

BOOK REVIEWS

Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). ISBN: 978-0-8223-7177-9

Practices of Decoloniality: Between Love and Anger

One of the intended aims of the 'On Decoloniality' series published by Duke University Press, as stated by the editors, Catherine E. Walsh and Walter Mignolo, is to create and illuminate 'pluriversal and interspersal paths, that disturb the totality from which the universal and the global are most often perceived'.¹ This does not amount to a rejection of western thought, which is also part of the pluriversal, but a disavowal of the western construction of universality. It stands as a search for a respectful non-competitive coexistence of multiple, reciprocal recognitions among different intellectual traditions and geopolitical struggles from below, emerging from different parts of the world, in addition to South America, Eastern Europe, Asia and the 'south in the north'. It requires the deployment of energies and forces towards affirmative, and not merely defensive, actions.

On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis, jointly authored by Mignolo and Walsh, is the first offering in the series. Structurally, the book is divided into two parts, each written by one of the editors, while the concluding section 'After-word(s)' takes the form of a conversation between the two authors. The book is an invitation to interrogate our beliefs, understandings and our readings of the world through a process of unlearning. Drawing on Paulo Freire's pedagogical approach, the authors describe their joint work as one of 'two engaged intellectuals still learning to unlearn in order to relearn'.²

Despite the declaration by the authors that the series is not dedicated to Latin American studies, *On Decoloniality* is embedded in the history of the struggles of South and Central America during the 1980s and 1990s. *On Decoloniality* draws on the shared work of the Proyecto M/C (Modernidad/Colonialidad), a critical thinking collective that originated in South America in the late 90s, that challenges western epistemology by criticising its rhetoric of modernity and engages in non-academic political and social activities. What is striking about the book is the clarity with which the known history and its hidden shadow are put in relation to one another, highlighting their mutual correlations and consequences. The invention of America and the genocides of other civilisations, the massive slave trade and the appropriation of

1 W. D. Mignolo and C. E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

2 *Ibid.*, 245.

lands, defined a new pattern of labour management in Europe and non-European countries; this shaped the emergence of the colonial economy, coloniality of knowledge, and the subjectivities of the conqueror and the conquered. Walsh and Mignolo underline the parallel between the radical shift in the Atlantic commercial circuit and the European Renaissance, stressing the different phases in which coloniality organises and raises itself, the common thread between civilisation, modernisation and 'globalisation' as the culmination of a process that began with the "invention of America(s)" and colonial/modern Euro-centered capitalism as the new global power.³ The book shows how decolonial theory and the evolution of politics and social participation from below in the constitution of the South American society, nurture each other reciprocally.

As remarked by sociologist and humanist thinker, Aníbal Quijano, one of the members of Proyecto M/C and its main source of inspiration, decoloniality cannot be treated as an academic discipline; it is not a concept born in the academe, but one that emerged from the struggles of people who feel the oppression of coloniality. If Foucault's concept of biopolitics, the Marxist surplus value and the unconscious of Freud originate from Europe, the colonial matrix of power is a theoretical concept created in the South American Andes as 'the result of the encounter between academic and public spheres'.⁴ Consistent with this attitude Walsh insists on presenting decolonisation as an active thinking and doing that denies the western epistemic division between theory and praxis. 'People and movements who live in the colonial difference not only act', Walsh writes, 'but also produce knowledge, and construct theory'.⁵ The first part of the book offers us numerous examples of practices of 'decolonization by doing': from the ability of the Zapatista movement to 'infect' Marxist theories through indigenous cosmologies,⁶ to the influence of the indigenous Andean movements on the debate on plurinationality and interculturality during the drafting of the new Constitution of Bolivia in 2009. It is important here to underline how the whole process of defining interculturality is diametrically opposed to the functional use of multiculturalism by the World Bank as part of the imperialistic economic and geopolitical strategies of the nineties and still adopted by western cultural diplomacy and industry in recent times. And as a concrete expression of her own commitment against what Argentine philosopher María Lugones defines as 'coloniality of gender',⁷ Walsh carefully presents us with the work of a vast range of indigenous and black feminist thinkers, such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Gloria Anzaldúa, Vanessa Fonseca, Corinne Kumar and Betty Ruth Lozano. In a world where intellectual production is still strongly affected by patriarchy, as a demonstration of the power structure over race and gender through which coloniality is perpetuated, it is invigorating to have access to such a vast array of female intellectuals.

