

George Ciccariello-Maher  
*Decolonizing Dialectics*  
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*Reviewed by Kris Sealey, 2019*

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Quote: “Ciccariello-Maher offers a decolonizing dialectics as the conceptual grid through which we might theorize these moments in history, when its linear and present time is interrupted by that other time of the combative spirit of colonized subjects determining conditions under which they might find a future.”

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George Ciccariello-Maher's *Decolonizing Dialectics* grounds its analysis in the work of three thinkers--Sorel, Fanon, and Dussel--to establish the value of the project of decolonizing dialectics. Through each of these thinkers, we come to see the value in *not* giving up on dialectics completely, if one's political investments are grounded in what scholars of decolonial theory have named the underside of modernity. In summary, a dialectics in the process of being “decolonized” is able to achieve what a conservative dialectics can't: it resists premature closure. It moves toward a horizon instead of an end. And as a consequence, it avoids an essentialist or static view of the human as it moves toward an alternative and (more important) decolonial conception of society.

So what, precisely, would a project of decolonizing dialectics involve? To ask this differently, what happens to dialectical struggle when it's decolonized? On my reading, Ciccariello-Maher's work tells us that our answers to such questions would have to come from what we understand by decolonization. Insofar as *Decolonizing Dialectics* elects to move through Sorel, Fanon, and Dussel, the book works with a tripartite (if you will) understanding of decolonization: decolonization involves relations that are combative (coming from Sorel's critique of social harmony); it stands against false universals (coming from Fanon's valuing of the necessary unpredictability of the human); and it generates conditions for thinking a radical Outside (coming from Dussel's call for a rupturing of totality). On these counts, a dialectics “decolonized” emerges out of a conception of decolonization that is antiharmony, antiteleological, and antisystem.

But, to be sure, the political mechanics of a decolonizing dialectics is as much dialectical as it is decolonial. That is to say, it continues to be true to “[the] question of dialectics,” which is the question of “what to preserve and what to discard, how to move forward without reproducing the

errors of the past . . .” (2). On Ciccariello-Maher’s analysis, this “dialectical question par excellence” can only genuinely unfold its true implications when it is decolonized, that is to say, when this dialectical question is posed from a relationship to history that enables history to show up *as* one of colonial violence. It is only then that the “radical possibilities” of dialectical struggle open up, replacing (perhaps as it repairs) a *colonized* dialectics as a deterministic and unitary march toward history’s end.

One might ask of this proposal to decolonize dialectics: Why work within the frame of dialectics at all? Could the radicalization *of* the dialectical question *by* decolonization take us radically Outside of dialectics altogether? I return to this question later in this essay, but Ciccariello-Maher makes a compelling case against this. He cites dialectical opposition as the spark from which history is made to unfold as something other than another version of itself. Through dialectical struggle, history’s teleology is overthrown by the unpredictable direction of the “subjective”--the will of people to *act* against or beyond the power algorithms of the state. And so, on this account, the path toward a radical Outside can only be dialectical in kind. In this sense, it would seem as though the animating question of a project to decolonize dialectics would be: How does one frame, signify, or determine the coordinates for this radical Outside? What might it mean to articulate a genuinely different possibility for the human, and perhaps more urgently, what does it mean to work toward that different possibility?

*Decolonizing Dialectics* argues that when we take those “internal oppositions” of *the* dialectic to the concrete struggles of the global majority, these internal oppositions are sufficiently radicalized by the implications of decolonization. In other words, it is in those concrete struggles from the underside of modernity that the coordinates for a radical Outside emerges. We “find something different”<sup>1</sup> through the subjective will of the global majority. Hence, it makes sense to use decolonization to articulate the combative, open-ended, anti-unity nature of dialectics because (1) it is “in the colonized and decolonizing world that the combative *spirit* of Marx was best able to flourish and transform” (43), and (2) the “dangers of false universals masquerading as ethical systems” is most clear for the colonized, or from the position of modernity’s underside (43). So, if our search is for the location of rupture, the source of an ontological generativity, the “how” of Fanon’s new humanity, then ours must be the task of decolonizing dialectics. Outside of this, the progression of history remains just that--movements within and in accordance with an orchestral whole that get us to nothing more than iterations of the master’s house.

