

# The Thinker

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON

## Decoloniality/Decolonization in the Twenty First Century: What, Why, Where, Whom, What For?

EDITORS

Walter D. Mignolo and

Sabelo J. Ndlovu Gastheni

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The University of Johannesburg acquired *The Thinker* in April 2019 from Dr Essop Pahad. Over the last decade, *The Thinker* has gained a reputation as a journal that explores Pan-African issues across fields and times. Ronit Frenkel, as the incoming editor, plans on maintaining the pan-African scope of the journal while increasing its coverage into fields such as books, art, literature and popular cultures. *The Thinker* is a 'hybrid' journal, publishing both journalistic pieces with more academic articles and contributors can now opt to have their submissions peer reviewed. We welcome Africa-centred articles from diverse perspectives, in order to enrich both knowledge of the continent and of issues impacting the continent.



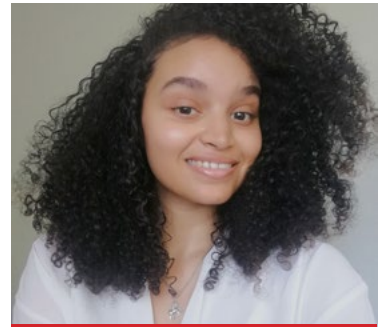
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Tamia Phiri

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(2022): 14-23; and “Knowledge Hegemonies and Autonomous Knowledge”, *Third World Quarterly* (published online: 04 Oct 2022). His areas of interest are social theory, religion and reform, the sociology of Islam, intra- and inter-religious dialogue, and the study of Eurocentrism.

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# FOREWORD



## Decoloniality/Decolonization in the Twenty First Century: What, Why, Where, Whom, What For?

Image: Pedro Lasch, Global Indianization/Indianización Global, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

By Walter D. Mignolo, Duke University, the U.S.A, and Sabelo J. Ndlovu Gastheni, University of Calgary, Canada.

**W**e would like to share with you, in the mood of introductory remarks on this special issue, some of the points we made in the letter we sent inviting contributions. We would like to share with you some of the key issues underscored in the letter, so that you can become a participant reader reflecting on your own take on colonialism/coloniality as well as decolonization/decoloniality. It's an invitation engage your own reflections of what is or would have been your take when reading the contribution to this volume, if you feel like expressing your own perspective.

The vogue and popularity of decolonization/decoloniality have grown exponentially in the recent past, reaching a vast spectrum from the academic disciplines, including the professional schools (law, design, computer), to the institutional spectrum of universities, museums, art schools, media schools and journalism.

Since “decolonization” sprang in the public sphere and state politics, during the Cold War, the decolonial debate has a fertile ground today in international relations, domestic state politics and political economy, still dominated by Western vocabulary and its assumed universality. However, we, in the planet, are witnessing and experiencing the end of the era dominated by narratives and

arguments based on abstract universals in the realm of knowledge and intersubjective relations and a unipolar world order in the realms of international relation.

The era of abstract universals is closing, and the era of concrete pluriversality and international multipolarity is opening. Narratives and arguments advancing the decolonial perspective (call it decolonial turn, decolonial option) in all areas of our (in the planet) lived experience are more necessary than ever. The reality is that coloniality it is not over; it is all over. Consequently, decoloniality is not just an academic but a political and existential question. The revival (re-emergence, re-existence) of the Indigenous knowing and understanding, ethical and political, around the world has been increasing and heard beyond their communal existence. Their re-emergence in all praxis of living is increasingly breaking up the apparent homogeneity of Western knowledge and praxis of living.

Recently the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission), organized a couple of conferences on decolonizing Russia (Commission on Security 2022). The title was “Decoloring Russia. A Moral and Strategic Imperative.” We would avoid comments when reading that the European Commission is proposing to decolonize Russia but would like to underscore the two imperatives, moral and strategic. Strategic is obvious. It was the geopolitical design of the US. To control Eurasia, since the early nineties. The moral imperative is the necessary rhetoric to justify the continuation of Western coloniality. It is argued in this respect that the decolonization of Russia is necessary for peace. Whatever decolonizing means for the author making such a claim, it is overlooking that for making peace, the decolonization of NATO is also equally necessary (Stepha 2024).