3 Ibid., 181.

4 Ibid., 142.

5 Ibid., 28.

6 W. D. Mignolo, 'The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution: Its Historical, Ethical, and Political Consequences', *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center), 25, 3 (Utopian Thinking), 2002, 245-275.

7 M. Lugones, 'Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System', *Hypatia*, 22, 1, 2007, 186-209.

In speaking of decolonisation, we often run the risk of falling into confusing and frustrating theoretical discourses that obscure what this project really means. It is worth clarifying then what is being referred to when the expressions, descolonisation/decolonisation, decoloniality/coloniality and ‘the colonial matrix of power’ are used. Walsh and Mignolo’s book states important ontological differences between ‘decolonisation’ and ‘decoloniality’. While decolonisation is linked to Anglo-Saxon postcolonial theory and refers to nation-state formation, decoloniality is linked to South American decolonial theory and refers to the need to free people from the colonial matrix of power that holds on the three layers of coloniality: power, knowledge and being. As suggested by Catherine Walsh,⁸ the term decolonisation (without the letter s) would therefore mark a clear distinction between decolonial theories, elaborated by the Latin American group Proyecto M/C, and the historical idea of postcolonial theories.⁹ While decolonisation aims at nation-state formation, decoloniality focuses on epistemic reconstruction, ‘because an effective decolonization of life will be possible only through hermeneutic liberation.’¹⁰ But epistemic reconstruction requires altering the terms, and not only the content, of the conversation.

Such a clarification is helpful in understanding the disenchanting process of decolonising institutions – such as universities and museums – that, committed to delinking from westernisation, often dispute the control and management of power without questioning its very foundations.¹¹ Decoloniality, on the contrary, proposes to subvert the unquestionable learning and aesthetic order of these institutions by thinking in and from, and not about, the praxis of living. In this regard, the book speaks directly to the South African Fallist movements that called for a meaningful decolonisation of curricula to include black intellectuals and thinkers, as well as female voices, and the right to a system of education that embraces African native languages. The movement represented a call for the decolonisation of knowledge from the African continent and, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, a contemporary African Renaissance and fight to complete an incomplete decolonisation/decoloniality.¹² The movement’s difficulties in achieving a common understanding of decolonisation practices, however, sheds light on the multiple layers of reflections and debates regarding the complexity of the building of decolonial projects. Drawing attention to the dynamics of gender, the feminists and LGBT members of the movement defined intersectionality as a common element to their struggles, but also denounced clashes over what the cis-hetero-patriarchy male component of the movement had unilaterally defined as ‘priority practices.’¹³ As the Trans Collective states, ‘solidarity cannot

8 C. Walsh, *Interculturalidad, estado, sociedad: luchas (de)coloniales de nuestra época* (Quito: Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar/ Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2009), 254.

9 This distinction (with or without s) is missed in the translation from Spanish to English. *Descolonización* (in Spanish) is translated into decolonisation; *decolonización* (in Spanish) is translated into decoloniality.

10 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 166.

11 *Ibid.*, 125.

12 S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning Over a New Leaf* (London: Routledge, 2020), 87, 137, 172.

13 See K. Ramaru, ‘Black Feminist Reflections on the Rhodes Must Fall Movement at UCT’, in *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, (London: Zed Books, 2018), 147-158; S. Ndelu, S. Dlakavu and B. Boswell, ‘Womxn’s and non-binary activists’ contribution to the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall student movements: 2015 and 2016’, *Agenda*, 31, 3-4, 2017, 1-4.

be centralised around a single rallying point because that could never do justice to the complexity and multiplicity of experiences of oppression under white supremacist colonialism. Rather, solidarity is to be found in a kind of radical empathy, an understanding of intersectionality that implies that this pain is political, but other pain, unknown pain, is valid and political too.¹⁴ These experiences show how deeply the coloniality of power acts, and how difficult it is to unhinge it.

