.[31] Made by white masters, modern art was directed at a white gaze assumed to be attached to a white body. Over time, as modernist artworks became canonized, reproduced, disseminated, and worshiped at the altar of the museum, the gazers – but not the artists – could be of any ethnicity, as they were now conditioned into this mode of looking by "having internalized the logic of the white gaze".[32]

Sociologist Joe Feagin refers to this social conditioning as the "white racial frame". He posits that this "dominant racial frame activates and relates to class-oriented and patriarchal ways of looking at society", to the degree that these views "become embedded in the structure of human brains", making them difficult to challenge or undo.[33] bell hooks earlier invoked the metaphor of the frame to describe "the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality".[34] This dominant frame is not just operative in art history and its institutions, which continue to function under the

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Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 243–244.

31
My phrasing here refers to the title of an important recent history of Africa: see Howard French, *Born in Blackness. Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War*, New York 2021.

32
Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 260, fn. 12.

33
Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame. Centuries of Framing and Counter-Framing*, New York/London 2013, 14–15.

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bell hooks and Sut Jhally, dir., *bell hooks. Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, transcript of the film, Northampton, MA 1997, 7. hooks referred to contemporary society as a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy", adding "when we use the term white supremacy, it doesn't just evoke white people: it evokes a political world that we can all frame ourselves in relationship to" (ibid.).

authority of the Western canon and Eurocentric periodization, it is dogma. In all its institutions, art history is structured according to temporal categories that center the modern, even when they refer to regions that are not Europe or when the modern goes unnamed, such as during the Middle Ages (midway between ancient and modern, that is). Modernity is, indeed, the West's crowning achievement. As characterized by decolonial philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "In modernity, geopolitical space, intersubjective relations, economic activity, and the production of knowledge form a nexus of power oriented by imperatives of domination and control that mirror the logic of a division between masters and slaves."[35]

To break the cycle of white (supremacist) gazing, Yancy proposes a process of un-suturing. As he describes it, "The terms 'sutured' and 'un-sutured,' [...] are not only practices that respectively occlude change and engender change, but they are also indicative of what it means to be a human subject at all, that is, indicative of what it means to be *homo possibilitas* (un-sutured) and to be thrown in within the context of historical facticity (sutured)."[36] This anti-racist approach offers the hope of overcoming, or at least countering, whiteness, something the author well knows cannot merely be willed into being. As communications scholar John T. Warren – one of the sources cited in Yancy's article – argues, "Whiteness is not [...] so simply a matter of intent that I can just stop doing it."[37] For Warren as a white man, resisting whiteness "is a place of paradox, a place of struggle, and a place of active discomfort".[38] Yancy, who is African-American, generously allows for the possibility of a white abolitionist project:

> In short, while it is true that whiteness is a site of power, an assemblage of "knowledge," and an effective history, it does not follow that white people are *determined* or devoid of agency qua white, that there is no space for counter-iterative, white anti-racist practices. In other words, there is a space for the practice of un-suturing, where this is both a form of anti-racist practice and a way of being all too human, always already a site of the given (facticity) and the taken (possibility).[39]

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Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War. Views from the Underside of Modernity*, Durham, NC/London 2008, 3.

36
Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 254–255.

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Warren, Performing Whiteness Differently, 454.

38
Ibid., 465.

39
Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 255.

He emphasizes that un-suturing takes continual effort and "constant *striving*; it will require practice, a reiterative opening and wounding, habits of uncovering the stench of white mendacity".[40] The term "striving" recalls the title of a seminal essay in African-American cultural history, W. E. B. Du Bois's "Strivings of the Negro People", where the author famously introduces his concept of "double consciousness" to describe the emotional and intellectual labor that Black people in the US have to endure to navigate a white world.[41] Yancy turns the tables by asking for white people to do the work. To even begin, however, there must be an acknowledgement of the problem: the hegemony of white supremacist thinking and gazing, along with its all-encompassing, pervasive, impermeable nature. All academic disciplines and educational institutions are implicated. This situation must not persist unchecked, but efforts to counter it are continually frustrated because of the sheer magnitude of the issue: white supremacist frames are so deeply embedded in people's concept of "reality" that the challenge to un-suture presents an existential quandary that most are unwilling to even concede, let alone engage with. Un-suturing is an ethically conscious act that aligns with what Maldonado-Torres refers to as the "decolonial turn", which "is about making visible the invisible and about analyzing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility".[42] The vision metaphor most relevant in this case is not Monet's solitary eye but Vuong's eyes recognizing themselves as a pair and looking for others to connect with. Decolonial thinking offers a way forward. As Maldonado-Torres writes, "For decolonization, concepts need to be conceived as invitations to dialogue and not as impositions. They are expressions of the availability of the subject to engage in dialogue and the desire for exchange."[43] Beyond a future-oriented, pluriversal praxis, the challenge for art history becomes how to reimagine the past.

