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Critique as Coloniality: The Decolonial Challenge to Immanent Critique

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ABSTRACT

Frankfurt School methodology involves a lasting commitment to immanent critique. What distinguishes immanent critique from other forms of social criticism, scholars in this tradition argue, is that social practices are to be judged according to norms and potentials already contained within their objects. This article considers critical theory's relationship to coloniality by developing a three-part challenge to the practice of immanent critique, drawing on insights of decolonial philosophers Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Maria Lugones, and Oyèrónkẹ́'Oyèwùmí. Immanent critics, I conclude, risk being inattentive to constitutive exclusions, reinscribing asymmetrical burdens on certain critics, and unwittingly replaying a mechanism of domination familiar from colonialism in and through their preferred method of critique. Accordingly, I argue that immanent critics should attend to relations of power that govern the practice of critique itself and offer reasons for being more pluralistic about our methods of criticism.

1 | Introduction

Although decolonial thought has been influential in feminist philosophy, cultural studies, and many other humanistic and social science disciplines, it has not yet received its due from critical social theorists. This oversight is particularly concerning given decolonial thought's engagement with central preoccupations of critical theory itself, such as the way that forms of knowledge production can obscure relations of domination. Decolonial philosophers operate with a concept of coloniality, addressing the legacies of colonialism that extend beyond the bounds of formal emancipatory movements in Africa and Asia in the second half of the twentieth century. Instead, decolonial philosophy underscores how our forms of knowledge production as well as our critical practices can themselves be sites of domination (Quijano 2000, 540). In this article, I take up a decolonial perspective on a widely advocated method of social criticism today, namely, immanent critique.

According to many philosophers working in the legacy of the Frankfurt School, when we offer forms of social criticism, calling to mind the inadequate social institutions that dominate us, we should do so through a procedure called immanent critique (Finlayson 2014, 1144–1145; Honneth 2000, 3–11; Jaeggi 2009, 75; Stahl 2013, 534–535). What distinguishes immanent critique from external critique is that the social practices we criticize are judged according to norms, criteria, or potentials that are in some sense “immanent” to them. Put otherwise, the standards for critique are contained within the objects of criticism. In other words, immanent critique involves assessing social life according to the criteria that we can find within social life itself (in a more nuanced sense than drawing merely on inner inconsistencies as will become clearer in what follows), as opposed to making these evaluations by appeal to criteria imposed from the outside.

Forms of immanent critique are widely advocated today, whether explicitly or not (Celikates 2012; Diehl 2022; Honneth 2000;

Jaeggi 2009, 2018, 6; Neuhouser 2022). What's more, much recent work highlights the method of immanent critique as central to how critical social theory is distinguished from other approaches to social philosophy. Karen Ng, for instance, argues that questions of immanence get to "the very heart of critical theory itself" (Ng 2015, 393). Given immanent critique's centrality to the practice of critical theory today, this is an excellent place to focus our attention when grappling with the task of bringing decolonial theory to bear on extant critical practices.

Immanent critics, I will argue, have insufficiently reckoned with the insights of decolonial philosophers. Drawing on the work of Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Maria Lugones, and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyèwùmí reveals the ways that recent work on immanent critique fails to adequately attend to relations of power in the critical situation itself. Although, admittedly, immanent critique *can* be a generative method for social philosophy, I suggest that critical theorists should be more pluralistic about methods of critique.¹ So too should they sensitize themselves to the limits of immanent critique as method.

Critique, like other social practices, involves constitutive exclusions. Yet, immanent critique, when practiced in certain social conditions, risks naturalizing these very exclusions through the process of critique. Immanent critique also involves asymmetric burdens of critique when practiced by particular critics. What's more, as a blanket methodological prescription, immanent critique risks replaying certain modes of domination characteristic of coloniality itself. If we fail to incorporate insights of decolonial thought into our critical methodology, however, we risk unwittingly re-entrenching through our practices of critique the very relations that we ought to take up as objects of criticism.