Embracing these complexities, the book stresses the fundamental importance of decolonising knowledge and being, questioning the foundations of western epistemology and ontology, but it does not propose one solution or a 'unique decolonial project'. 'Each one is responsible for his/her own decolonial process as a praxis of living.'¹⁵ Decoloniality then is a pathway to several projects of liberation, some of which forego their classification as 'decolonial'. It implies border thinking, decolonial delinking and '*decolonial love*' enacted by '*dignified anger*' that embraces the conflict and permits us to work together on the definition of something new. The word '*love*' in this respect carries a different meaning from that given by the Christian and neo-liberal discourse. It does not refer to a peaceful world of encounters but to a fatiguing process of learning, and a painful, and joyful, deconstruction through the agency of these encounters.

According to this framework the decolonial project works around two movements: (1) the affirmation of different epistemological and ontological options, and (2) the acceptance that this plurality of options can coexist in a collaborative but also conflicting form, and the urgency to find an equilibrium that permits these conflicts to work together. It is upon the acceptance of differences that the founding element of epistemic disobedience rests, as an objection to the 'logic of non-contradiction' and 'the semantic of binary opposition' of modernity, integral to the European need to hierarchise differences (differences that come to designate the human and the less than human, the nonhuman), and to support the universality of patriarchy and the detachment of the human from nature. Against this, 'the logic of decolonial thinking is grounded on cosmologies of complementary dualities (and-and) rather than dichotomies or contradictory (or-either) as the condition for the pluriverse'.¹⁶ The explication of what indigenous Andean people understand as politics can help us to frame how these conflicts can work together. According to Ailton Krenak, the organisation of indigenous daily life requires a constant search for a balance between nature and people, between the forest and the people who live in it. It is this constant quest for balance that indigenous peoples understand as 'politics'. Considering the forest as a living being, they believe that, as they do with the forest, they must find a form of coexistence with the white man (as 'the other'). This coexistence does not deny the conflict but requires mediation as the subsistence of the plurality of worlds.

14 TransCollective, 'Giving Content to Decolonisation: The Trans Collective in South Africa', *Bubblegum*, 2015.

15 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 117.

16 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 161.

The very existence of all worlds, the possibility of the continuity of plurality, diversity and succession,¹⁷ depends on this ‘politics.’

This pluriversalist vision of decoloniality echoes Édouard Glissant’s right of opacity as an ‘exultant divergence of humanities’, and his conclusion that ‘thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality.’¹⁸ It also calls to mind Audre Lorde’s black feminism and intersectionality, highlighting the substantial contribution of indigenous and black feminist thinkers in the book – ‘without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our difference, nor a pathetic pretence that these differences do not exist.’¹⁹ This shift requires the adoption of *border thinking*, ‘not between discipline but past the discipline’, and hence it is not only geopolitical, but also racial, sexual and generational.

While border thinking dialogues with Dussel’s concept of transmodernity,²⁰ Walsh links the concept to Gloria Anzaldúa’s decolonial cracks, ‘a space of thinking-doing [...] a space to be occupied to perceive something from multiples angles.’²¹ It represents a starting point of becoming ‘decolonial or dewestern subjects’²² where shifting identities, border crossings and hybridism can be strategies deployed in the praxis of decolonisation. These ‘border crossings’ also relate to multilingualism and bilingualism, as the power of making decolonial thoughts through the experience of translation, which is not just a mere translation of words, but a transference of being from one language to another, and in this way commuting between worlds.²³

Decolonial thinking has been the object of many criticisms, and leading the charge among the voices from South America are the Bolivian feminist sociologist, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui,²⁴ the Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel, and the Colombian philosopher, Santiago Castro-Gómez. Beyond the three, *Crítica de la Razón Neocolonial*, published by CLACSO,²⁵ brings together some critical voices from the formulation of the Theory of Dependence, to the latest contributions on decolonial theory by leading scholars. Some critics, contained in the book, argue against the decolonial adherence to relativism and its dissent from positivism; others object to decolonial critics of Marxism, with an emphasis on the contradiction between capital and nature. Another notable example is the book *Piel blanca, máscaras negras. Crítica de la razón decolonial* (2020), put together by Gaya Makaran and Pierre Gaussens. The book received an insightfully review in English by Benjamin Davis.²⁶ It is beyond the scope of this reflection to dwell on the many criticisms raised in the book, but it might be worthwhile to ponder, albeit briefly, on what is here called

17 P. Cesarino, ‘Entrevista com Ailton Krenak, As Alianças Afetivas’, *Bienal São Paulo. Incerteza Viva. Dias de estudo* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016), 169–188.

