I am trying to explain the coloniality discourse (discourse) by looking at what I think are the three main themes: a racial world system, a matrix of power, and the *episteme* of modernity.

The discourse argues that colonialism was and continues to be more than the military conquest, political control, and exploitation of the resources, labor, and markets of the countries of the former empires. Colonialism also created a world system, according to the discourse, that did not end with de-colonization and the breakdown of the empires; it is still in place today, more total, but less visible. Post-colonial thought, from the point of view of the discourse, is at best naïve, and at worst, serves the interests of the system. The discourse refers to itself as a critical theory, and Anibal Quijones, a foundational thinker in the discourse, argues that a critique, historical, philosophical, political and social, is necessary to reveal this system in order to create the possibility of liberation. He calls this revised understanding of colonialism, coloniality, and the need to identify it and liberate from it, decoloniality.[[1]](#footnote-1) Coloniality is frequently referred to by Quijones and other thinkers in the discourse as the “dark-side of Modernity.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The discourse adopts the framework of Wallerstein’s world-systems theory.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nation-states are the dominant institutional actors in Wallerstein’s theory, and they act within the framework of core, semi-periphery, and periphery. The core nations dominate the system through political, economic and military means. This allows them to keep the semi-periphery and periphery in a state of subordination while the core countries exploit their resources, labor and markets. (As I remember, there can be some movement within the system.) The discourse accepts much of this, but argues that the system is primarily racial in both origin and structure. From the point of view of the discourse, the core nations, characterized as white European, dominate the system and guarantee its ongoing function to their benefit, and the benefit of their white citizenry. The semi-periphery and periphery are nation states whose populations are predominantly people of color and the on-going victims of the system. The discourse includes among the victims of the system, indigenous populations still living in the core nations, and immigrants and refugees who have migrated to the core nations, or from the periphery to the semi-periphery.

. The discourse argues that the world system is essentially racial, racial in origin, racial in structure, and justified by a racist ideology. This racial world system operates and is controlled by what Quijones calls the colonial matrix of power. The discourse’s critique of the matrix of power reveals the world system as a racially structured system of hierarchies, originating early in white Euro-history, and justified by the world view of modernity, understood as dualism, essentialism, rationality, epistemology and the nation-state.[[4]](#footnote-4) Racial differences, superiorities and inferiorities, are institutionalized and consolidated throughout the system. Nation-states, political ideologies, media, education, religion, especially the Catholic Church function to maintain this racially structured hierarchical system.

The capacity of the matrix to produce knowledge is the main means by which the institutions propagate, legitimate and justify the racialized system. Walter Mignolo, an influential thinker in the discourse, calls the system of knowledge, the *episteme* of modernity.[[5]](#footnote-5) The *episteme*, according to Mignolo, produces the knowledge that justifies the system of racial hierarchy, excludes alternative epistemologies and eliminates the possibility of other forms of knowledge. He also argues that the closed and monological nature of the *episteme* eliminates the possibility of legitimate critique from within the system. The discourse emphasizes in its critique of the *episteme* the significance of positivism. Positivism assumed that both nature and society could be studied empirically and through empirical studies the laws that govern both nature and society could be discovered. Once discovered humans could dominate the natural world, and shape and control the social world. The discourse argues that the *episteme’s* assumption and claim that there are categorical truths about the world, natural and social, led to the creation of the “truth” about race; that there are races, that these races exist as natural phenomena, that there are essential characteristics to each race, that these essential characteristics justify conclusions concerning racial superiority and inferiority, and that this knowledge about race has subsequently been used and continues to be used, to justify and legitimated the racially structured world system.