2 | The Importance of Decolonial Theory

Engagement with decolonial theory is important, not least because of longstanding concerns that Frankfurt School Critical Theory has said surprisingly little about colonialism. Edward Said, for instance, in *Culture and Imperialism*, wonders how the Frankfurt School can offer such compelling "insights into the relationships between domination, modern society, and the opportunities for redemption through art as critique" while nonetheless remaining "stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire" (Said 1994, 278). Amy Allen argues that decades after Said, little has changed (Allen 2017, 2). Although attempts at inclusion have been made, this often happens by leaving central concepts of critical theory intact while adding new figures to the stock of philosophers we see as critical theorists or else introducing new contexts and concepts into critical theorizing (Allen 2017, 2). These efforts at inclusion are a needed corrective. Yet, as many critical theorists committed to decoloniality themselves insist, more is required. We need a more thoroughgoing reevaluation of critical theory's central concepts. To that end, this work aims to rework these concepts in a manner like Amy Allen's discussion of postcolonial critiques of "progress" in the context of Frankfurt School theorizing, or Elizabeth Povinelli and Glen Coulthard's discussion of the limits of "recognition" from the perspective of indigenous persons (Allen 2017; Coulthard 2014, 3; Povinelli 2002).

What's more, critical theorists should, by their own lights, be concerned with issues central to decolonial theorists. I take on board Nancy Fraser's understanding of critical theory, following Marx, as about "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age" (Fraser 1993, 113). Fraser's claim suggests that critical social theory is meant to be responsive to the particular social struggles that we encounter today. In other words, we are meant to develop our research program with a view toward "the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical, identification. The question it asks and the models it designs are informed by that identification and interest" (Fraser 1993, 113). Critical theory, then, is not meant to be neutral about oppositional social struggles such as those around decolonization. It continues its work precisely in aligning its research program and its conceptual framework through areas of political contestation. Today, struggles around decoloniality are significant. Here, I mean to claim that critical theory both ought to concern itself with the formal struggles for decolonization in the wake of World War II while also coming to terms with the legacies of colonization that continue beyond these more legal moves for emancipation. For one, struggles around coloniality are increasingly tied to struggles around climate justice, as evidenced by Vandana Shiva's detailing the eco-feminist Chipko movement's connection to particular knowledge frameworks (Shiva 1993).

The suggestion then is that critical theorists must think both about the particular political relations that characterized formal colonialism while also thinking about the "relations of power, and to conceptions of being and knowing" that are colonialism's legacy, what many decolonial theorists following Quijano call *coloniality* (Maldonado-Torres 2018, 119; Quijano 2000). Struggles around decoloniality are not merely about formal struggles for independence but also involve reevaluation of knowledge production and critical practices. Accordingly, if we see decolonial struggles as significant, critical social theory—by its own lights—needs an account of critical methodology that will allow the distinctive axes of coloniality to appear as a worthy object of critique. This opening up to the concerns of coloniality is required for us as critical theorists in the Frankfurt School tradition to remain "truly critical" (Allen 2017, 4). To be sure, there have been some notable attempts to bring Frankfurt School critical theory into conversation with decolonial thought, such as Rocio Zambrana's work on colonial debts, Linda Alcoff's work on Enrique Dussel, and Eduardo Mendieta's scholarship on Dussel in the context of globalization (Mendieta 2007; Alcoff 2021; Zambrana 2021). In spite of these works, however, many from within Frankfurt School critical theory still regularly draw on concepts—such as immanent critique—without bringing to bear the ways decoloniality bear on such concerns. What's more, much of the critical theory literature that does cite contemporary decolonial struggles misunderstands the movement's core claims.²

Moreover, decolonial theory's focus on coloniality of knowledge aligns with critical theory's own concern with self-implication. For canonical critical theorists like Horkheimer, what sets critical theory apart from traditional theory is self-reflexivity. For Horkheimer, remaining "self-aware" requires reflecting on our critical practices themselves (Horkheimer 1972, 206). Reflecting on our critical practices is a condition of adequacy of our method of critique itself. If critical theory sees itself as aiming

at dismantling structural forms of domination, the call to self-reflexivity requires us to ask whether our methods of critique themselves can yield forms of domination. These questions about coloniality—or the ways that our critical practices as well as modes of knowledge production connect to domination—are central to critical theorizing.