18 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

19 A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2007), 112.

20 E. Dussel, *Ética de la Liberación: En La Edad de la Globalización y de la Exclusión* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2009), n. 106, 82.

21 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 250.

22 *Ibid.*, 207.

23 A. Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb: Writings on Postcolonialism*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 129.

24 S. R. Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa: On Decolonising Practices and Discourses* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 95–109.

25 *Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales* (The Latin American Council of Social Sciences).

26 B. P. Davis, ‘Decolonial Depths and Expanses: Responding to Critics of Dussel, Mignolo, and Grosfoguel’, *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*, 12, 1, 2021, 20–39.

the questionable ‘decolonial construction of the other, and the assumption of a “pure” Other, one somehow outside of the mediations of globalization.’²⁷ As has already been stated, border thinking considers the Other closer to Glissant’s ‘vision of difference as an assembler of the “dissimilars”’²⁸ – a multitude of individuals – instead of the construction of the other forged in opposition and Manichaeism. The assumption of a preconceived idea of ‘pre-colonial purity’, beyond denying indigenous people’s membership in the contemporary world of ‘capitalist sin’, it also denies them their own self representation²⁹ and it re-creates a binary akin to the one pointed to by Said: the division between the rational and progressive West and the irrational and primitive Orient.³⁰

The discussion contained in *Piel blanca, máscaras negras. Crítica de la razón decolonial* puts one in mind of Anthony Mangeon’s observation regarding ‘how the internal polarisation, for or against, into the field of postcolonial studies, explains the gradual shift to a new paradigm: that of decolonial thought.’³¹ This legacy of internal polarisation, it seems to me, is reflected in the critical discussions on decolonial thinking. In place of rigorous intellectual debate, one picks up hints of personal animosity. The criticism here is different from, say, Lugones’ critic of Quijano’s coloniality of power with regards to gender and intersectionality that, on the contrary, may represent an example of academic practice attempting to balance an internal existing conflict. It is important also to note that most of these debates refer to a limited number of male scholars, when decolonial thinking is the result of multiples voices and, as Walsh clearly shows in the first part of the book, many of them are female voices. Perhaps, it reveals ‘the darker side of academia’ as the expression of a competitive rather than collaborative space. I concur with Walsh when she states, ‘I am not interested in perpetuating these debates, critique, and competition.’³² Decoloniality attempts to create communalities of respect and listening, cooperation and care able to confront the dismantling of the social fabric that promotes competition, where academia, one of the main institutional places of knowledge-making, is adept at fostering. It underscores the importance of relationships and empathy. Likewise, the use of the autobiographical by the authors of *On Decoloniality* points to the importance of a pedagogical practice intended to break the division between mind and body, and the confirmation of knowledge as the result of processes of becoming.

Decoloniality questions the western modern understanding of the process of knowledge production. While daily life practices of indigenous communities do not satisfy the western epistemological parameters, the book offers numerous institutes that recognise them as forms of knowledge and foreground a pluriversal worldview and concrete alternatives to western universalism. Examples of these are the

27 Ibid., p.27.

28 M. Diawara, ‘Édouard Glissant’s Worldmentality: An Introduction to One World in Relation’, *South, Issue #6, [Documenta14 #1]*, <https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/>.

29 L. Burocco, ‘Reflections on the Future and Past of Decolonisation: Africa and Latin America’, *Third Text*, 2021

30 E. Said, *Orientalismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 2013).

31 S. B. Diagne and J-L. Amselle, *In Search of Africa(s): Universalism and Decolonial Thought*, (Cambridge: (Polity Press, 2020), xi.

32 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 100.