II. Un-suturing in Mexican Art

I propose that the artists I discuss below were attempting, if only for a brief while, a practice of un-suturing through a critical dialogue with Impressionism, which in their hands became a vehicle towards an art grounded on relationality and driven by concerns

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Ibid., 257.

41
See W. E. B. Du Bois, Strivings of the Negro People, in: *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1897, 194–198 (January 21, 2024).

42
Nelson Maldonado-Torres, On the Coloniality of Being. Contributions to the Development of a Concept, in: *Cultural Studies* 21/2–3, 2007, 240–270, here 262. See as well, Maldonado-Torres, Against War, 8.

43
Maldonado-Torres, On the Coloniality of Being, 261.

for social and racial justice.[44] Our little-known protagonists are a group of painters affiliated with the open-air painting school on the outskirts of Mexico City. Founded and directed by Alfredo Ramos Martínez, a committed Mexican Impressionist, they operated during and in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920).[45] It should come as no surprise that their body of work and legacy were broadly dismissed as "belated" because of their association with a formal language that had fallen out of fashion.[46] Regarded as seen as minor through a Eurocentric paradigm, they were also minimized by their contemporaries during an era of intense rivalries and ideological rifts.[47] The narrative of modernism that later prevailed in Mexico was heroic and masculinist, corresponding to Paul K. Saint-Amour's characterization of modernism as "the production of aesthetic strength through iconoclasm and strenuous innovation. It is strong people exhibiting strength."[48] In a context where the most famous painters are known as "los tres grandes", or the big three, this description is keenly resonant. One of them, Diego Rivera, sought to become the Mexican Picasso and succeeded. Another, David Alfaro Siqueiros, projected himself as the quintessential macho man, above and beyond the Mexican stereotype. And the third, José Clemente Orozco, could not have appeared more misogynistic if he tried.[49]

To set the stage, it is useful to consider the conquest of Mexico in light of the modernity/coloniality dialectic that Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and other decolonial scholars have probed. Rather than beginning in the twentieth century and thinking about Mexican art through modernization, development, progress, and other familiar temporal tropes, let us rewind the clock by five

44
The following discussion engages with and expands on my monograph on Mexican avant-garde movements of the 1920s. See Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes. From Estridentismo to ¡30-30!*, New Haven, CT/London 2013.

45
On the history of the open-air painting schools, see Laura González Matute, *Escuelas de pintura al aire libre y centros populares de pintura*, Mexico City 1987 and *Escuelas de pintura al aire libre, episodios dramáticos del arte en México* (exh. cat. Mexico City, MUNAL/INBA), ed. by Evelyn Useda Miranda, Víctor Mantilla González, Mariana Casanova Zamudio, and María Helena Rangel Guerrero, Mexico City 2014.

46
See, for example, Juan Hernández Araujo [pseudonym of David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jean Charlot], El movimiento actual de la pintura en México. La influencia benéfica de la Revolución sobre las Artes Plásticas, in: *El Demócrata. Diario Independiente de la mañana*, August 2, 1923 (International Center for Arts of the Americas (ICAA) digital database, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Record ID 757972; February 27, 2024).

47
I elaborate on these dynamics in Tatiana Flores, Whose Side Are We On? Artistic Rivalries in Mexican Avant-Garde Art, in: *Journal of History of Modern Art* 32, 2012, 137–172.

