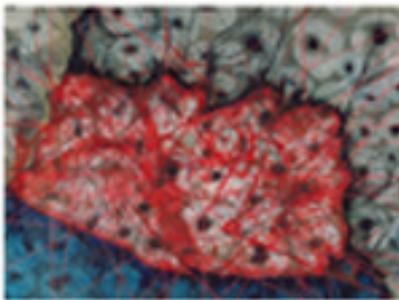


## Nelson Maldonado-Torres's *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*

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Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 360 pages. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.



AGAINST WAR

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VIEWS FROM THE UNDERSIDE OF MODERNITY

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NELSON MALDONADO-TORRES  
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One of the most enduring images in *Against War* is borrowed from another book, Enrique Dussel's *The Invention of the Americas*. It is of an event that happens in privacy, behind the scenes of History: Hernán Cortés learns from Moctezuma's envoys that the indigenous inhabitants take him to be God. Alone, and then surrounded by his men, Cortés acknowledges the power bestowed on him by those very words that constitute him. This scene of solitude is also one in which unmistakable and egotistical grandeur works as self-fashioning. Even more so than for Dussel himself, it serves Maldonado-Torres as an occasion to reflect on the birth of modern subjectivity as a consciousness born out of the radical unevenness between the European and the native. Far from Spain, freed from the all-seeing gaze of the King, Cortés can truly believe himself to be God. Modernity thus is born in the moment when Western civilization takes the place of God and defines its mission as an expansionist one, rendering every Other a slave by means of “naturalizing war”—a concept which Maldonado-Torres defines as “the radical suspension or displacement of ethical and political relationships in favor of the propagation of a peculiar death ethic that renders massacre and different forms of genocide as natural” (xi). The conquest and then the colony are quotidian exercises in which “Imperial God and imperial man become immediate proofs of the existence of each other” (113), to the extent that no identification can be possible between colonizer and colonized. Hence, race and the coloniality of power perpetuate the radical ethical breach created by Western domination. That severance can only be healed, Maldonado-Torres proposes, through an ethics of love as goodness, that is, as a humanizing practice.

In search of a genealogy of love as a response to war (and implicitly positioning himself at the forefront of it), Maldonado-Torres launches a project that starts in Europe only to challenge Eurocentric domination over the periphery. He chooses philosophers that engage in a critical dialogue with European philosophical thought. They are philosophers-other, one might say. Starting with the French-Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas and his human and intellectual experience with Hitlerism and its thinkers, Maldonado-Torres's account moves to the Martiniquan philosopher Frantz Fanon and his radical vision of love as enslavement to the slave. From the colonial Caribbean, then, the author ends by discussing the Mexican-Argentine liberation theorist Enrique Dussel. In this way, Maldonado-Torres traces an itinerary that, working from the margins of European discourse, questions Europe's cultural imperial project by revealing it to be bound up in a non-ethics of war. As Maldonado-Torres acknowledges, he works in the same vein as the Argentine thinker Walter Mignolo (xi). While the latter conceives of the conquest as the "darker side" of the Renaissance, the former makes us see that war plays the same sordid role when discussing Modernity. This leads Maldonado-Torres to conclude that "the description of modernity as a paradigm of war can only be fully understood when we relate it to the experience of warriors and conquerors at the birth of modernity" (213).

*Against War* works along distinct lines that move beyond the infertile politics of post-colonialism. Maldonado-Torres sees neocolonial discourse as still working its dehumanizing practices at an everyday level. In that sense, he attempts to restore to contemporary academic thought a political edge that is all too often lost. Although he starts his highly chronological narrative with occupied France during the Second World War, toward the end of the book he offers illuminating reflections on Latin American immigration to the United States, showing how it is that Hispanics can now be perceived as "cultural terrorists of sorts who menace the cultural integrity of the nation" (252). In this sense Maldonado-Torres constructs his discourse in opposition to postmodern views, much in the line of philosophers who, like Enrique Dussel, have criticized postmodernism for its apolitical view of difference and distrust of reason, which fail to acknowledge the enduring practices of Modernity as a paradigm of war.

Maldonado-Torres explicitly locates his work in the fourth moment of the de-colonial turn he historicizes, a turn that begins with W.E.B. Du Bois at the beginning of the 20th century and continues into the present. Nonetheless, it is not clear through what specific means love can contribute, as a crucial element of the de-colonial turn, to undoing the paradigm of War as constitutive of Modernity. The author argues that in the transition from Levinas to Fanon, that is, from the second to the third moment of the de-colonial turn, there is a demonstrable move from the ethical to the political (89). I agree with his claim but am left with several questions regarding the political edge of the author's conception of love. In a post-Cold War world, where the ethical again seems to gain ground in opposition to projects of political emancipation, how does love as decolonizing practice work as a collective project that speaks back to oppression? To be more precise, must violence now and forever be branded a negative force incompatible with love? Are there other ways of thinking violence, going back to Fanon, as a possibility of

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de-activating the all-pervasive Eurocentric project of Modernity? Perhaps these are questions Maldonado-Torres will answer in the book he announces as a continuation of *Against War*, a work-in-progress entitled (interestingly enough) *Fanonian Meditations*.

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