3 | What is Immanent Critique and Why is it Central to Critical Theory?

But what is immanent critique, and what motivates critical theorists to take it up at the exclusion of other modes of critique? A discussion of what distinguishes immanent critique from two other ways of approaching critique (external and internal) as well as the historical precursors of this method in Hegel and Marx points to the ways that immanent critique is meant to help us with a convincing mode of critique that does not posit a privileged position of the critic, while also allowing critique to retain its bite.

Immanent critique is a way of thinking about the form of critique itself. Very roughly, it involves evaluating social practices according to criteria that are in some suitable sense contained within (or that are immanent to) them (Becker 2020; Celikates 2006; Jaeggi 2009, 2018, 6; Stahl 2013).

Immanent critique, then, is distinguished from external forms of criticism because of issues of convincingness. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for instance, Hegel argues that we judge different forms of consciousness according to their “own internal criterion” (PhS §83) rather than appealing to some standards of criticism that are not shared. Here, Hegel is concerned with the issue of incommensurable standpoints. In particular, Hegel’s concern is how difficult it is to adjudicate disputes in such situations. Imagine we disagree about whether I have paid my taxes on time. Even if we do not share our conclusions, we nonetheless could have shared criteria we can use to settle our dispute. You might, for example, ask me copies of my tax return and agree that if I can produce the right document, that will settle the question. But in other cases, particularly when we have disputes about particular forms of life or about our social institutions, we may not find shared criteria on the basis of which we can make our judgments.

Take the following institutions that each have different self-understandings: a commercial publishing house, an activist newspaper, and a zine that publishes poetry. Each institution could have a particular set of norms (criteria) on the basis of which they operate. The commercial publishing house might focus on turning a profit on as many books as is possible. The activist newspaper might focus on circulating the most important political information. The zine might be focused on fostering a new aesthetic centered around linguistic play. Part of how we are to understand Hegel is that we cannot judge the commercial publishing house by the standard of the activist newspaper or the standards of the poetry zine. Telling the folks at the political newspaper that they should care more about linguistic play or turning a profit would be unpersuasive. Why should the folks at the political newspaper care? This form of critique is unconvincing because the criteria that are appealed to (linguistic play, say, or turning a profit) are not widely shared. As such, the critique would not have uptake, as the people at the

newspaper would “not necessarily have to recognize the validity of that criterion” (§83), which is used for critique. What Hegel suggests, then, is that drawing on external criticism, as in the example above, is unpersuasive as critique. Relying on external standards is also to position the critic as authoritative. In drawing on standards for critique that are not shared, the critic sets their standards (and the person who draws on them) apart as “in the know” in the process of rendering criticism. Instead, Hegel tells us we need a way of judging consciousness against its own criterion that leads to a “comparison of itself with itself” (§84).

This is all the more relevant for those writing in the wake of Hegel when it comes to social life. Given that we accept the facts of reasonable pluralism, for example, immanent critics argue that we can no longer appeal to shared criteria when setting out to diagnose social problems (Honneth 2000; Jaeggi 2018, ix–xi, 14). If we are to discuss issues like the funding of public art institutions, family leave policies, or appropriate retirement ages, that is, we disagree both about the first-order questions and the second-order questions about the criteria on the basis of which the first-order issues ought to be decided.³ This means that what critical theorists call external criticism is likely to lead to a stale mate. As Hegel puts it, “one bare assurance is worth as much as another” (§76).

Marx, too, offers us examples of immanent critique in practice; he also advocates judging according to immanent criteria explicitly in a text often cited by later generations of the Frankfurt School. In a letter to Arnold Ruge, for instance, he writes:

This does not mean that we shall confront the world with new doctrinaire principles and proclaim: Here is the truth, on your knees before it! It means that we shall develop for the world new principles from the existing principles of the world. We shall not say: Abandon your struggles, they are mere folly; let us provide you with true campaign-slogans. Instead, we shall simply show the world why it is struggling, and consciousness of this is a thing it must acquire whether it wishes or not. (Marx 1992, 208f)

The concern with convincingness that we find in Hegel and Marx is shared with later figures in the Frankfurt tradition, such as Jaeggi and Stahl who quote these passages of Marx in particular as a way of mobilizing support for immanent critique (Jaeggi 2018, 174; Stahl 2013, 533–535). What these scholars retain from Hegel and Marx, then, is that turning toward immanent critique can at once be more convincing and, at the same time, avoid a kind of authoritarianism that is involved in imposing critical standards from without.