This is one among several reasons for the necessity and urgency to review and debate the meaning, scope, ethics, and politics of decolonization/decoloniality. Most likely, the U.S. Helsinki Commission by decolonization means “regime change.” Which is one example that “decolonization” came to mean the destitution of what I do not like by something that is contrary to the universal truth that is held by those who request the decolonization of Russia. If that is the case, then there would be no difference between

decolonization, Christian conversion, European liberal civilizing mission, U.S. liberal modernization and development missions, the neoliberal market democracy and a/the homogenous global order.

Moreover, the recent events in Niger and Gabon have put on the table telling signs of the change of era we in the planet are undergoing, and clear signs that Western abstract universals lost their meaning. However, to say that the military coup, with overwhelming popular support, is a threat to democracy means to support the persistence of French coloniality, without colonial settlers, and to support the presence of the U.S. military bases in Africa. Leaving aside the canonical debate on the illegality of a military coup that deposed a president democratically elected, we shall decolonially inquire on the meaning of democracy when the term is activated to maintain French coloniality and U.S. military bases in Africa to warrant national security. Both are clear examples that the end of colonization did not mean the end of coloniality, that Western abstract universals are falling out of place and the responses today are on the one hand decolonization in the public sphere and de-westernization in inter-state relations.

However, it will not be exactly appropriate to say that Niger’s and Gabon’s military uprising were acts of decolonization, even if they could be seen as a continuation of decolonization during the Cold War. Only that we are no longer in the Cold War, and the legacies of the Bandung Conference (1955) could be seen as both, the seeds of decolonization and the seeds of de-westernization. Decolonization, within the context of the Cold War, resulted in the establishment of nation-states governed by indigenous populations. It was de-westernization in that it was a state project followed up by the independence of Singapore and the change of direction Deng Xiaoping introduced in the government and the history of China.

## II

The first motivation of this special issue was the assumption that coloniality is far from over, it is all over, to borrow a felicitous sentence from a Divinity School graduate student at Duke University. Hence, if coloniality is not over, so must be decoloniality. With this premise in mind our first move was to invite scholars/intellecutuals/activists from the

spread of the planet, as wide as we could reach. We have considered also participants based in the former Third World, today the Global South, as well as those who migrated from the Third World to the First, as well as those who have moved from the Second World (or Poor North) (Tlostanova 2011). Secondly, we invited participants to set aside an academic expectation for “papers” or “studies”, but to provide “reflections” that are not so much about what is coloniality out there and what decoloniality shall be. Rather, to explore where and how coloniality affects them, impinges on their lives and what, therefore, decoloniality means to them.

The calls for decolonization/decoloniality in the 21st century have taken the world by storm in its critique of existing knowledge and praxes of living as well as its animation of hopes and visions of the change of era. We are no longer living in the era of the Cold War when decolonization had a clear destination: to send the settlers home and to create national states governed by the indigenous or native population. It was a splendor and a misery. The splendor was getting the settlers out of the territory. The miseries were to found nation-states without calling into question the political theory, the political economy and the world order that maintained the colonial nation-states dependent on the international global order established after the Treaty of Westphalia, 1648, to resolve European problems. The nation-states did not emerge in Europe after sending the colonial settler’s home, but from an emerging ethno-bourgeoisie and the political and economic control managed by the monarchies and the church. The ascending ethno-class took over the civilizing mission and the colonial expansion of Europe in Asia and Africa.