Beyond the above, the discourse argues that the *episteme* controls the subjectivities of both the victims of coloniality and their victimizers. The capacity of the matrix to control subjectivities is the means by which it keeps the system invisible. For example, immigrants, historically, have believed, and continue to believe, that they have made a choice to immigrate in search of a better life, not that they were victims of the colonial world system that forced them to flee their countries. Rather than the terms immigration or refugee, the discourse uses the term diaspora,[[6]](#footnote-6) the forced dislocation of peoples, when referring to immigrants and refugees. Another example of controlling subjectivity, has been the capacity of the *episteme* to control the self-understanding of the citizens of the settler colonial nation-states. From the point of view of the discourse, the citizens of these states understand their country and their presence, in so far as they reflect on it at all, as the result of natural forces, or, at least, of the inevitable outcomes of natural hierarchies, but not as the result of the conquest and occupation of the land of the other, who was exterminated or forced into uninhabitable lands. The term hegemony is used by some in the discourse to describe this capacity to control subjectivities. The term hegemonic mind is also used to describe a mind so dominated by the matrix of power that it cannot see its situation in the world as it relates to the world system, or cannot see the world from the point of view of the other.

There is, however, more to the discourse’s emphasis on the significance of the *episteme* of modernity and positivism in particular in relation to colonialism/coloniality and the need for critique. The following quote explains this.

"In the early 19th century, many Latin American countries secured independence from European colonial powers. In the wake of independence, the newly liberated peoples faced the challenge of forming stable, enduring nations out of the remnants of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. The predominant political concerns of that era included the organization and consolidation of the new nations, along with aspirations for social stability, national integration of largely diverse peoples. The overarching ambition in many nations was to achieve the same economic and social progress enjoyed by other nations in Europe and North America. In this context, the ideology of choice was a version of positivism. The positivist motto, “order and progress,” which graces the Brazilian flag, suggests why positivism was especially appealing in the context of nation building. Positivism’s emphasis on both empirical science and pragmatic solutions appeared to provide a practical foundation for attaining the diverse ends of the new nations. Indeed, positivism became so influential and widely accepted by intellectuals that it became the official state philosophy of several nations. It was even used to justify dictatorial regimes, as in the case of Mexico."[[7]](#footnote-7) (This, as we said, would take a lot of unpacking.)

According to the discourse, the first step in liberation from the world system is a critique which makes the system visible. The starting point of the critique cannot be from within the system, and the discourse identifies modernity with the system, and thinkers both modern and postmodern, as embedded in the *episteme* of modernity. One thinker in the Discourse makes this clear in relation to Foucault’s concept of power. He says that just because “Foucault comes later” does not mean that his thought is not embedded in the system. Not only must the critique of the world system be from outside the system, it must be “from the bottom up.” The discourse uses the term subaltern to identify those whose voices must shape the critique and ultimately the possibilities of liberation from the world system.[[8]](#footnote-8) According to Mignolo, the authentic voice needs to be able to separate itself from the *episteme* of modernity. Mignolo calls what is required *epistemic* disobedience-refusing the system and separating oneself from it by producing and/or affirming marginalized knowledges.[[9]](#footnote-9) He uses the term “de-linking” as the way in which one establishes this separation. And he also uses the term “re-exist” to explain the broad transformation that is the goal of this *epistemic* disobedience.[[10]](#footnote-10)

At this point, I have only a couple of comments.

The theoretical position of the discourse demands that it find the origin of the racial world system. The discourse cannot logically use a Marxist argument, and thinkers in the discourse even acknowledge that the world system was in place prior to the concept of race even emerging, and significantly before it became a justification for the system. The search for origin appears to have become a search for “whiteness,” and the search has led the discourse to the same place that white supremacists have gone, the Renaissance. But their search, like that of the white supremacists, ends in bad history. First, the category of “whiteness” and “blackness” were not defining or determining categories of the Renaissance or Greek culture (see Black Athena). In fact, the “whiteness” of both was a product of 18th and 19th century Euro-colonial historians intentionally trying to purify the Renaissance and Greek culture in order to recreate the history of Europe as a history of “whiteness.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