Yet, although critical theorists reject external critique, they also want to avoid challenges of internal critique. Forms of internal criticism appeal to standards for critique within their objects of critique, but in a way that is distinct from how immanent critique operates. Both immanent and internal critique say that standards for critique should come from within the practices being criticized.

Internal critique takes up the idea that we as a community have failed to live up to our own ideals and norms (for a view of this kind, see Walzer 1993). We might criticize the United States, for example, for failing to live up to its own ideals of equality through vast wealth inequalities between citizens of different races, for example. Or, we might criticize a company's professed commitments to sustainability and its donations to climate change organizations when the same company manufactures plastic water bottles, for example. In so doing, we are holding institutions up to their self-professed standards. Internal criticism, that is, draws attention to inconsistencies between accepted norms (be sustainable, say) and practices (that are far from green). The critique works, then, by demonstrating discrepancies between the reality of our practices on the one hand and the ideals embodied in them on the other. The aim is transforming the practices—by, for example, making the company *truly* rather than merely apparently sustainable or requiring that the US reckon with its professed ideal of equality.

Yet, critical theorists often find internal critique not critical enough (Jaeggi 2018, 5). The end goal of this form of critique does not involve transformation of ideals (say, thinking beyond green capitalism). Internal critique's limits concern the ways it is unable to raise any normative claims that go beyond the particular self-understandings already in play. Moreover, internal critique does not, on this view, allow us to debate our social institutions and practices themselves.

Critical theorists, rejecting both internal and external criticism, advocate for immanent critique. Immanent critique, while like internal criticism, rejects an Archimedean point outside of social reality from which critique is offered. Yet, immanent critique looks beyond self-professed standards. Instead, immanent critique turns to our practices themselves, which are constituted by norms and normative potentials. These norms (or potentials) become the basis of justifying “demands for the change of both the actual practice and the explicitly accepted norms of the community” (Stahl 2013, 535). So rather than merely saying that a company that manufactures plastic water bottles should live up to its professed commitments to sustainability, we might ask about whether a company can consistently embody both its ideals of making a profit and simultaneously being truly sustainable at the same time. If these norms cannot be realized consistently, an immanent critic might suggest that attempts to realize sustainability in corporations “necessarily turn against their original purpose upon being realized” (Jaeggi 2009, 75).

Immanent critique is meant to be both more convincing and to account for the critic's position (unlike external critique), while also offering a way to offer a form of criticism that can retain its bite as contrasted with merely criticizing practices according to their explicit norms and standards.

The intellectual legacy of the Frankfurt School, as taken up by second and third generation critics, is distinguished by this attempt to find normative standards to ground critique (Allen 2017, 3; Honneth 1994, 64–66; Jaeggi 2018, 191; Stahl 2013, 39). This strategy involves immanent critique, what some scholars call the “guiding idea” of critical theory (Diehl 2022, 677). Not only do scholars see immanent critique as what sets Frankfurt School critical theory apart from other approaches to social philosophy,

but they often go so far as to characterize immanent critique as the exclusive and best method of social critique. Rahel Jaeggi, for example, argues that “the approach of immanent criticism is the *only* one that can solve the problem of establishing a critical standard” that is not external (imposing criteria from without) while at the same time remaining adequately normative (Jaeggi 2018, 174; emphasis mine).

Nonetheless, critical theorists in the Frankfurt School tradition overstep in speaking about immanent critique as the only method of critique. In doing so, immanent critics risk ignoring the insights of decolonial philosophers. We are now prepared for the three-part challenge I will mount to immanent critique that I will discuss under the rubric of constitutive exclusions, asymmetric burdens, and domination.