The Americas, the Caribbean and South/Central America is another story grounded in the Renaissance, not in the Enlightenment. The second period of the European Renaissance goes from 1500 to 1650. The Treaty of Westphalia is the emblematic closing of the Renaissance and the opening of the Enlightenment. But still, within the same era, the era of Westernization of the world, or of what Carl Schmitt called “the second *nomos* of the earth.” The “third *nomos*” or the change of era was marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union (Schmitt, [1955], 2003, 351-355; Mignolo, 2021, 483-530). From 1990 to today, the era that opened was announced as “the end of history”

when, in fact, it was the “beginning of a new history or a new era.” All that to underscore that a) decolonization/decoloniality during the Cold War was a project framed within the Westernization of the planet or the second *nomos* of the earth; b) decolonization/decoloniality after 1990, has to confront the re-Westernization of the world that erupted with the Washington Consensus and the neoliberal convictions that from then on it was Westernization all the way down, without barrier and without obstacle. In 2025 it is clear to many that it was not the case.

### III

Two pivotal global events demand our attention: first, the rationale articulated by the Israeli state for its military offensive in October 2023, which labeled the actions of Hamas as terrorism and invoked the right to self-defense. The second event was the Russian special operation in Ukraine or invasion in Western vocabulary. Yet, for Palestinians, October 2023 was a chapter in an ongoing struggle against a settler-colonial project that began in 1948 with the establishment of Israel—an act facilitated by British imperialism and the emerging global dominance of the United States. The language and urgency of decolonization are inescapable here, as Palestinians continue to live under occupation, denied statehood and self-determination, and subjected to systematic dispossession and violence with the support of powerful Western states (Khalidi 2024).

It is crucial to recall that 1948 is not only the year of Israel’s founding but also the onset of apartheid in South Africa, which remained in place until 1994. Today, Israel’s policies—its military occupation, expanding settlements, and the siege of Gaza—are widely regarded by international human rights organizations as violations of international law and, in some analyses, as forms of apartheid. Israel’s actions are sustained by unwavering military and economic support from the United States, even as an increasing number of states, including some within the European Union, publicly denounce the ongoing violence. However, these condemnations are rarely matched by meaningful consequences or policy shifts.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has seen formal accusations of war crimes: Benjamin

Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister, faces charges presented by South Africa, while Russian President Vladimir Putin stands accused by Ukraine. These cases lay bare the double standards in the application of international law and the rhetoric of Western media and governments. Selective outrage and inconsistent support for human rights not only undermine the credibility of the so-called rules-based international order but also perpetuate cycles of domination, oppression, disavowal and, as a consequence, conflicts.

There is a persistent pattern: while the U.S. and the EU often position themselves as defenders of democracy and the rule of law, their support for Israel continues even in the face of grave and well-documented abuses. Expressions of solidarity with Palestinians are often suppressed, especially in the U.S., where pro-Palestinian activism can be met with legal and social reprisals. Meanwhile, only cautious, belated statements of support for a Palestinian state emerge from European leaders, revealing both the limits of Western solidarity and the power structures that maintain the efforts to manage the colonial matrix of power. Israel continues with the unconditional military and economic support of the U.S., despite the increasing number of states condemning the genocide, including growing dissent within the U.S., but without effective consequences, so far.

The situation in Ukraine is more complex as it is, on the one hand, an inter-State conflict, involving NATO, the EU, the U.S. and Russia. As in any conflict, the interpretation depends on the assumptions (assumptions are always non-rational) from where you start. In Ukraine, the Western official states and NATO assumptions is that the invasion was *unprovoked*. The Russian and the BRICS countries assume that the Russian special operation was *provoked* by a neoliberal design since 1900 to expand NATO to the East. These designs have been explained by Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Strategic Imperatives* (1997). Given the confusion about the invocation of decolonization in the provoked/unprovoked Ukrainian conflict, and the notorious bias of the EU and the U.S. mainstream media, it is useful to quote the first paragraph of Chapter 2, titled "The Eurasian Chessboard", where the author outlines the role of Ukraine-America geostrategic imperatives

For America, the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia. For half a millennium, world affairs were dominated by Eurasian powers and peoples who fought with one another for regional domination and reached out for global power. Now a non-Eurasian power is preeminent in Eurasia—and America's global primacy is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained.

(Brzezinski, 1997, 30).

