

## **From the South**

Ana María León

Is a non-homogenous global possible? I would like to tackle this question, compellingly posed by Vikramāditya Prakāsh in his video intervention, from a different angle. It seems to me that the deceptive homogeneity of the global is the product of considering it in terms of temporal and geographic inclusion. Thus we are careful about even coverage, and anxious about forgotten or dismissed time periods and regions. From this point of view, homogeneity is a desirable goal. However, the murder of George Floyd in Summer 2020 accelerated an already present shift in education, the humanities, and architectural history: an increased focus on the exclusions that temporal and geographic inclusion allows, and sometimes even promotes. This shift has in some cases been complicated by institutional reactions that have depoliticized the projects stemming from the very Indigenous and Black populations they claim to address. Rather than participate in this erasure, I want to argue for the urgency of theorizing and teaching the history of architecture from the conceptual position of the South.

Here it is useful to think about the difference between equality and equity in the context of social justice discourses. While equality seeks even distribution of resources, and thus produces the appearance of fairness, equity organizes distribution according to the needs of the recipients. In other words, equity takes into account the consequences of systemic racism, gender disparity, and other inequalities premised on the production of otherness, and seeks to address them. Similarly, understanding a contemporary study of the global must take into account the historical events that have produced the non-homogenous present (in terms of scholarship, resources, cultural production, and other dimensions involved in teaching and writing the history of architecture). Addressing systemic inequality thus necessarily requires a non-homogenous approach that specifically addresses past exclusions.

So, what are these exclusions allowed and even sometimes promoted by geographic and temporal inclusion? The first exclusions that come to mind have to do with privilege, and the exclusion of agents, discourses, populations, and their environments based on class, race, gender, and body ability. In US academia, these exclusions were brought to the foreground in the Summer of 2020, with the intersection of racial injustice, pandemic disaster, and academic precarity. The subsequent protests and letter-writing campaigns initiated mostly by students directly called out the anti-black racism embedded in their courses, curriculums, student body, faculty composition, and institutional relationships with surrounding communities. These student-led campaigns in the US have resulted, in the short term, in notable changes in the composition and topics of lecture series, rushed adjunct hires, and elective seminars. We have yet to see whether these changes will be solidified in the long term with the hiring of tenure-track faculty, and changes in required surveys and other courses. The elective is an important tool in the fast implementation of curricular change, but it is also ineffectual in that it tends to preach to the choir (only interested students sign up, thus the elective is quick but can be

temporary, a bit like the executive order of curricular change). We find ourselves in an important moment in which students not only support, but even demand a revision and a questioning of the survey, or whatever its required replacement ends up being, the very course that has been GAHTC's main focus and banner.

Since its foundation in 2013, GAHTC has provided an important space for teacher-to-teacher conversations. Starting in 2017, the funding of teacher-to-teacher workshops provided an additional and much-needed space for more focused reflection. I have benefited from the support of the organization as co-organizer of several of these workshops, which included assembled educators invested in intersectional feminism, in teaching from and about Latin America, in teaching the global, in decolonizing architectural pasts and futures, and in the teaching of an antiracist architectural history. These workshops have provided spaces to share experiences and reflect on what we teach and how we teach it, separate from academia's constant focus on research. I have personally benefitted from working with these workshops' co-organizers and have learned from all the participants and broader publics. These opportunities to reflect on the ways in which we teach about gender, race, coloniality, and displaced geographies have provided me with valuable insights that inform this reflection.

There is a common agreement on the need to move beyond the canon of texts, buildings, and privileged practitioners, wherever they may be, and towards a diversification of sources, subjects, and actors: from the Indigenous ontological knowledge received from Indigenous elders (as discussed by Potawatomi historian John Low), to the poetry of author and teacher Gwendolyn Brooks (as cited by US architectural historian Amber Wiley, for instance, as an invaluable source in her teaching), to the role of black female laborers in the construction of colonial spaces in Panama (as discussed by Panamenian architectural historian Sylvia Arroyo). This expanded scope of the discipline points to a different urgency that goes beyond geographic inclusion and towards bringing together humans and non-humans, landscapes and objects, labor processes and materials, circulation and consumption. Shifting the focus to these relationships and the power differentials they create, promote, push against, is a mode of research that many architectural historians have been invested in for a while and that is sometimes subsumed into different names, including the terms decolonization, antiracism, and intersectional feminism. These approaches need to be understood as key components of a global history of architecture.