If one searches for the origin of the Euro-world system, one is much more likely find it, not in race, but in conquest, but earlier than expected. It would be in the first conquest of the emerging British Empire, Ireland, which became the first colony of the Empire, “upon which the sun never set.” The second conquest of origin was internal, and it was the conquest that created the white labor pool for the British colonies in the Americas, a diaspora. The conquest was the dispossession of the peasants of England by the state and the bourgeoisie of emerging global capitalism. The peasants were dispossessed by the Acts of Enclosure which forced them off their land, and into the city where they lived in squalor and labored in “dark Satanic mills,”[[12]](#footnote-12) or were put in prison for being poor, see Poor Laws. These peasants became the humanity, referred to as “waste,” that made up the population of indentured servitude. This was an early diaspora, the first indentured servants arrived in 1609, and made up 40% of the non-slave population in the Empire’s American colonies, in 1776 over 250,000. The death rate of the indentured servants who came during the early part of the seventeenth century was nearly 100%. The discourse dismisses this as a diaspora because they argue that the indentured servants freely chose to enter into contracts (by definition a voluntary agreement between parties) and had a limited time of servitude, after which they could exercise all the rights of a free colonist. In other words, the discourse argues that they benefited from colonialism. First of all, voluntary means that both sides freely agree to the contract and the stipulations within. Freely, has two criteria, free from coercion, and free to make another choice based on a viable option. Neither of these criteria were met with the contract for indentured servitude. The condition of the peasants was coercive, forced labor, life in squalor and early death, or poverty and death, or prison and death. And he or she had no other viable choice than to enter into a contract of indentured servitude.  
But there is even more to this, an historical analysis guided by human and ethical concern, something the discourse is demanding from the victimizers on behalf of the victims of coloniality, would examine the reality of indentured servitude. Once the indentured reached the colonies, if they did not die during the crossing, who was going to guarantee that their contractual “rights” were upheld? The courts, with judges who were land owners? The juries that were composed only of owners land and of human ‘waste’? The results were violations of contracts by the land owners, physical abuse, harsh working conditions, early death, and extended service justified by a variety of accusations claiming violations of the contract, disobedience a common violation. Children of indentured servants were forced to fulfill the contractual obligation if the father or mother died before they had fulfilled their contract. Women were highly valued for their labor, but most valued for their ability to produce a workforce for the holder of the contract, and were frequently abused physically and sexually, without recourse.

As for the indentured that served their time, and their options to take advantage of their new found freedom, that new found freedom involved the choice between poverty, subsistence level job, or moving west into the land of the “other,” because land was means and the land of the colonies was already ‘owned’ by the rich through large land grants. If the newly freed indentured wanted land, it meant having to move further into the land of the “other,” a forced diaspora which worked perfectly for the rich in the long, as they eventually took the land. See Bacon’s Rebellion, and a novel The Last of the Mohicans (Hawkeye in response to British officer’s question why the slaughtered family was here in the first place, “no place else to go.”)

Some Other Works

Maldonado Torres, Nelson. **The Coloniality of Being.**

Quijano, Anibal. **Coloniality of Power and the Power Matrix.**

Quijano, Anibal and Immanuel Wallerstein. **When Worlds Collide**

Wynter, Sylvia. **Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom**.

The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the Other and the Myth of Modernity.

<http://bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/ar/libros/dussel/1492in/1492in.html>

1. Quijones, Anibal. **Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America.** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The terms world system, coloniality, modernity, matrix of power are frequently used interchangeably by thinkers in the discourse. I am not using the matrix of power synonymously with world system. To me, the matrix of power suggests instruments of power that maintain and legitimate the system. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wallerstein, Immanuel. **World-Systems Theory: An Introduction** [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quijones. "Colonialism and Modernism/Rationality" [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mignolo, Walter. **Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought, and Decolonial Freedom.** [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The term diaspora and its conceptualization are central to understanding the critique of the discourse but also the possibilities of liberation from it. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There is quite a bit in this quote that needs to be “considered.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Subalterns is a term in Gramsci’s thought that refers to workers who have been excluded from the capitalist economic structure. It is a term frequently used by the Discourse, but also Marxists from India and southeast Asia. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mignolo, Walter. **Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option.** We will recognize both Nietzsche and especially Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy and History” in this idea of localized knowledges. And as you reminded me today Leotard. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Maldonado Torres’s work, **The Coloniality of Being** might be useful for understanding this transformation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Denise Eileen McCoskey, “Black Athena, White Power” in **Eidolon** for an analysis of the ways in which white classical scholars “white washed” Euro-history, and her argument that they continue to do it today. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Blake, William. **Dark Satanic Mills**. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)