48
Paul K. Saint-Amour, Weak Theory, Weak Modernism, in: *Modernism/Modernity* 25/3, 2018, 437–459, here 437.

49
See Mary K. Coffey, Without Any of the Seductions of Art. On Orozco's Misogyny and Public Art in the Americas, in: *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 83, 2003, 99–119.

hundred years. In 1519, Hernán Cortés invaded the land that is today known as Mexico with the purpose of conquering the territory for the Spanish Crown. He landed on the Gulf Coast and founded the city of Veracruz (meaning True Cross) and later made his way inland. Along the way, he relied on translators – Jerónimo Aguilar, a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked in Yucatán for twenty years and had learned to speak Maya, and Malintzin, popularly known as Malinche, who spoke Maya and Nahuatl.[50] Aguilar and Malintzin were crucial interlocutors, and translation was considered essential to the conquest to the degree that Malinche is regarded as the ultimate sellout – a traitor like no other, the Mexican Eve.[51]

Spanish occupation lasted almost three centuries, until a criollo (meaning a Mexican-born, Spanish-descendant) priest, Miguel Hidalgo, made a call to arms on September 16, 1810, and assembled an army of thousands to wage an attack on local elites. When Hidalgo was captured and killed, his mantle was taken up by José María Morelos, an Afro-Mexican priest turned insurgent. In 1821, Mexico became an independent country, and the nineteenth century was devoted to nation-building and infrastructure but also fending off, not always successfully, neocolonialist aggression from the United States and Western Europe. In 1848, Mexico lost almost half of its territory in the Mexican-American War. It is important to emphasize, however, that Mexico was and is also a settler country, and the post-independence "Mexicans", the representatives of the nation, were white elites and privileged mestizos (people of mixed ancestry). The coloniality of social relations, between this demographic, and the disenfranchised Natives, Afro-Mexicans, and deeper-skinned mestizos remained essentially untouched, if not to say worsened post-independence. As Mignolo has noted, "geopolitical decolonization sent the colonizer home, but it also adapted and adopted their structure of governance: the nation-state".[52]

In late nineteenth-century Mexico, the government became increasingly authoritarian, economic inequality deepened, and foreign interests took precedence over local needs leading to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910.[53] An unprecedented constitution promising universal education and land redistribution was ratified in 1917, and the postrevolutionary period, of 1921 to about

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See Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices. An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*, Albuquerque, 2006.

51
For a classic negative portrayal of Malinche, see Octavio Paz, The Sons of La Malinche, in: id., *The Labyrinth of Solitude. Life and Thought in Mexico*, transl. by Lysander Kemp, New York/London 1961, 65–88. For a revindication, see Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]framing the 'Bad Woman'. Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui and Other Rebels with a Cause*, Austin, TX 2014.

52
Interview. Walter D. Mignolo, in: *E-International Relations*, June 1, 2017 (February 28, 2024).

53
On the Mexican Revolution, see John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico. The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution*, Berkeley, CA 1987.

1940, was marked by optimism in the possibility of social justice and faith in the potential of art to effect change. The intellectuals who spearheaded the cultural revolution – what came to be known, tellingly, as the Mexican Renaissance[54] – were elites or socially mobile individuals (men, mostly, white or white adjacent), who more than likely held varying degrees of racial and gender-based prejudice, and were at best conscious of their privilege and at worst assumed that their dominance in society was part of a natural order. As such, the matter of representation – of who is speaking and for whom, how, and why – is crucial to consider in any assessment of Mexican modernism. Indeed, Mexican art is emphatically representational, as in figurative. Because it embraces intelligibility, it has been othered in relation to mainstream modernism, which favors the abstract(ed) and the arcane.

Odd as it may be, the revolutionary period and its aftermath were when Impressionism took root in Mexico. This would seem to be in line with the standard story of global modernisms as belated. But we have already established that modernity is not a temporal category and cannot be divorced from coloniality. As Carol Symes writes, quoting José Rabasa, "'invoking the modern is never a natural inconsequential affair, but a violent regulatory speech act.' It suggests that people who inhabit un-Modern times and cultures are not fully developed, not really human, the antithesis of what it means to be modern."[55] Elite Mexicans were deeply sensitive to being seen as not modern, but they did not necessarily embrace modernism's narrative of frenetic innovation and unprecedented originality. And Mexico itself was not invisible to the heroes of the mainstream modernist narrative, beginning with none other than the father-figure (as some would say) Édouard Manet.[56] (Where would art history be without genealogy?) Manet painted a major canvas depicting the execution in 1867 of Archduke Maximilian of Austria, a short-lived emperor of Mexico during the reign of Napoleon III. After Napoleon's fall, Maximilian and two generals were captured and killed by a local army, but the painting imagines the scene as a role reversal in that the soldiers wear French-style uniforms, while Maximilian dons a sombrero. His companions in death are depicted as having significantly darker skin. Indeed, the