While these terms are politically aligned, they rise from different forms of oppression in colonial structures, including land dispossession, genocide, enslaved and unjustly remunerated labor as a component of capitalism and patriarchy. These forms of oppression can be in tension with each other—for instance, in the mobilization of white feminism against racial struggle, or in false binaries problematizing body ability as a luxury investment. Moreover, they have been appropriated and depoliticized in particular ways in the United States, leading to the paradoxical perception in South America, for instance, that they are trends imposed by empire.

The different forms of colonization across the globe have generated some confusion as the terms take on different meanings and priorities, these differences need to be better understood in order to avoid conflating different struggles. Indigenous activists and scholars living in settler colonial states such as the US understand and experience the state as a colony: as occupied Indigenous land. By placing colonization as an event in the past, the term postcolonial invalidates their struggle. Thus the conflation of postcolonial studies with decolonization has important, and often elided implications. In the context of the United States and other settler colonial states, decolonization is the rematriation of land to Indigeneity, a political project that involves a return to a different set of relationships with the land. As Aleut scholar Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have forcefully argued, the term has been flattened into a metaphor for a project of inclusion, or of an expansion of the discipline. This depoliticization of decolonization erases the claims of Indigenous groups and constitutes an act of violence, an act that Tuck and Yang have termed a settler move to innocence, an evasion that attempts to relieve settlers from feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land, power, or privilege.<sup>1</sup>

Further confusion arises from the conflation of decolonization with decoloniality, a term that stems from Aníbal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power and the repercussions of this discussion through the Modernity/Coloniality group.<sup>2</sup> While this group has focused on the coloniality of power as a transregional phenomenon that is constitutive of modernity itself, South American Indigenous scholars such as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui have pushed back against this group's particular focus on European colonization of the Americas as an erasure of the colonial acts committed by *criollos* against Indigenous populations.<sup>3</sup> The Spanish term *criollos*, in contrast to the term creole in English, came to signify folks born in the Americas of European descent, a qualifier that includes many of the scholars in the Modernity/Coloniality group.

It has been tempting to conflate these efforts with scholars arguing for similar approaches from other parts of the world. In fact, these groups have long been in conversation with each other: for instance, in the 1990s a Latin American group organized itself under the banner of Subaltern Studies, in an effort to incorporate South Asian insights to South American conditions.<sup>4</sup> Without attempting to summarize this

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2012): 10.

<sup>2</sup> Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," in *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1 (3): 533–580. I have reflected on the differentiation between these terms in the context of the American continent in "Plains and Pampa: Decolonizing 'America'" in *Harvard Design Magazine* (Winter 2021), 48–49.

<sup>3</sup> Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization" in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (Winter 2012), 95–109.

<sup>4</sup> For summaries of these conversations see Ileana Rodríguez (ed.), *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), and Gustavo Verdesio, ed., *Latin American Subaltern Studies Revisited* Special issue of *Dispositio/n* 25: 52 (2005).

intervention, ultimately the conversations revealed the distance between these regions and the ways in a similar approach yielded different results. More recently, a review by Arjun Appadurai weighed in Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh's discourse on decoloniality, rooted in South America, and what he describes as their cult of Indigeneity against Achille Mbembe's more future-facing position, stemming from Africa.<sup>5</sup> Mbembe's discourse on decolonization, Appadurai summarizes, is grounded on Africa and proposes a path to Afropolitanism and global emancipation. Thus Mbembe argues the masking of colonialism as a civilizing process has produced a global disenchantment whose violence affects all. Also approaching the problem of decolonization, political scientist Adom Getachew has connected Africa and the Caribbean to theorize the Black Atlantic and reconsider anticolonial nationalism.<sup>6</sup> From the Indigenous nations of the Americas to North American settlers and South American criollos, from the postcolonial discourse on the subaltern in Southern Asia to the Black Atlantic: these discourses span the globe. Rather than flatten them into a generalized discourse against oppression, theorizing the global compels us to keep track of their geographic and temporal specificities, their nuances and their differences.

Antiracism is another political approach that has been mobilized as part of projects of inclusion, and sometimes flattened into important but insufficient claims for more ethnically diverse scholars, practitioners, and students. Conflating these projects erases the politics of antiracism, understood in the words of Saidiya Hartman, as radical divestment in the project of whiteness, a redistribution of wealth and resources that ultimately requires abolition: the abolition of the carceral world and of capitalism and a remaking of the social order.<sup>7</sup> As historian Matthew Johnson has demonstrated, projects of racial inclusion that avoid disrupting institutional priorities tend to perpetuate inequality instead of eliminating it.<sup>8</sup> Antiracism in architectural history prompts us to reflect on how systemic racism has structured our built environment to produce inequality, and prompts us to think about reparations through various means, including material and economic reparations. In other words, antiracism has clearly stated stakes and demands that go beyond sporadic hires and look onto the transformation of the world.