To my mind, the possibility of the radical Outside calls for a deep pessimism that is contrarily also a deep optimism about this possibility. It calls for a deep pessimism that sees history’s uninterrupted unfolding for what it is--the unfolding of nothing other than modulations of colonial violence. But also deep optimism insofar as out of this understanding comes a truth that it is precisely through history’s (re)productive cycle of force that there will be the rupture needed for “jump-starting” a combative, revolutionary violence. This “jump-start” is not (cannot be) coded in history’s self-determination. It is not *its* “product” in the strict sense. Rather, this jump-start emerges out of history’s colonial metrics as its “unpredictable remainder,” whereby *out* of the “old,” something “new” emerges for which the colonial algorithm cannot account, given its unpredictability.<sup>2</sup> Ciccariello-Maher offers a decolonizing dialectics as the conceptual grid through which we might theorize these moments in history, when its linear and present time is

interrupted by that other time of the combative spirit of colonized subjects determining conditions under which they might find a future.

This difficult pessimistic-optimism locates the claims of *Decolonizing Dialectics* centrally in Fanon. For Fanon, it is at the level of ontological negation that we find the full realization of history's metrics of oppression. And it is out of the abjectness of this ontological negation that history's unpredictable remainder--the colonized, the wretched of the earth--emerges. The promise of an otherwise--a radical Outside--finds its possibility only through this subjective position (or nonposition) of the wretched, insofar as it is there that the force of history encounters a counter-force (a violence) sufficiently combative for generating (to anticipate Dussel) an aperture in the totality of colonial history.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon notes that, without this aperture, the dangers of "false universals" lurk in the moment of formal emancipation. That is to say, without gesturing toward a radical Outside, emancipation remains within the very metrics of colonial violence, and carries, through the postcolonial moment, its ontological negations into subsequent stages of determining national sovereignty. This is not to say that *Wretched of the Earth* discards the frame of the nation as a viable horizon toward which decolonization ought to move. Rather, Fanon proposes a *decolonial* conception of "nation"--one whose starting point is a commitment to move beyond the ontological apartheid of colonial rule. So, for Fanon, the wretched of the earth will see, from their subterranean (non)position, that *all* of a colonial society is in need of replacing. Their anticolonial violence works in the name of this complete rupture, but the end toward which it moves is "an as-yet undefined horizon, orienting while not yet determining" (8) the trajectory of their anticolonial struggle.<sup>3</sup>

Ciccariello-Maher notes that this commitment to the open-endedness of combative struggle (an open-endedness that ultimately resists the kinds of false universals lurking in the promise of formal emancipations) makes Fanon's conception of decolonial liberation a dialectical one. More important, Fanon's is *the* truest to dialectical movement, insofar as it gestures toward rupture from *within* the totality (of colonial violence) that it ruptures. We see this in Fanon's call for the colonized to take up the very black identity prescribed to them by the Manichaean divide--the frozen totality of the colonial world--in order to then invert (and unfreeze) that ontological apartheid, for the sake of motion toward something otherwise. This unfreezing of the stasis of the colonial symbolic order happens through the product of the stasis itself--black identity, subterranean nonbeing. That subterranean non-being--always constituted as violent, illegitimately there, there in order to be destroyed--becomes weaponized for the sake of the self-activity of the colonized, the system's unpredictable remainder. Out of this weaponized self-activity of totality's unpredictable remainder, history moves *not* toward a predetermined end, but rather toward something genuinely different, toward a radical Outside.

So, out of the project of decolonizing dialectics, coloniality's totality is (paradoxically) *both* fully totalizing *and* never totalizing enough. Coloniality is a "dirty computer"<sup>4</sup> that must either invest in wiping away its unpredictable remainders or invest in including them in its matrix by way of those false universals. What both options show is that these unpredictable remainders are always there (so that coloniality must always be content with what it cannot account for). And as Fanon points out in terms of race, and Sorel gets close to in terms of class, the "thereness" of these

unpredictable remainders is felt when the divisions of coloniality's ontological apartheid are at their most extreme. Fanon's sociogenesis captures these internal paradoxes, or ambiguities, within colonialism's Manichaeism, between the "included within" and the "excluded without." He describes this divide as never fully total, and ultimately working against itself from the beginning, "claiming pure goodness on one side while the very existence of an opposition steals away part of its purity" (82).