54
It is worth noting the words of Mignolo: "The European Renaissance founded itself as re-naissance by colonizing time, by inventing the Middle Ages and Antiquity", in: Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity, 187. The idea of a Mexican renaissance in the arts was in circulation in the 1910s, but the people who most promoted it were anthropologist Anita Brenner and French painter Jean Charlot during the 1920s and beyond. See Tatiana Flores, An Art Critic in a Contested Field. Anita Brenner and the Construction of the Mexican Renaissance, in: Karen Cordero Reiman (ed.), *Another Promised Land. Anita Brenner's Mexico*, Los Angeles 2017, 86–103, and Jean Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1921–1925*, New Haven, CT 1965.

55
Carol Symes, When We Talk About Modernity, in: *The American Historical Review* 116/3, 2011, 715–726, here 716.

56
On Manet as the father of modernism, see Georges Bataille, *Manet*, transl. by Austryn Wainhouse and James Emmons, Lausanne 1955.

man to the emperor's right looks Black. Even though critical literature typically is reluctant to ascribe meaning and intentionality to Manet, the painting reads a lot like social critique. The artist disapproved of French intervention in Mexico. And while this is not specifically an Impressionist painting, he is considered the most significant precursor of the artistic movement that came to be known as Impressionism.

In Mexico, one of the earliest exponents of Impressionism was Joaquín Clausell, a self-taught artist who was also a successful practicing lawyer. Active in the aughts, he worked in isolation.[57] Until the early twentieth century, formal art training in Mexico City was concentrated at the Academy of San Carlos and largely consisted of copying plaster casts and emulating the Old Masters – vernacular visual culture was not considered art.[58] With the upheavals wrought by the outbreak of the revolution in 1910, the students staged a strike to demand curricular changes and the director's resignation. Congregating in a city plaza, they began painting there rather than attending their classes. The practice of plein-air painting became part of the curriculum when a new director, the Mexican Impressionist painter Alfredo Ramos Martínez, established a school of open-air painting in the nearby town of Santa Anita in 1913. Affectionately nicknamed Barbizon, it was a short-lived experiment because with changing revolutionary governments came changes to the governance of the Academy of San Carlos. The school, which changed names three times over the course of the revolution and again in 1929, became a site of contention for the direction art should follow under a new social order which was very much in flux.[59] Ramos Martínez's successor, Dr. Atl, sought to ally it politically with the armed struggle. He too was forced out and fled to Veracruz, joined by a group of artists – including Orozco and Siqueiros – who supported him in publishing the short-lived political newspaper *La Vanguardia*. During these fraught moments of the revolution, painting seemed far from the minds of certain artists. The academy itself closed for three years. Siqueiros enrolled in the army and was eventually sent as an envoy to Spain.

While it is easy to imagine plein-air painting as out of touch with social reality, certain students who had worked at Santa Anita had thrived there and lamented the school's closure. Lola Cueto had enrolled as a teenager and insisted on going back outdoors to paint

57
On Clausell, see Mark A. Castro, 'Echoes of Impressionism'. Joaquín Clausell and the Politics of Mexican Art, in: Emily C. Burns and Alice Rudy Price, *Mapping Impressionist Painting in Transnational Contexts*, London/New York 2021, 192–203.

58
See Jean Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, Austin, TX 1962.

59
For a brief history of the school detailing its various name changes, see entry "Antigua Academia de San Carlos" on the website of the Biblioteca Academia de San Carlos (February 27, 2024).

on her own, much to the dismay of her parents.[60] Her painting of a cabbage patch dates from this era, its bucolic setting contrasting the political turmoil of the time [Fig. 1]. Fernando Leal refused to enroll in the academy but was an eager student of Ramos Martínez in the open-air school. As he reminisced later,

