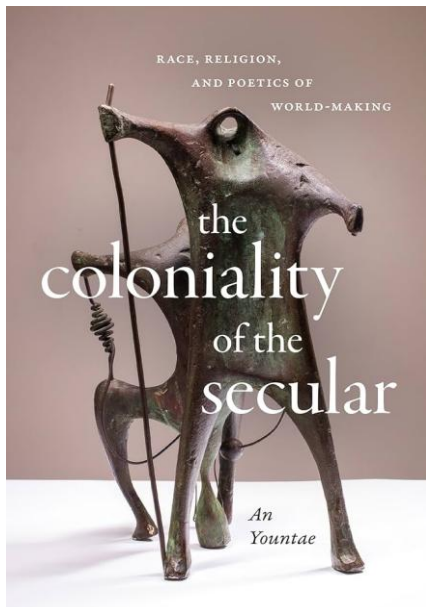


Secularity or the Underbelly of Coloniality: On *The Coloniality of the Secular: Race, Religion and the Poetics of World Making* by An Yountae
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The Coloniality of the Secular: Race, Religion and the Poetics of World Making.

An Yountae

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Secularity or the Underbelly of Coloniality: On *The Coloniality of the Secular: Race, Religion and the Poetics of World Making* by An Yountae

Review by Aya Chelloul

The Coloniality of the Secular: Race, Religion and the Poetics of World Making analyzes the sedimentary aspect of religion and its pervasive presence in culture in Latin America with a special focus on the Caribbean. By blurring the line between the secular and the religious/sacred that characterizes modernity, it posits religion as at once a power structure that authorizes violence as well as the instigator of counterhegemonic practices. Moreover, it gives a particular focus on how these practices bring about an “otherwise:” worldviews beyond a Eurocentric framework. To do so, the book examines Latin American texts written by anticolonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon and Édouard Glissant. Often qualified as secular by various decolonial theorists and scholars, An Yountae makes way with such a reception by revealing that the expressed visions of the works by the above-mentioned writers cannot be qualified as purely secular because the centrality of religion in their critique resignifies and reinvents the sacred in novel ways. The author ultimately argues for the necessity to attend to the underlying aesthetic, spiritual and affective sensibilities that form the intellectual heritage of the Americas, while Caribbean poetics articulate a rejection of the colonial-secular category of the human and the ontological system that presents the black population as lack.

The book has two principal aims. The first is to locate how religion is central to decolonial scholarship both in normative and critical, liberatory ways. It does so by revealing how secular epistemes suffused in decolonial theory neglect the central role of religion in modernity/coloniality, reinforcing a Eurocentric worldview. It also draws a sharp distinction between the binary of secularism/religion as a Eurocentric conceptual framework, and the lived experience of them. By foregrounding religion, the fundamental affective and spiritual aspects of decolonial thinking emerge. The sacred is seen to be the underlying aspect that brings about decolonial imaginations. The second aim of the book, by tapping into the historical experience of the Americas, particularly the Caribbean, emerges as a valuable site to study modern religion and the book in itself substantiates the value of decolonial/anticolonial thought in establishing a theory that caters for the conceptual frameworks that contend the secular-colonial foundations of European modernity. Anticolonial thought is here used as a tool to mend the tendency of decolonial theory to assume secularist categories in discussing indigenous and Afro-Caribbean intellectual traditions.

Yountae argues that religion was a constitutive element in establishing coloniality. Far from being dismissed as a private domain in the colonies, religion informed the basis on which the hierarchical difference between populations was discerned. In contrast with this, scientific racism was nothing but a rearticulation of those religious categories along the lines of reason. Furthermore, the categories of race and religion worked in tandem in maintaining colonial domination in the Americas since 1492. Such an argument is supported by Walter Mignolo and Sylvia Wynter’s theoretical writings: for Mignolo, European religious conflict informs racial hierarchy and colonial administration in the colonies, while for Sylvia Wynter illustrates how the enlightenment’s new concept of the human required a particular understanding of the colonial other used as disciplining norm with which the exploitation and dispossession of the natives was exercised. A sacred violence consequently emerged by basing itself on theological ideas like the original sin or the “untrue Christian.” However, the focus of the text is directed towards what is usually deemed as secular in order to excavate how religion is articulated as a

vital metaphysical realm that underpins coloniality. At the same time, the focus also attends to how these texts, in their critique of religion, end up reinventing a symbolic system, and eventually, recreating the self and the order in which they operate.