On the following page he quotes Samuel Huntington (1993): "A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder, and less democracy and economic growth, than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country in shaping global affairs." (cited in Brzezinski, 1997, 31). At Harvard, a political scientist can voice such assertions with institutional support, regardless of how speculative they might sound. One needs to only glance at the World Population Review (2025) to weigh the bias of these claims.

It's also crucial to note that the Ukrainian people themselves were not directly involved in the decisions behind the so-called unprovoked or provoked war; rather, it was the Ukrainian State that acted. If decolonization is to be invoked, it should address inter-state (often mistakenly called national) relations—meaning the Ukrainian State, NATO and its member states, and Russia should be engaged. In this context, the Ukrainian people have become hostages to their State's active choices, not merely passive victims. This conflict, then, can be better understood as a clash between "primacy" or re-Westernization and the "disobedience" that energizes state-led de-westernization.

These two events—the situations in Israel/Palestine and Ukraine/Russia—highlight the ongoing transformation of coloniality, often masked or justified by the language of Western modernity and the defense of Western values. The West certainly has the right to uphold its values, but it does not have the authority to deny other civilizations the right to defend their own. In Ukraine's case, those who claim that the invasion was unprovoked often call for a ceasefire and for Ukraine's national interests to be secured (Ivakhiv 2022, 2023). Conversely, those who believe that the conflict was provoked

see Russia's national security as paramount, given NATO's expansion toward its borders. From this perspective, the root cause of the war lies in NATO's actions, with each side presenting its arguments through official statements and media coverage. Russia and Ukraine both assert their right to national security: Russia sees itself as threatened by NATO, while Ukraine feels threatened by Russia. In the case of Israel, those supporting Israel's right to self-defense often ignore that Palestinians also have the right to defend themselves after decades of settler colonialism.

Both events are connected to the mutation of Westernization into re-westernization (refreshing so to speak Western strategies of leadership and domination managed by the US, EU, NATO, G7). However, the unipolar global designs as sole manager of the colonial matrix of power provoked the emergence of de-westernizing States responses (China, Russia, Iran, BRICS). Ukraine is the site of confrontation between two projects disputing the management of the colonial matrix of power. Israel is a Western post (properly the West here means to the West of Jerusalem). From the perspective of Beijing, West Asia, with a focus in Iran, is a key location in the triangulation with China and Russia in preventing the march of Westernization towards Eurasia.

In these explosive circumstances of planetary resonance, what could the decolonial tasks and roles be? The dramatic turnaround of the context and situation in which decolonization operated and decoloniality was thought out during the Cold War demands serious and judicious reflections and elucidations on where decolonization/decoloniality could and should be operative. The goal of sending the settler home and founding nation-states governed by the natives or indigenous peoples doesn't seem to be a desirable goal at this point. Not because there are still a stateless population, which they are all over (the Palestinian is a case in point) but because the nation-state is more of a problem than a solution.

The public sphere—encompassing universities, schools, museums, journalism, social media, and all institutions that influence and shape subjectivities and social relationships—is where decoloniality finds its urgency. There is no doubt that both individual and collective perspectives are shaped

by inter-state events such as those previously discussed. While decoloniality may have little direct impact on inter-state relations, except to powerful conceptual apparatus to unveil the colonial matrix of power under international law and its constant violation, its (ours) intervention(s) in the public sphere remains both necessary and timely. It is important to recognize that decoloniality is one option among many, and those who participate in or support it often view their engagement as a priority. Ultimately, the imperative lies in our actions, not solely in how we undertake them.

These are among the reasons we invite reflections grounded in the local histories and personal experiences sensing modernity and coloniality. Let us pause briefly to clarify the relational meaning within three pairs of concepts:

- Modernity serves as the abstract horizon, while modernizations represent its concrete implementations across various times, places, and local histories.
- Coloniality is the abstract horizon, with colonializations as its practical enactments in different periods, regions, and historical contexts.
- Decoloniality stands as the abstract horizon, whereas decolonizations are the realizations of its principles in diverse times, locations, and local histories.