> [T]he open-air light transfigured [the students]. I asked to be allowed to paint. To my intense surprise, I was given an enormous canvas [...] and a set of colors [...] I started painting as if it were a game and soon heard behind me the exclamations that Ramos Martinez never denied anyone: 'It is a Cézanne! One should paint like that without *parti-pris*. What color! Silvery! And *la pate* [sic]! To what texture it builds!' I could understand only a few of these breathless sayings, but I will always remain grateful to Alfredo Ramos Martínez for having confronted me with the most fantastic problems that a painter can face, without attempting to humble me with the pedantry of an academic teacher.[61]

As the revolution unfolded, Leal continued working independently, inspired by the potential of plein-air painting. *El viejo de la olla* (The old man and the pot, 1918) [Fig. 2], a meditative painting of an Indigenous man holding a painted ceramic vessel posed against a field of yellow grass and periwinkle flowers, dates from this era. Its golden hues were likely an homage to the recently deceased Mexican painter Saturnino Herrán (1887–1918), but the dabs of color to describe the landscape referred stylistically to French Impressionism.

Subsequently, Orozco and Siqueiros both denigrated the open-air painting schools, contributing to the dismissal of the artists who promoted them. Orozco mocked it for being detached from its context, writing in his autobiography: "The first thing [Ramos Martínez] did [as director] was to found in Santa Anita [...] an open-air painting school pompously called 'Barbizon,' which was like founding on the Seine River, close to Paris, a Santa Anita with canoes, pulque, charros, enchiladas, huaraches, and knife-fights. Two steps from the Eiffel Tower."[62] While in Spain as a representative of the Mexican government, Siqueiros connected with the local intelligentsia and Latin American expats and set out to influence the direction of modern art of the Americas through the publication of the short-lived journal *Vida Americana*, launched in Barcelona

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On Lola Cueto, see *Lola Cueto. Trascendencia mágica, 1897–1978* (exh. cat. Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes) ed. by Estela Duarte, Mexico City 2013. The anecdote about Cueto's parents' anxiety about their daughter being out painting on her own was told to me by Mireya Cueto in 2002.

61
Quoted in Charlot, The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 161.

62
José Clemente Orozco, *Autobiografía*, Mexico City 1945, 39. Author's translation.

[Fig. 1]
Lola Cueto, Campos de col (Cabbage patch), 1916, oil on canvas, Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Arte/INBA © José Pablo Wayne Ridgell Cueto.

[Fig. 2]
Fernando Leal, El viejo de la olla (The old man and the pot), 1918, oil on canvas, 75 × 65 cm, photograph by Francisco Kochen © Fernando Leal-Audirac Collection & Archives.

in 1921.[63] There, he published a manifesto aligning himself with the return-to-order tendencies of post-World War I European art and decrying Impressionism and the open-air painting schools: "Let us discard puerile theories which we have recently welcomed with frenzy in the Americas, sickly branches of the tree of *Impressionism*, pruned by Paul Cézanne, the restorer of the essential."[64]

Reappointed as director of the art academy in 1920, Ramos Martínez established an open-air painting school eventually headquartered in Coyoacán. There, students could live and work independent of the academic curriculum, receiving materials, room, and board at no expense to them. They painted the grounds and the Indigenous models, who worked on the property, forging a strong sense of community. The works produced at the Coyoacán school are not the bucolic Impressionist landscapes of the school's earlier iteration. Instead, they use the pictorial language of broken brushstrokes to confront difference. In some cases, they express solidarity with Indigenous Mexicans, interrogate the unevenness of visual representation, and meditate on the relation of Natives to the land. In short, they propose new directions for modernist figuration. Leal's *El indio del sarape rojo* (The Native man of the red serape, 1920) [Fig. 3] is a larger than life-sized portrait of a groundskeeper, where dabs of paint cover a vertical expanse about two meters high. It is an approach figuration that is unprecedented in French plein-air Impressionism. In fact, Michael Fried argues that after Manet's great figure paintings of the early 1860s, "the century-long immensely productive tradition or problematic of ambitious figure painting [...] came to a close".[65] According to Fried, Impressionist landscape became the future for ambitious painting after Claude Monet's experiments with large-scale figurative painting could not be resolved in paintings such as *Women in the Garden* (1866) or *Luncheon on the Grass* (1865–1866) because, in Fried's words, "the sheer scale of his figures put a kind of pressure on his paint-handling".[66] These remarks are important in terms of what would unfold in Mexican painting: Leal came to abandon the Impressionist brushstroke and looked to Manet for examples of monumental figuration. In 1922, he became one of the founders of the mural movement.