While Yountae situates his argument within the critical discussion of (post)secularism and political theology in *The Coloniality of the Secular*, he also adopts a decolonial turn in his discussion of religion, race and coloniality. When it comes to postsecularism, the argument moves beyond the simplistic assumption that secularism is an outcome of modernization and rationality. Rather, religion is still a pervasive phenomenon, a category that is made to be meaningful through opposition of the marginalized/colonized presumed irrationality to the rationality (secularism) of the West. As a modern category, religion additionally reflects the emergence of liberal secularism in the way it has rendered it a private category that is constantly regulated. In other words, Yountae admits that the colonial encounter is essential to the construction of the modern notion of religion and secularism plays a pivotal role in colonial administration as a tool to stifle colonial difference. Additionally, political theology excavates old theological Christian concepts that are operational in modern, secular political institutions in the European context. The political is inaugurated through sacred violence, a sovereignty previously theorized by Carl Schmitt. From the critical threads mentioned above, Yountae makes way for a larger discussion on how theology with its attendant concepts of race and secularism, shape modern-colonial order and its underlying political concepts. By doing so, he undermines the presumed neutrality of the secular, highlights the imposed nature of religion in the Caribbean, and unearths the sacred as a notion capable of bringing about a new world.

It is important to note that the sacred in Yountae's argument is not a replacement of religion. Rather, it is used as a concept that signals the unimaginable and unrealized ways of world-making. He claims that poetics, and the sacred it carries within, have the capacity to articulate a world beyond secular modernity. The term 'poetics' here signals Sylvia Wynter's theorization of Caribbean poetics and the 'imaginary.' Heavily influenced by Fanon, Wynter views that poetics extend beyond the realm of literary and artistic expression to encompass the creative and intellectual space that has been shaped by the Caribbean experience and its rich heritage. This view intimates a deep framework for understanding human existence and the self beyond the colonial construction of the colonized, where the imaginary arises as a collective cultural realm that fosters counternarratives that questions and goes beyond the Eurocentric humanism, all at the heart of coloniality. In this context, Yountae's emphasis on the geopolitical space of Latin America as Europe's other is grounded in the idea of exteriority that Enrique Dussel develops from Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. The promise of an unrealized and an unimaginable subverts the totality of rationality as it hints at the existence of possibilities beyond the grip of a Eurocentric, rational framework. Yountae takes note of the critiques waged at Dussel's radical exteriority, particularly for the concept's essentializing potential that neglects the constitutive role of Europe in Latin America, and in response, takes heed of both the role of coloniality and the contextualized response situated in the geopolitical space of Latin America.

To explore these themes, the book is divided into two sections. The first section comprises of chapter one and two and it explores the intersection between coloniality and religion as theorized by Latin American decolonial thought. The second section, comprising of chapters three, four and five, direct the discussion towards exploring the decolonial potentialities at the heart of Caribbean poetics, particularly in the works of Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, and Derek Walcott. Chapter one, "Modernity/Coloniality/Secularity: The Cartography of Struggle" situates decolonial interventions in religion that are seldom addressed, charting various locations of colonial secularity and parses the sites where anticolonial resistance emerges to showcase how religion, race (whiteness) and power interact. Notable critical interventions arise from Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Sylvia Wynter, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Maria Lugonès. In his foundational text "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America," Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power demonstrates that the mechanisms set forth by colonialism endure long after the process of decolonization,

particularly racial classification as a tool of social stratification and control. Walter Dignolo finds pertinence to the concept of the coloniality of power in the realm of knowledge production, seeing that exploitation is maintained through colonial knowledge's discursive formulations. Alongside its material effects, Dignolo demonstrates how coloniality is the underbelly of modernity (which was established the moment the Americas were "discovered") arguing that the concept of Man necessitated the existence of a racialized other to acquire its meaning. Furthermore, he showcases how theological ideas like 'purity of blood' has been translated into the rational, secular concept of race. Whiteness comes to the fore in the Western sense of self early on through the religious notion of "the enemy" that posits Jews as an internal threat and Muslims as external adversaries. For Dignolo, European religious conflict informs racial hierarchy and colonial administration in the colonies. Wynter similarly spots the theological undercurrents of coloniality by illustrating how the enlightenment's new concept of the human required a particular understanding of the colonial other and was used as a disciplining norm with which the exploitation and dispossession of the natives was exercised. These theoretical threads illustrate the role of religion in coloniality, despite the latter's proclaimed secularity.

Chapter two, "Crisis and Revolutionary Praxis: Philosophy and Theology of Liberation," focuses on Latin American intellectual history by exploring two movements: the philosophy of liberation and liberation theology. While the philosophy of liberation has been recognized as the driving force behind decolonial thought, the equally inspiring contribution of liberation theology has gone under the radar due to the proliferation of secular thought structure within decolonial theory. The contributions of José Carlos Mariátegui, Franz Hinkelammert and Enrique Dussel are highlighted as the hallmarks of decolonial thought with a special emphasis on their critical stance towards the deification of the capitalist system and its social relations and their reflection on religion as a potential ground for decolonial resistance. Additionally, the author examines the contributions of liberation theology in its critique of imperialism and the class structure it imposes; the particularity of this theology is its emphasis on the importance of rooting theological knowledge in its geopolitical context and emphasizing the role of praxis in generating knowledge.