Decoloniality could be conceived as a “turn” or as an “option”. As a turn, it means that decoloniality is a change of direction, but it also means that it is the decolonial turn, that decoloniality has arrived. It could be assumed also as an “option”. Meaning that we leave options: (there is nothing else but the options populating the semiosphere, a concept borrowed from Jurij Lotman, which refers to the universe of signs shaping our cultural lived experience next to the lived experience of our organism in the biosphere) options of faith (generally called religions), options of ideas (generally called ideologies), options of knowledge (generally called disciplines). In both senses of the term decoloniality, turn or option, the sphere of knowing and understanding is operative. Knowledge and understanding guides our doing, while our doing guides our thinking.

Readers will find in this issue a wide spectrum of reflections, extending from South Africa and Malaysia/Singapore to Russia/Scandinavia, Haiti,

South America, South Asia, the U.S., and Europe. Decoloniality, alongside the diverse range of decolonial tasks within the public sphere, offers both a powerful analytical lens and an ethical foundation for everyday practice. It has often been remarked that the transformation of worlds—plural—depends on the willingness of their inhabitants to change themselves. Yet, the process of transformation rarely unfolds according to our expectations, as myriad options coexist: some advocate for change, while others strive to preserve the status quo.

The decolonial option operates in one semiotic domain within the broader semiosphere. Our bio-semiotic corporality demands ongoing reflections: on why do we do what we do, when, where, with what purpose, to the benefit of whom, and in relation to what? This volume does not claim to resolve these questions, but rather a potential beginning of conversations.

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# Thinking against Coloniality from the Malay World: A Personal Reflection

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## Abstract

My thinking against coloniality began from the earliest days of my childhood when I was in elementary school in Singapore. This started in 1968, the year after my family moved from Malaysia to Singapore. My father, Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007) was a University of Amsterdam-trained sociologist who was to found the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Singapore in 1967, now the National University of Singapore (see Alatas 2024).

My father's writing against colonial knowledge production, his aversion to the slavish imitation of Eurocentric scholarship by the formerly colonised, and his creative approach to scholarship had greatly influenced my own thinking. But, it was not merely my reading of his works that impacted me. Probably of more importance were the thousands of hours of discussion during and after dinner, conversations that my mother had participated in with much drive and encouragement, on topics related to colonialism and intellectual combat that impressed upon me the desirability of a life of scholarship.

## Introduction

My intellectual upbringing began from the earliest days of my childhood when I was in primary school in Singapore. I started my school education in 1968, the year after my family moved from Malaysia to

Singapore. My father, Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007) was a University of Amsterdam-trained sociologist who was to found the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Singapore, now the National University of Singapore, in 1967 (see

Alatas 2024). Four years later, he published the first critical study on the founder of British colonial Singapore, Thomas Stamford Raffles. In this book, *Thomas Stamford Raffles: Schemer or Reformer*, Alatas argued for a more critical appraisal of Raffles (Alatas 1971). I was to join the Department of Sociology (now the Department of Sociology and Anthropology) at the same university in 1992. As Singapore commemorated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Raffles' "founding" of Singapore in 2019, I had arranged for the re-edition of Alatas' book on Raffles in order to contribute to a more critical discussion on the man as an agent of colonial interests as well as on the broader meaning of colonialism.

In most countries of the world, the idea of putting up an enthusiastic imperialist as the founder of a newly independent state and giving him an iconic status would have been considered "outrageous and most definitely reactionary" (*The Straits Times* 1983). K. G. Tregonning (1923–2015), formerly Raffles Professor of History at the University of Singapore, said the following: "Modern Singapore began in 1819. Nothing that occurred on the island prior to this has particular relevance to an understanding of the contemporary scene; it is of antiquarian interest only" (Tregonning 1969: 14). Thus, despite centuries of the existence of Singapore, history was said to begin after 1819 and Raffles, as the prime mover, was elevated to a "Great Man" of history, not only by colonial historians, but also officially by the post-colonial state (Kwa 2018: 3–4).