4 | First Challenge: Constitutive Exclusions in Practices of Social Critique

Immanent critique, I argue, obscures constitutive exclusions⁴ through the practices of critique itself. The aim of my first challenge, then, is to put the literature on immanent critique in dialogue with longstanding discussions about the racial exclusions of indigenous and racialized persons in critical contexts (Dussel 2013; Mbembe 2001). My motivation is to take seriously Dussel's claim that a decolonial philosophy “will ask itself always, first, who is situated in the Exteriority of the system, and in the system as alienated, oppressed” (Dussel 1989, 18). What this suggests, concretely, is that to think about critique of institutions according to their immanent norms is also to ask about what exclusions shape those practices themselves. More succinctly: Immanent critique means judging social institutions against normative criteria that in some sense inhere in the same. However, sometimes those very practices as well as their normative potentials are shaped constitutively, and not merely accidentally, by who is left out of such social institutions (or else situated asymmetrically within such practices, a point that I take up in my second challenge). My contention is that immanent critique, in recommending that we turn to the criteria or potentials that already exist within social institutions, risks naturalizing certain exclusions in critical praxis.

Imagine, for instance, that we are engaged in a collective discussion about how to think about addressing the historical past of a university that occupies land formerly inhabited by the Munsee Mohicans, an indigenous group that continues to this day. These people were collectively dispossessed of land. Immanent critique as a method would suggest that our way of approaching such issues would include a turn to the criteria that we find within our practices. We might be asked, when addressing land acknowledgments, to think about commitments to equality and intellectual debate, or when addressing the university, we might appeal to ideas about education. But sometimes, the very terms of such conversations as well as the practices of the university in question can themselves be constitutively defined by the exclusion of the Munsee Mohicans. More concretely, perhaps the university's educational practices are defined partly through their exclusion of indigenous forms of knowledge. The terms of the conversations around historic wrongs as well as reparations

may reinscribe ideas such as shared ownership of land at the same time that they attempt redress. Ideas such as shared ownership of land. But, on a Mohican worldview, we might find that ownership of land is itself rejected. In other words, sometimes both our practices (as well as the normative potentials that inhere in them) are not incidentally shaped by who is left out. The very criteria that appeal to—for example, norms of contemporary education or potentials that emerge from thinking about land rights and property, say—risk reinscribing the constitutive exclusions that were of a piece with dispossession. In other words, we cannot simply appeal to the operative norms here without attending to how these practices as well as their constitutive norms have been shaped by those who were not a part of the social institutions at issue.

Decolonial philosophers would draw out how one avenue for critique concerns the way that constitutive exclusions have affected our social practices as well as their norms. Reckoning with these exclusions is an important part of the critique at issue. In Dussel's words, we need to be sensitive to those who are "already excluded from participating in her corporeality with food, clothing, education, and in justice" as well as how some people are excluded "in argumentation" (Dussel 1989, 14). If immanent critique is the best form of critique for meta-critical reasons, as later generations of the Frankfurt School argue, we risk naturalizing these constitutive exclusions at play in questions of coloniality.

To be sure, some immanent critics may argue that normative potential for critique occurs even in practices like property ownership or university education. In turn, these potentials could be used as sources of critique. On this view, what is needed is not just a transformation of our practices but also the norms that make them up. Perhaps, for example, what's needed is not just applying the university's norms of equality in education but also transformation of the norms of the university so that higher education is more pluralistic and thereby inclusive of indigenous forms of knowledge that have traditionally been excluded from such forms of schooling. Or, perhaps we can address competing land claims in some way that does not reinscribe claims to property. Two complications follow from this move, however. For one, this reworking of immanent critique risks undercutting our motivations for accepting immanent critique in the first place. Immanent critique was meant to be preferable to external criticism because of convincingness. Yet, if immanent critics—in order to address cases like that of the university's historic exclusions of certain forms of knowledge and indigenous land claims—require participants in the university to come to see education expansively as including ways of knowing that were deliberately excluded from educational institutions, this will require the understanding of education to shift so much that one might wonder how immanent critique gets to continue to appeal to "convincingness". Second, transforming the ideals in social practices to address exclusions presumes that the exclusions in question are not central to the social practices being critiqued. The immanent critic here suggests that we can think about practices of land negotiation without seeing how frameworks of property and land rights are constitutive of these practices. This suggests that the social institution is constituted in part by its exclusion of Munsee Mohican worldviews.