But Ciccariello-Maher shows that it is in Dussel that we find the conceptual vocabulary of analectics, which theorizes this combative conception of a radical Outside that emerges from within. Ciccariello-Maher notes Dussel's own suspicions toward a dialectical conception of decolonial struggle, insofar as it moves toward unity, closure, and totality. For Dussel, there is no outside in dialectical theorizations of history, no remainder for which history cannot account. However, on Ciccariello-Maher's reading, Dussel's conception of analectics offers a historicized exteriority that is able to radicalize dialectical struggle. The Other as historicized--whose difference is in (and not despite) her social location--is part of a colonizing totality as its "excluded within." She is radically excluded by virtue of the severity (barbarity) of her internal oppression. Hence, by way of Dussel, a decolonizing dialectics conditions a barbarian (without sense, beyond sense) liberation emerging from "beyond the walls" of colonial apartheid.

The question of finding a radical Outside within the totality of colonial history is also Fanon's question of the leap, of the possibility of introducing invention into existence. On David Marriott's reading, this Fanonian conception of "invention" (its *way* of being future, or its temporality) not only takes us out of Time itself, but also takes us outside of the utility of method altogether. (Recall, here, Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he says, of the use of methodology in deriving the meaning of the possibility of invention, "I shall be derelict. I leave methods to the botanists and mathematicians. There is a point at which methods devour themselves" [Fanon 1952, 12].) In other words, as what Marriott calls a "future imperfect" (Marriott 2011, 53)--"a moment of inventiveness whose introduction necessarily never arrives but does not stop arriving, and whose destination cannot be foreseen, or anticipated, but only repeatedly traveled, and, therefore, not future at all" (53-54)--the decolonial rupture that might emerge as colonialism's radical Outside "suggests precisely the sense in which those excluded from the narrative of colonial history generate a notion of agency that evades the grasp of all such narratives [of methodology], *including dialectics . . .*" (72; emphasis added).

Marriott grounds his reading of Fanon's futuricity on the ways in which temporality itself is undone, or made incongruent, by the nature of the violence of ontological negation. As a violence that is both contingent *and* necessary, unforeseeable *and* destined, accidental *and* anticipated, anti-Black colonial violence is always out of Time (so to speak). As such, Marriott asks us whether the problem of an alternative future might not also be the problem of time itself (63), of determining the possibility of how actual futures might register "in the colonial subject's very untimeliness" (64). On account of this untimeliness (the colonized subject's being in time, but not yet in History), invention, for Fanon, is not a search for a new telos, but rather a question about the possibility of a future *without* telos. This telos-less rupture is precisely what, on Ciccariello-Maher's analysis, decolonizing dialectics positions us to imagine. But if, in decolonizing dialectics, we continue to remain within the confines of method--whereby the combative struggle of the oppressed is available as an object *for* knowledge/theory--then

Marriott's critical reading of Sylvia Wynter's taking-up of sociogeny seems relevant here as well. Of Wynter's work with sociogeny, Marriott writes, "It strikes me as odd, perhaps, that an argument for humanist reinvention should be illustrated as a new way of making the human calculable and predictable" (80). Setting aside the question of whether this is a fair reading of Wynter, Marriott's criticism does seem to offer us the following important consideration for the proposed task of decolonizing dialectics. "[if] invention is to preserve itself as the promise of endless creativity, [must it ultimately] leave all teleologies--all methods [even the dialectical one]--derelict"? (84).

