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Central American migrants walk to the U.S.-Mexico border crossing April 29 in Tijuana, where they presented themselves for asylum. (CNS/David Maung)



by Alex Mikulich

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As U.S. Americans rightly protest the Trump administration's policy of breaking up families detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, both progressives and conservatives seem to forget how the United States created the conditions for Latin American migrations. This enduring amnesia feeds the historical myth of U.S. exceptionalism and innocence.

We will continue to fail to address the current crisis until we contend with the U.S. legacy of military, economic and political domination of the Americas for two centuries. The question is not whether Latin American peoples will become the demographic majority in the U.S. The forces of white supremacy and nationalism that vaulted Trump to the White House cannot stop this ongoing demographic shift.

The deeper problem is whether and how people of faith address the legacy of U.S. militarism, colonialism and neoliberal economic policies that have unleashed death-dealing havoc on vulnerable populations throughout the Americas.

How do we decolonize our entire way of being in North America? How do we decolonize historical assumptions that run deep in the heart and soul of U.S. culture?

These are tricky questions because we tend not to think of the U.S. as a colonial power even though our country is a white settler nation that maintains more than 300 reservations within its borders. We tend not to question the ways coloniality shapes how we think, act and view the world.

In his synthetic study of Western modernity, scholar Walter Mignolo invites us to question U.S. and Western assumptions of modernity, namely, that it is only a relentless achievement of progress, development, modernization and democracy. U.S. Americans are constantly taught to forget the histories of colonialism and slavery, what Mignolo terms the "darker side of Western modernity."

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This insight into how coloniality corrupts human knowing and being (by assuming Western ways of knowing and being are inherently superior and innocent) is a "duh!" statement for indigenous peoples throughout the Americas. Pause for a moment to think about the assumptions U.S. Americans make about the organization of space and time. We tend to forget how Christian and European conquest of land and genocide of indigenous peoples forms the inception of all of the "Americas."

The problem of the oppressive side of U.S. coloniality in the Americas precedes and runs far deeper than the Trump administration. The legacy of Manifest Destiny in the Americas is one of repeated military interventions squashing democratic will and human rights in favor of right-wing dictatorships supporting U.S. corporate interests for nearly two centuries.

Journalist Juan Gonzalez recounts this legacy in the 2012 film "Harvest of Empire," based on his book of the same name. Gonzalez recalls the U.S. intervention in Puerto Rico in 1901 that led to the military registration of 236,000 Puerto Ricans, including 80,000 who served in World War I.



Central American migrants sleep inside a Catholic church serving as a temporary shelter April 18 in Tlaquepaque, Mexico. (CNS/Reuters/Edgard Garrido)

We forget the CIA-led military coup in Guatemala in 1954 that led to the genocide of the Mayans; we forget the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and the intervention in Dominican Republic in 1965. CIA training and support for Salvadoran death squads in the 1970s and 1980s include the murders of Archbishop Oscar Romero and two Maryknoll sisters, an Ursuline sister and a lay Maryknoll missioner, and the massacre at El Mozote.

Too many U.S. citizens conveniently ignore the wisdom of the Mexican saying: "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us." We forget that the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah and Texas were all previously inhabited by First American and Mexican peoples long before they were taken over by white U.S. settlers. We forget that the creation of Texas was part of a U.S. effort to expand slavery at a time when the Mexican government had abolished it.

The North American Free Trade and the Central American Free Trade agreements undergird neoliberal economic policies that sustain economic elites at the expense of local farmers and workers in Central America and Mexico, the most vulnerable populations who are being pushed to migrate north to better opportunities.

And rarely do we address how our own appetite for drugs fuels the drug trade and associated violence in Mexico.

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We will not contend with histories of migrations in the Americas until we, U.S. Americans, contend with our enduring role in legacies of slavery and colonialism. Unlearning white supremacy and the assumptions of colonialism that shape us individually and collectively is a lifelong work that is constitutive of retrieving the nonviolent Gospel.

An open process of unlearning white supremacy and coloniality begins by questioning the most basic assumptions we live by in the midst of U.S. empire.

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