5 | Second Challenge: Asymmetric Burdens in Practices of Critique

Despite its usefulness, the method of immanent critique faces a second challenge. Immanent critique can be inattentive to asymmetrical burdens placed on particular critics. Even if particular critics are included in social practices that are the subject of criticism, in other words, asymmetries condition participation in such practices.⁵ Not all people are situated equally within social practices, even if they are included. Practices, then, position different people differently. Both intersectional and decolonial feminists⁶ have long recognized this point. If immanent critics do not attend to the differently situated nature of people within such practices, we risk reinscribing asymmetrical burdens of critique.

In Maria Lugones's dialog with Elizabeth Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You," Lugones describes her participation in the US feminist movements of the 1980s. The article consists partly in a dialogue (written in a Hispana voice) addressed to Anglo women. In her discussion, Lugones points to issues of asymmetrical burdens that are placed on her as a feminist critic of color, burdens that are not faced by Anglos in the same movement. Addressing an imagined (Anglo) interlocutor, Lugones writes: "You are ill at ease in our world. You are ill at ease in our world in a very different way than we are ill at ease in yours" (Lugones et al. 1983, 575). Here, Lugones does not suggest that she has been excluded from 1980s US feminist movements. Instead, she argues that historically, Hispana women have been included, but their inclusion involved a kind of asymmetry: Hispanas were tasked with taking up the norms of a mostly white feminist movement, even when Hispana women were included. Taking on these terms of the practice placed different burdens on Hispana feminists than on, for example, Anglo feminists.⁷

Lugones explains:

We try to use it [your language] to communicate our world of experience. But since your language and your theories are inadequate in expressing our experiences, we only succeed in communicating our experience of exclusion. We cannot talk to you in our language because you do not understand it. So the brute facts that we understand your language and that the place where most theorizing about women is taking place is your place, both combine to require that we either use your language and distort our experience not just in the speaking about it, but in the living of it, or that we remain silent. (Lugones et al. 1983, 575)

Lugones's contention here is that when she attempts to operate by the norms of mostly white feminist groups, she faces a distinctive burden as a critic. This is a burden that people situated more centrally (Anglo women, in this case) do not face. In other words, since the criteria that are operative within the 1980s feminist groups she references are shaped by the experience of Anglo women, when Lugones takes up these criteria in order to offer forms of social critique, she finds the result to be inadequate for addressing her concerns. Lugones's point is one shared with

intersectional feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw (Collins 2020; Crenshaw 1989).

If we assume symmetry with respect to the criteria operative within social practices and suggest that critics appeal to these standards in the processes of critique, this puts disproportionate burdens on particular people. In Lugones's case, this issue concerns the Hispana women who were a part of feminist movements. In other cases, the terms of any additional burden will depend similarly on the standards being critiqued, as well as who is doing the critique.

Critiquing social institutions according to the norms immanent to the same is widely advocated by critics in the Frankfurt tradition. Yet, theorists in this tradition, I am arguing, have inadequately reckoned with the reality that this procedure for critique may place asymmetrical burdens on some critics who are well practiced at taking up the terms of given institutions but who find that doing so comes at a cost (either for themselves or for the scope of the critique that they are able to offer).

No doubt, critical theorists sometimes admit asymmetries that caused by empire. I do not mean to suggest otherwise. Rahel Jaeggi, for instance, argues—in a conversation with Nancy Fraser—that “we cannot and should not pretend to be ‘in the same boat’ with those whose perspectives and experiences have been neglected through the legacy of colonialism and imperialism” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2023, 186). Fraser, too, agrees about “the need for real debate on equal footing” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2023, 186).

Nonetheless, my contention is that discussing the existence of asymmetries of power—through reference to colonialism—has not yet extended to a reckoning with asymmetries in knowledge production. In particular, what's needed is theorizing asymmetry within the critical situation itself, as Lugones does in the above example.