I use the frame of the dirty computer intentionally here to reference Janelle Monae's pro-black, pro-feminist, and pro-queer 2018 album, because, for me, the animating spirit of the project of decolonizing dialectics--the possibility of gesturing toward a radical Outside--is also one that animates much of women of color feminist thought, as well as the critical projects of queer women of color. It is in this spirit that women of color feminisms particularly caution against premature closures and preemptive success stories, precisely because of the dangers included in those "false universals," which often (but not always) manifest in feminisms that are exclusionary to black, trans, and queer agency. For the sake of intercepting the dangers of these false universals, Fanon begins with colonialism's ontological apartheid, an apartheid that "drives the wedge of difference as deeply as possible . . ." (Ciccariello-Maher, 80). In other words, for Fanon (and similarly, for Sorel across class), it is at the juncture of this deep wedge that one finds conditions for the possibility of genuine rupture and movement in history, or for the possibility of a radical Outside.

Might the *form* of a decolonizing dialectic be used to theorize the ways in which women of color feminisms articulate resistance against coloniality, and against the false universals that mask coloniality's persistence? If not, is there an exteriority toward which these feminisms point, which might signify as the unpredictable remainder within a decolonial-dialectical struggle itself? Might black feminisms, decolonial feminisms, or third-world feminisms point to a radical Outside that conditions the production of a new human in ways not yet thought of by Sorel, Fanon, or Dussel? My sense is that these are precisely the kinds of questions for which *Decolonizing Dialectics* prepares us. In other words, what seems to be of value in Ciccariello-Maher's argument for a decolonizing dialectic is not so much that it is housed in a completed project, but rather that the project offers itself--its content--as what will always be *on its way* to being completed. Indeed, the project is one of decoloniz-*ing*, and not decoloniz-*ed* dialectics. Hence, in bringing the form of a decolonizing dialectics into (combative?) relationship with critical projects like women of color feminisms, decolonial feminisms, and third-world feminisms, we find possible sites of struggle, possible internal combative divides among what Dussel would name the always-politicized multifaceted exteriorities, "who are each to varying degrees *outside* the system" (119). Perhaps it is in this spirit of a decolonizing dialectics that we might hear Bernice Johnson Reagon when she reminds us that "no matter how much of a coalition space this is, it ain' nothing like the coalescing you've got to do tomorrow, and Tuesday and Wednesday. . . ." <sup>5</sup>

And so, to end with one of my earlier questions-- why should we continue to work within the frame of dialectics, as we decolonize that frame?--I also wonder if the faithfulness to the combative relationships to which the methodology of decolonizing dialectics itself asks us to



attend might lead to something radically otherwise. In other words, I wonder if the work of decolonizing dialectics might take us toward something that is no longer dialectical, and perhaps is also no longer “methodology” in the strict sense (to reference, again, Marriott’s critique of Wynter’s reading of Fanon). Can inventive dissonance within the dialectic be sufficiently radical so as to make the dialectic itself obsolete? And if so, would this point toward something other than violent struggle, or toward a possible mode of violence that *itself* is so radically otherwise that it signifies beyond what we are able to recognize--within a dialectical methodology--as violence? Perhaps this is the point of the project of (an ongoing) decolonizing of dialectics--that it is, itself, “a proliferation of heterogeneity” (97), that its form just *is* the ushering in of rupture within rupture, which is already no longer the conservative unfolding of a totalized and totalizing One. The richness of George Ciccariello-Maher’s work lies in generating, for its readers, these sorts of questions, questions that are pivotal to the work of imagining alternative futures.

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<sup>1</sup> In this, I reference Anthony Alessandrini’s work, which offers the cultural politics of Frantz Fanon as the location of alternative futures (Alessandrini 2014).

<sup>2</sup> In this terminology, I reference Homi Bhabha’s conception of the archaic in postcolonial cultural systems (Bhabha 2004, 175–98).

<sup>3</sup> I underscore Fanon’s conception of a decolonial nationalism using the work of Edouard Glissant in Sealey 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *Dirty Computer* is the third studio album by singer Janelle Monae, which was released in April, 2018. The compilation consists of tracks that celebrate queer black womanhood.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Emma Velez, who reminded us of the power in these words during the presentation of her work at the 2018 meeting of SPEP in State College, Pennsylvania.