Much smaller in scale, Salvador Martínez Báez's *Joven campesina* (Young peasant woman, 1921) [Fig. 4] recalls the abrupt croppings of Edgar Degas, here using a seemingly truncated composi-

63
See Natalia de la Rosa, Vida Americana, 1919–1921. Redes conceptuales en torno a un proyecto trans-continental de vanguardia, in: *Artl@s Bulletin* 3/2, 2014, 22–35.

64
David Alfaro Siqueiros, Three Appeals of the Modern Guidance of American Painters and Sculptors, in: Mari Carmen Ramírez, Héctor Olea, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Resisting Categories. Latin American and/or Latino?*, Houston 2012, 348–351, here 351.

65
Michael Fried, The Moment of Impressionism, in: *nonsite.org* 33, 2020 (October 13, 2022).

66
Ibid.

[Fig. 3]
Fernando Leal, El indio del sarape rojo (The Native man of the red serape), 1920, oil on canvas, 188 × 108.5 cm, photograph by Francisco Kochen © Fernando Leal-Audirac Collection & Archives.

[Fig. 4]
Salvador Martínez Báez, Joven campesina (Young peasant woman), 1921, oil on canvas,
Museo Nacional de Arte / INBA, Mexico City.

tion in the service of social commentary. The sitter is positioned in urban space, walking alongside a colonial building that serves as a permanent reminder of the displacement and subjugation of her ancestors and of her own community in the present. Rosario Cabrera's surprisingly bold *Portrait of a Boy* (1921) [Fig. 5] suggests a conjunction between subject and place. Parts of the boy's hair and face are composed of the same tones of blue and green as make up the wooded background. As a settler artist, Cabrera acknowledges the boy's proximity to his land of origins in a manner that brings to the fore the coloniality of the genre of landscape painting. In *El indio de la tuna* (The Native man and the tuna, 1922), Fernando Leal infuses the connection of Indigenous subject to land with religious overtones by suggesting a halo around the sitter's head through his manner of lighting the field in the background. Francisco Díaz de León's *Market Day* (1922) [Fig. 6] imbues his sitters, three women seated on the ground, with a monumental dignity. In many of these paintings, the Indigenous subjects look away, not meeting the viewer's gaze, a gesture that could be interpreted as subjugated humility or refusal.[67] The practice of figure painting at the school entailed surrounding the model with the easels, underscoring the one-sidedness of visual representation [Fig. 7]. The works mentioned above, however, betray a self-consciousness on the part of elite (mestizo or white) artists of their own privilege and positionality. I regard them as an attempt at un-suturing, as described by Yancy. In their visual experimentation through a stylistic affinity with Impressionism and Postimpressionism, they treat the Indigenous subject with an unprecedented level of attention and respect. Rendering their faces with a high degree of verisimilitude – as portraits rather than as types – the artists establish an ethical relationship of the face-to-face encounter as described by French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, who writes, "The absolute nakedness of the face, the absolutely defenceless face without covering cloth or mask, is what opposes my power over it, my violence, and opposes it in an absolute way."[68] As Michael L. Morgan explicates, "The thing to remember in the face-to-face encounter between the self and the other person is that it is concrete and particular."[69] Such an encounter happens precisely in the act of portrait painting.

67

For an extended discussion of indigenist pictorial representation, see Tatiana Flores, Art, Revolution, and Indigenous Subjects, in: Carlos Salomon (ed.), *The Routledge History of Latin American Culture*, New York/London 2017, 115–129. On refusal, see Audra Simpson, On Ethnographic Refusal. Indigeneity, 'Voice,' and Colonial Citizenship, in: *Junctures* 9, 2007, 67–80.

68

Quoted in Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, Cambridge/New York 2011, 68. I am grateful to conversations with Aliza Nisenbaum for introducing me to the work of Levinas. See Tatiana Flores, Aliza Nisenbaum's Agential Realism, in: Amanda Singer (ed.), *Aliza Nisenbaum*, Berlin 2019, 7–14.

69

Morgan, The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas, 59.

[Fig. 5]
Rosario Cabrera, Portrait of a Boy, 1921, oil on canvas, private collection, Mexico City.