To reiterate, the present challenge is not to say that immanent critique in general is never justified due to exclusions or asymmetries that occur in some situations. Exclusions and asymmetries may be part of social practices simpliciter. The issue, however, is that immanent critics argue (for meta-critical reasons) immanent critique is the best and *only* method for critique. Asymmetries and exclusions are not incorporated into the way immanent critics go about their practices of critique. There may, and I think there are, ways of incorporating asymmetries and exclusions into the method of critique itself—as Dussel's suggestion about critique from the perspective of the “victim” or the excluded or asymmetrically positioned bear out (Dussel 2013). I do not, for the purposes of this article, take up whether I think that we can retain a critique that is immanent in all cases while simultaneously incorporating asymmetries and exclusion into such theorizing.

I have argued that we need a decolonial critique of immanent critique. This is particularly true as immanent critique can replay exclusions and asymmetries in its preferred account of critique. Certain norms and practices are shaped by who is not allowed to be part of a practice. And immanent critique can yield asymmetrical burdens on particular critics depending on who is

doing the critiquing and what the practice is that is being judged on the basis of its own norms and standards.

6 | Replaying Relations of Domination in Critique Itself

We are now well placed to turn to the final part of my challenge to immanent critique, a claim about colonial patterns of domination. As decolonial philosophers have long argued, certain patterns of domination (coloniality) work not only through exploitation and expropriation but also through the hegemony of particular frameworks for critique. Decolonial philosophers have long attended to the ways that in setting the terms of how we are to critique particular institutions, we risk in turn reinscribing the very colonial relations that we set out to criticize (Mignolo 2008; Oyèwùmí 1997; Quijano 2000).

My contention here is that colonial patterns of domination sometimes work through constraining the terms on the basis of which we are asked to critique a social practice. Immanent critics, in recommending that the only way to offer social criticism involves turning to criteria within such practices, risk replaying these same patterns of domination.

Oyèrónkẹ́'Oyèwùmí, the Nigerian scholar of gender, makes a related point in *The Invention of Women*. Oyèwùmí first set out to write about gender in a Yorùbá community but realized some of the categories in use in scholarship, even in the African context, emerged from the West. In particular, the idea of “woman”—what Oyèwùmí writes is a “category that is foundational to many feminist conversations ... simply didn't exist in Yorùbáland prior to sustained contact with the West” (Oyèwùmí 1997, ix). What Oyèwùmí attends to is how histories of colonization impacted not only resource extraction but also the very terms of critique in the African context. In particular, Oyèwùmí draws attention to how, even in African studies, terms of critique are affected by the way that academic life is part of global relations of power, where “foundational questions that inform research are generated in the West” at the same time that “theories and concepts are generated from Western experiences” (Oyèwùmí 1997, 22). This is true even when the academic research in question happens in African studies. Yet, if we insist on immanent critique, we may require that a social institution (e.g., the gender system today, say in Yorùbáland) be critiqued according to norms or potentials in play in the institution today. But in so doing, we may insist on the use of European frameworks for knowledge, part of the very object of critique for someone like Oyèwùmí. This idea—namely, that part of the violence of colonization involves constraining the appropriate terms of critique—is one we find elsewhere too. Ashis Nandy, the Indian political philosopher, makes a related argument in his book on the psychology of colonialism, *The Intimate Enemy*. “The ultimate violence” colonialism perpetrates on its victims is that it creates a context where “the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter” (Nandy 1998, 3).

For Oyèwùmí and for Nandy, then, coloniality consists in setting the terms for viable critique. The former colonial subject is told that they need to take up colonial frameworks of knowledge

or their critique will not be rendered appropriate. The scholar of gender in Yorùbáland, for instance, takes up categories like male and female. But the norms that are used to contest a Eurocentric perspective on issues of gender were themselves the products of colonization. Would Oyèwùmí have been required to take up these immanent criteria in the process of critical work. In some sense, Oyèwùmí would reinscribe the colonial system and its patterns of domination through this very act. This takes place even as Oyèwùmí intends to offer critique. That is, if domination occurs through a colonial form of knowledge production, critics who appeal to the standards that inhere in colonial frameworks as the only viable method for critique re-entrench coloniality at the same time that they attempt to resist colonial domination.