This logic is echoed in the Combahee River Collective Statement, which argued in 1977 that Black feminists should use their position at the bottom to leap towards revolutionary

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<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Beyond Domination: The future and past of decolonization," in *The Nation* (9 March 2021), <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/achille-mbembe-walter-mignolo-catherine-walsh-decolonization/>. See also Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018) and Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (Columbia University Press, 2021)

<sup>6</sup> Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "On insurgent histories and the abolitionist imaginary" (interview as told to Catherine Damman," in *Artforum* (14 July 2020), <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/saidiya-hartman-83579>.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Johnson, *Undermining Racial Justice: How One University Embraced Inclusion and Inequality* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

action.<sup>9</sup> The fight for the liberation of those at the bottom should be everyone's fight, they argued, because their freedom necessitates the destruction of all systems of oppression. The efforts of other groups fighting for their rights further support the argument of countering systems of oppression from below. For instance, scholars of disability studies Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch have argued that designing spaces that are more accessible benefits multiple groups, not only those traditionally considered as supposedly "disabled."<sup>10</sup> They also open up pathways towards other archives and other histories beyond the self-imposed limits of the western canon, histories of labor, material histories, environmental histories and other human and non-human efforts that have participated in shaping the built environment. The work of Tithi Bhattacharya and Social Reproduction Theory points to other forms of labor involved in the construction of the built environment.<sup>11</sup> It is this opening towards, rather than a closing in, that I want to point to when I argue for a repositioning of a view from the South.

Thus the challenge in thinking through ideas that operate through decolonizing, anti-racist, and intersectional feminist thought is that of centering actors, landscapes, materials, and processes excluded by different forms of oppression, and above all, the political projects they involve. These projects might situate academics against their own institutions, and necessitate a political commitment beyond scholarly labor.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, it's important to understand that this is not equivalent to centering oppression itself, which ultimately contributes to perpetuate dominant groups. Excessive dwelling on the hegemonic nature of systems of oppression—usually waged by those whom these system privileges—tends to replicate and ultimately augment the power of these systems. Finally, coliberatory frameworks look to stand with, rather than speak for—otherwise they fall into extractive patterns that replicate the operations of empire in the very scholarship that claims to oppose it.<sup>13</sup> This requires the historians' reflection on their own position within the academic complex, their status as laborers in elite institutions, and the need to sometimes act through but against these institutions.<sup>14</sup>

A view from the South doesn't mean highlighting the lacks we may have personally experienced, but rather understanding the privileges we enjoy despite these experiences. It means prioritizing the voices, landscapes, and processes that lack these privileges. This repositioning includes also being aware of our own position, in my case,

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<sup>9</sup> "Combahee River Collective Statement," in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How we get free: Black feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> For a powerful call to action towards intersectional justice see Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, "Crip Technoscience Manifesto," in *Catalyst* Vol. 5, No. 1 (2019): 1–33.

<sup>11</sup> *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, Tithi Bhattacharya, ed. (Pluto Press: 2017).

<sup>12</sup> I refer here to the positions laid out by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney for the subversive intellectual, and by la paperson for the Third World University. See Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), and la paperson, *A Third University if Possible* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Indigenous Action Media, *Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex* <https://www.indigenousaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/>

<sup>14</sup> Olúfémi O. Táíwo, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference," in *The Philosopher* 108 (4), <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/essay-taiwo>.

within the US academic complex where I work and reside. Teaching from within the Western academic bubble, it is easy to lose track of the exclusions and oppressions that exist not only outside Europe and the US, but also all around us and in the very academic spaces in which we operate. Trying to understand how, from each of our own positions, we might learn to speak from or speak with the South is also understanding the limits and challenges of attempting this repositioning. It means understanding impossibility while at the same time turning towards it, making space for it and for those who might contribute to it. Finally, a position from the South means understanding that there are spaces we can't reach, and thus a decolonizing, antiracist, feminist approach to the history of architecture will necessarily always be collective, always uneven, and always incomplete, and yet a commitment to this position implies always reaching towards it.