[Fig. 6]
Francisco Díaz de León, Market Day, 1922, oil on canvas, 100 × 122 cm, colección Andrés Blaisten, Mexico City.

[Fig. 7]
Artists painting Luz Jiménez at the Coyoacán school (left to right: Ramón Alva de la Canal, Fernado Leal, Francisco Díaz de León, and unidentified man), ca. 1921.

One of the school's models was Luz Jiménez, later an icon of Mexican postrevolutionary art depicted by Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, Diego Rivera, and others.[70] She was a native Nahuatl speaker from a traditional community in Milpa Alta, in the Valley of Mexico and became a crucial interlocutor for artists. She was Leal's favorite model, and they became lifelong friends. In *India con frutas* (Indigenous woman with fruit, 1921) [Fig. 8], he poses her against a wooded background, holding a large bowl of fruit atop her head. The model's direct eye contact with the spectator contrasts with the demure downward gaze more characteristic of Indigenous men and women in their interaction with white or mestizo elites as seen in the Martínez Báez painting discussed earlier. The French painter Jean Charlot described Luz as possessing a double consciousness, in that she could inhabit the mindset of both the colonized and the colonizer:

> Now many of the other girls could put their village clothes on and pose with a pot on their shoulders, but they didn't do it, so to speak, to the manor born. And Luz had one thing that was important: she could do it both naturally, as the Indian girl that she was, and know enough so that she could imagine from the outside, so to speak, what the painters or the writers saw in her, and she helped both see things because of that sort of double outlook she could have on herself and her tradition. I think that not only in art but, as I said, in ethnology, she has been a very important link between past Mexico and present Mexico.[71]

Feminist critics have rightly highlighted the ways in which the Indigenous Mexican women occupy a doubly subaltern status, as women and Native.[72] Certainly, the image of Luz was instrumentalized in the service of Mexican state ideology, but this was not the case for all the artists who painted her. At the Coyoacán school, the experience of listening to Luz, rather than simply representing her, was formative for Leal, and it may have been his dialogue with her and other models that propelled his constant questioning of the power dynamics of the act of representing.[73] Un-suturing for him

70
See *Luz Jiménez. Símbolo de un pueblo milenario, 1897–1965* (exh. cat. Mexico City, Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo; Austin, TX, Mexic-Arte Museum), ed. by Instituto Nacional de Cultura y Arte, Mexico City 2000.

71
John Pierre Charlot, Twenty-Sixth Interview with Jean Charlot, August 7, 1971, *The Jean Charlot Foundation* (March 10, 2024).

72
See Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition. Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art*, University Park, PA 2009.

73
A different interpretation on the relationship between Luz and these artists was advanced by literary scholar Natasha Varner. See Natasha Varner, *La Raza Cosmética. Beauty, Identity, and Settler Colonialism in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, Tucson, AZ 2020.

[Fig. 8]
Fernando Leal, India con frutas (Native woman with fruit), 1921, oil on canvas, 97 × 82 cm, photograph by Francisco Kochen © Fernando Leal-Audirac Collection & Archives.

became an ethical lifelong practice, and he employed it to advocate for disenfranchised communities both pictorially and through activism.

In *Campamento de un coronel Zapatista*, known in English as *Zapatistas at Rest* (1922) [Fig. 9], Leal composed a large multi-figural composition of five Native Mexicans, members of the peasant army of Emiliano Zapata, gathered together. Defying stereotypes of Zapatistas as violent warriors, the artist poses them at rest. Luz is included as the only woman in the scene, and she appears with a pot in the background, in a pose recalling a Toltec Chac Mool sculpture while clearly in dialogue with Western pictorial traditions. Considered the first painting of the Mexican Revolution, what many commentators overlooked is how the composition is deliberately artificial, quoting Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863). In posing his sitters in a contrived manner, Leal predicted how images of Indigenous men and women would be instrumentalized in the service of Mexican state ideology. *Zapatistas at Rest* set the stage for the iconography of the mural movement, which was also prefigured by Leal's first mural *The Dancers of Chalma* (1922–1923). These monumental multi-figural compositions were birthed by a sustained engagement with the legacy of Impressionism and a dialogic relationship with the models that posed for them. The Coyoacán painters' immersion in Impressionism corresponds to Piotr Piotrowski's theorization of a horizontal, de-hierarchized art history that interprets such "influences" not as belatedness, but, as articulated by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, as "very different ideas of what art could be and where the centre of reference could be, and a series of productive misunderstandings that meant that a relationship was still possible between these differing positions".[74]