Amawtay Wasi (House of Wisdom), Ecuador's Intercultural University (disactivated), the Intercultural University of Indigenous Nationalities and People of Ecuador; the Abya Yalean network of Indigenous Universities; the Afro-Andean Document and Archival Project; the Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes run by the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST); the Andean Project for Peasant Technologies (PRATEC), led since 1986 by academics in collaboration with Indigenous and peasant communities; and the doctoral program in Latin America (Inter)Cultural Studies at the Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar in Ecuador founded by Walsh in 1992.³³

Decoloniality's critique does not solely engage with the past but also with the future, and its tools and insights are relevant to explore phenomena that, on the face of it, are not related directly to colonialism. The current trust and optimism placed in new technologies and AI, for instance, seems to me to represent the changing face of coloniality, overcoming even the human, who appears reduced to a secondary tool of the gear. As a contemporary framework for colonialism, it reminds one of the Italian futurist movement of the early twentieth century, and its blind faith in progress, which at the time was represented by industrialisation, speed and, from the second half of the 20th century, the outsized expectations that the information society³⁴ has placed in the potential of the internet.

The book raises a few reflections on the Boaventura de Sousa Santos-concepts of *Epistemicide* and the theoretical framework of the *Anthropocene* that may find some of the readers discordant. Boaventura's concept of *Epistemicide*,³⁵ the murder of others' knowledges which involves the destruction of the social practices and the disqualification of the social agents as the condition to establish European modernity, appears to be invalidated by the insurgency of indigenous thinking and doing through the Americas, as widely proved by the numerous references, especially in the first part of the book. Rather than *Epistemicide*, the book points out the affirmative biopower of indigenous epistemologies and invites the reader to engage in confronting the Christian Europeans epistemic totalitarianism in the making of the modern/colonial world order.

According to Mignolo there is little novelty in the Anthropocene that seems to draw on thoughts and concerns that have already been in circulation among the First Nations of the Americas for a very long time. While Gaia seems to be discovered by the contemporary Anthropocene intellectual debate, the most ancient warnings coming from indigenous *xamās* (shamans) regarding *Pacha Mama* (the name used by South American indigenous people to refer to the 'Mother Heart') were never properly heard.³⁶ Again, it is a question of listening. Rather the Anthropocene seems to embody the need for a framework to locate Man3, the post-human. As referring

33 For a broader understanding of how Andean indigenous and Afro-descendant intellectuals and movements understand epistemic production as a key component of their political projects, see C. Walsh, "Other" Knowledges, "Other" Critiques: Reflections on the Politics and Practices of Philosophy and Decoloniality in the "Other" America, *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 2012.

34 M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2010).

35 B. de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: justice against epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 240.

36 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 185.

to Sylvia Winter's work and her invention of the western Man as, Man1, the rational political subject separated from God resulting from the secularisation promoted by the Renaissance; followed by Man2, the liberal *homo economicus* produced by the economic pattern of the Enlightenment. In this regards Man3 seems to be functional to the postmodern enclosed conceptualisation of human and humanity, and the consequent post-humanity, maintaining a trajectory of cumulative evolution (or de-evolution).

While the book strongly affirms the need for delinking from western epistemology, it also expresses an equally strong invitation to engage in collaborative work. As Naidoo and Gamedze state, 'where there is an understood political urgency to the pedagogical process, one's orientation to each other, because we need each other, is potentially one of generosity rather than the fierceness and cold of academic critique. Which is not to say that there is no criticality: a form of criticality is built into dialogue, as is creativity.'³⁷

Reading the book from the situated perspective of South Africa opens one up to different levels of engagement. It recalls the praxis of the South African student movement and how it stands in contrast to the monolithic and superior view of academic knowledge to achieve cognitive justice. As bell hooks remarks, 'seriousness is considered an essential element of the [western] knowledge process.'³⁸ According to this vision, practices of daily life struggle seem not to satisfy the level of authority required by the parameters of Western knowledge. To reject this position, they must instead be brought into the debate about decolonisation and the definition of contemporary theories from the South. Multilingualism, and its relation to border thinking, as claimed by the South African student movement with regards to African languages, offers a rich approach to decolonisation, and it represents a daily praxis for most of South African students raised in at least two languages.

Laura Burocco

University Institute of Lisbon

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7767-4941>

37 A. Gamedze and L-A. Naidoo, 'The mustfall mo(ve)ments and Publica[c]tion: Reflections on collective knowledge production in South Africa', in *The University and Social Justice* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 204.

38 b. hooks, *Ensinando a Transgredir* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes Editora, 2017), 16, 194.