Chapter three is on "Phenomenology of the Political: Fanon's Religion" and examines the relationship between secular and colonial knowledge vis-à-vis the colonized in Frantz Fanon two works *The Wretched of the Earth* and "On Violence." By digging into the complex relationship Fanon has with religion through his study of the phenomenology of the political, the chapter reveals how the critique of colonial modernity denounces the political theology of coloniality. In Yountae's reading, Fanon sees that the ontological division between the colonizer and colonized is sanctioned through the theological binary of good and evil – a Manichean theodicy also described by Lewis Gordon. This constitutes the underlying basis of colonial control that exceeds mere physical coercion. Nevertheless, the disposability of the black/colonized body within this theologically infused political set up brings about a logic of redemption which is founded on the idea that salvation requires sacrifice. This sacrifice of the colonized translates into their exclusion and oppression and the violence with which their lives is met is sanctified: it is the sacred, organizing principle of colonial society. Coloniality, however, obscures this sacredness under the guise of secularism by obscuring its influence on social and political life.

The fourth chapter of the book, "Phenomenology of Race: Poetics of Blackness," investigates the bearings of Fanon's phenomenology on racial embodiment. His concept of 'racial epidermal schema' moves beyond Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theorization of the body schema. The external imposition of racial meaning interrupts the black body from reaching a full awareness of itself and its movement in space and self-awareness is shaped by power relations and social norms that are impossible to escape. The violence with which the black body is met gnaws at the sense of faith that is fundamental, in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological critique, to the individual's sense of self. However, as Yountae argues, Fanon's thought is adamant on engaging in human relationships which are founded on mutual love and recognition. Fanon's awareness of the signification of his (black) body within the colonial imaginary cedes the way

for finding new directions that allow one to live and create among animosity and hostility. Yountae highlights the paradox that arises from the moment when secular humanism disavows western religion and metaphysics arguing that another sense of sacred arises as the antithesis of the sacred. So, in Yountae's view, when Fanon reexamines his blackness, he also reinvents religion by decolonizing the sacred.

Chapter five, "Poetics of World-Making: Creolizing the Sacred, Becoming Archipelago," moves towards a full analysis of Caribbean poetics. Yountae finds in Édouard Glissant's body of work, namely his reflections on the Middle Passage and the (post)plantation life, an important terrain to explore notions of becoming in relation to place, creolization, and relation. Glissant's poetics are situated within the Caribbean method which describes the Caribbean approach to knowledge and existence with emphasis on the creativity and resilience of its identity. This is a form of decolonial poetics that critiques the systematic, ritualized violence that dehumanizes and marginalizes Black and colonized peoples. Through Glissant's work, Yountae demonstrates how the notion of place is reinvented beyond the colonial, universalizing concept of territory. Place is a dynamic, relational process that, on the one hand, resists colonial definitions of land and belonging, while on the other hand, makes way for the violence of displacement and deracination that inaugurated life there. The abyss of the ocean that generated the loss is also the site of creation and becoming; the lonely rootlessness brought about by exile becomes wholeness realized through the relationality that is formed in acts of solidarity and connection. Within these parameters, creolization becomes the self's capacity to recreate and regenerate the world and its place within it from the fragments. Here, the sacred arises in the regenerative acts of world-making the creolized self performs, while new notions of sacredness provide a new center rooted in multiplicity, openness and continual transformation that radically undermine Western ideas of origin and purity. The decolonial undercurrents of Caribbean poetics call our attention to the importance of *l'imaginaire* or the imaginary in fostering new ways of understanding the world. Yountae, through Glissant, locates it in the active, dynamic relationship that allows for transformation between knowledge and existence, between the self and its engagement with the world, between thinking and being.

In *The Coloniality of the Secular*, Yountae, in attending to the decolonial potentialities of the texts he explored and their relation to religion and the sacred, reveals the omnipresence of the imaginary. The book provides a rich critical terrain to reconsider the relationship between coloniality, modernity, secularism and religion by providing an important contribution to the historicization of Latin American Liberation Theology, and a new, decolonial reading of Caribbean poetics. Through its skillful probing of secularism/religion in relation to coloniality/modernity, this volume is also a valuable reading for not only for those interested in the Caribbean region or in Latin America and the Americas with its rich intellectual heritage, but also for those dealing with issues concerning religion, race, and colonialism in other geopolitical contexts as well, as this book offers useful pointers to guide critical engagement with contemporary pragmatic concepts.