When Rivera and Siqueiros, who had been in Europe at the end of the Revolution, returned to Mexico, they found a fertile environment that had flourished in their absence. Both artists came practicing and promoting the return-to-order neoclassical aesthetic that had taken hold in Europe after World War I. On their part, however, after their resounding rejection of the academy, artists allied with the open-air schools in Mexico could not easily be convinced that a reversion to academic tendencies was the direction they should embrace. They continued to promote the open-air painting schools as the key revolutionary initiative in art education. Ramos Martínez founded three additional schools in 1924. By the end of the decade, institutions designed to promote plein-air painting had become a full-blown experiment in alternative art pedagogies geared towards women and young people from disenfranchised communities, both urban and Indigenous. There were seven open-air painting schools, two schools located in urban centers, and a school of sculpture and

74
Joyeux-Prunel, Why Horizontal Art History Cannot Escape Computation, 197.

[Fig. 9]
Fernando Leal, Zapatistas at Rest, 1922, oil on canvas, 150 × 180 cm, photograph by Francisco Kochen © Fernando Leal-Audirac Collection & Archives.

direct carving. There were critically lauded exhibitions in Europe, but there were also a great many local detractors.[75]

To the artists that promoted the schools, they were a great democratizing project that gave people from marginalized communities the tools to represent themselves in a context where "Peasant", "Worker", and "Indian" had long since become abstractions. In an art history built on the cult of personality and the fetishization of objects, however, there was no room for proposals that argued that another world was possible. The Eurocentric narrative of modernism hasn't been able to conceive of other stories even when they are staring it right in the face.

III. Conclusion

The category of "global modernisms" links two fundamentally colonial constructs, one spatial, the other temporal. What we come to understand as global today came into being with the European discovery and colonization of the Americas, beginning in 1492. The very term "globe" has cartographic connotations, bringing to mind, not the planet itself, but the world as a collectible commodity. Similarly, the modern is premised on violence, dispossession, and death, but these conditions are routinely occluded. Instead, the attributes we associate with modernism are more in line with what Paul Gilroy described as "an innocent modernity [that] emerges from the apparently happy social relations that graced post-Enlightenment life in Paris, Berlin, and London".[76] At their most elemental, global modernisms replicate a center-periphery model of diffusion that reinscribes Europe. They have no place in a project of decolonizing art history because they reinforce European standards, which are not only deeply arrogant, but also violent and white supremacist. To operate within this category under the premise of "[*r*]*eversing* the terms of the conversation", Mignolo warns, "will not work, mainly because doing so remains within the same rule of game and play, yet under inferior conditions".[77] Instead, what is needed is to "*change the terms* of the conversation".[78] Decolonizing global modernisms means discarding them altogether and reconceptualizing the aesthetic object through a different set of parameters.

A way forward for Mignolo is through the practice of delinking, which "means not to operate under the same assumptions even

75
See Tatiana Flores, Starting from Mexico. Estridentismo as an Avant-Garde Model, in: *World Art* 4/1, 2014, 47–65.

76
Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London/New York 1993, 44.

77
Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity, 206. Emphasis in original.

78
Ibid.

while acknowledging that modern categories of thought are dominant, if not hegemonic, and in many, if not all of us".[79] One model he proposes, which works well with the examples from Mexico discussed above is "cosmopolitan localism".[80] It is tempting to close this essay with his own beautifully worded characterization: "Cosmopolitan localism means working toward a world in which many worlds would coexist."[81] But it is even more powerful to think back to the Mexican artists modeling this very praxis long before it was theorized. Fernando Leal, Lola Cueto, Rosario Cabrera, Franscico Díaz de León, Salvador Martínez Báez, and their contemporaries explored dialogic collaborative artmaking of care and repair. Conscious of their privilege and critical of the coloniality of art and life in early twentieth-century Mexico, they sought out forms of social engagement on the easel and beyond it, using every means at their disposal to engender a decolonial turn.

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79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 209.

81 Ibid.