Again, I do not contest that sometimes we have strategic reasons to operate in this way. We might point, for instance, to Wendy Brown's claim that sometimes our practices of critique themselves reinscribe the very the categories of domination, as with identity politics, while refusing to concede that such dynamics tell against these forms of critique themselves (Brown 1995). Nonetheless, immanent critics in the later generations of the Frankfurt School fail to acknowledge the costs that are a part of their forms of critique in their meta-critical arguments about the nature of critique itself.

In other words, at least sometimes, to use the terms of a social institution (in this case, the colonial system's terms or standards) as the criterion by which we should assess those practices as immanent critique requires is to reinscribe the colonial system's mode of domination. Although there may be trade-offs in so doing, later generations of Frankfurt School critical theorists have inadequately reckoned with such concerns in their blanket advocacy for immanent critique as the best method for criticizing social and political institutions.

7 | Conclusion

Critical theorists working in the Frankfurt School tradition advocate for immanent critique, seeing it as preferable to both internal and external forms of criticism. In the process, they argue that we should critique social institutions and practices on their own terms, or according to criteria that inhere in the very practices under critique. But, as I have been suggesting, in spite of the usefulness of such moves, we would do well to better attend to the risks inherent in championing immanent critique as the best and *only* method of critique.

Decolonial philosophy draws our attention to three ways that critique is bound up with coloniality: through exclusion, asymmetry, and the replaying of forms of domination associated with colonial relations themselves. Put punchily, women of color in the feminist movement and people involved in decolonial struggles are already, in their day-to-day life, well practiced at taking up the criteria that are a part of the institutions that they set out to critique. This holds even when the institutions position subjects asymmetrically or exclude them altogether. Immanent critics risk simply advocating for more of the same, in the process reinscribing the patterns of dominance at the same time as we attempt to contest them.

Despite my interest and commitment to critical theory and my sense of the usefulness of immanent critique in a number of cases, I have been arguing that where critical theorists go wrong is in failing to avail themselves of the plurality of critical methods. Critical theorists in the decolonial tradition have pointed us toward possible futures, offering critique in some cases from the standpoint of the victims who are excluded or situated asymmetrically in every social institution or practice (Dussel 2013). To do so is our best hope as critics of remaining truly critical.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Although the scope of this article focuses on coloniality, related points might be made about Frankfurt School critical theory's connection to other forms of critical theorizing (e.g., Foucauldian critique).
- ² To take an example, in *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*, Fraser cites an indigenous movement focused on the Quecha expression "sumak kawsay" that promotes coexistence between human beings and non-human nature as part of an effort to promote "a form of life that 'modern' in the sense of being gender-egalitarian and democratic" (Fraser and Jaeggi 2023, 188). Yet, for most decolonial activists and theorists, part of the work of decolonization is also to find correctives to thinking about modernity as "democratic," say, or "gender egalitarian," in the ways that are taken for granted in Fraser's comments. See, for example: Maldonado-Torres (2018, 112).
- ³ Here, there is a connection between motivations for critical theorists working in the wake of Hegel and the epistemology literature on disagreement. See Kelly (2005) and Elga (2007).
- ⁴ Jose Medina, for instance, traces the constitutive exclusions involved in critical theory, particularly in regard to Behabib's reference to the category of citizens even while theorizing statelessness (Medina 2020).
- ⁵ Some might see constitutive exclusions and asymmetry as falling under one umbrella set of considerations—Jose Medina, for instance, speaks about certain categories of people who are both within social institutions and are nonetheless internally excluded, as for instance, indigenous people who are not left out of the category of citizen but are confined to reservations or the curtailment of rights of incarcerated people who are incorporated into the category of rights-bearers in some ways while being deprived of, for example, voting rights (Medina 2020).
- ⁶ One might also wonder about calling Lugones an intersectional feminist given her critical remarks about, for example, intersectionality in Lugones (2014), but I am sympathetic to reconstructions of Lugones's work that we find that suggest more compatibility here than we may otherwise suspect (Velez 2019).
- ⁷ For more on the question of burdens that follow from critique, see, for instance: Tessman (2005).

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