While Alatas was a post-graduate student at the University of Amsterdam, he published a short piece in *Eastern World* in 1956. Here he discussed what he considered to be some fundamental problems of colonialism:

The problems left behind after a period of colonialism fall into three categories. One is the purely physical and material problem, incorporating agriculture, communications and housing. The second is the problem of organisation, economic relations, political administration, education, social welfare, and industrialisation. The third problem is sociological, psychological and moral, and the greatest damage occasioned by colonialism is precisely in this field, since it hampers the solution to other difficulties (Alatas 1956: 9).

The idea that the non-material problems and legacies of colonialism, that is, its sociological, psychological and moral dimensions, are fundamental is, of course, a view that is widely shared today among those who identify Eurocentrism as a hegemonic orientation in knowledge creation. The phenomenon of the mass importation and consumption of Western theories, concepts and empirical material in an imitative, mimicking manner, without due attention to the socio-historical setting of those ideas, was an almost unconscious continuation of colonialism in the cultural, intellectual sense (Alatas 1956: 9). This parallels Samir Amin's discussion in his *Eurocentrism* (Amin 1989). This is what is meant by coloniality after colonialism, although Alatas had not used the term. For Alatas, the lasting and devastating legacy of colonialism in the Malay world is the internalization of the British image of the native by the natives themselves, including the political elite. The concomitant development of an inferiority complex among the formerly colonized is a serious consequence of colonial rule and a defining feature of the post-colonial society and politics. Indeed, the condition of coloniality without colonialism sometimes reached the point of auto-racism.

In both *Thomas Stamford Raffles* (Alatas 1971) and *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (Alatas 1977), Alatas exposes and critiques the ideological function of the colonial constructions of the 'natives' and the continuity of this ideology among the native elite themselves. In *Thomas Stamford Raffles*, for example, he presents a critique of the philosophy of Raffles at a time in Singapore scholarship when there was a dearth of critical scholarship on the colonial administrator who, far from being the progressive statesman and humanitarian reformer that his British biographers made him out to be, was a figure with racist views, and who had been implicated in the Massacre of Palembang, the corruption case known as the Banjarmasin Affair, and other questionable acts, all of which can be seen to be 'normal' when put in the proper context of British imperialism and the ideology of colonial capitalism.

What I appreciated about my father's work was not only his rigorous scholarship but his inspiring transparency about the ideological motives guiding his work:

I believe in the primarily negative influence of colonialism. I believe in the need to unmask the colonial ideology, for its influence is still very strong. Colonial scholars have on the whole avoided the study of the negative aspects of colonialism; an attempt to correct this should not be considered automatically as a reversal of the coin. It is the facts adduced, the evidence marshalled, the themes introduced, the analyses accomplished, and the attitudes of the scholar which should finally decide whether the attempt is merely a reversal of the coin or a real extension and supplementation of existing knowledge (Alatas 1977: 9).

Alatas was my father. The 1971 edition of *Thomas Stamford Raffles* was dedicated to me. I was ten years old at the time and was excited, almost exhilarated, to see my name printed on the page of a book. As I grew older, dinner table conversations about Raffles and later, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* socialized me into a decolonial way of knowing. A few years later, in 1979, a Singaporean, responding to my father's critique of Raffles at a forum in Singapore, wrote in defense of Raffles, the colonizer, in the Singapore daily, *The Straits Times* (N. Sivarajah 1979). I was a high school student then, a little more mature than in 1971, and eagerly took it upon myself to write a response in *The Straits Times*, declaring that there was evidence of Raffles' misdeeds and prejudiced views (Alatas 1979).

In addition to my father, there was also the influence of my uncle, my father's younger brother, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, a scholar of Sufi metaphysics, history, theology, among others (see Wan Mohd Nor 1998). When I was a teenager, I had spent many hours at his home in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, listening to his critique of European, particularly Dutch Orientalists, in the field of Islamic studies. It was from him that I had first heard the term "Orientalism" with its pejorative connotations. This was before I was exposed to Edward Said's *Orientalism* when I was a graduate student in the United States in the 1980s. My uncle's stress on the importance of formal logic, including the various modes of argumentation, was to have a great effect on my later intellectual development, particularly on my work on Ibn Khaldun. In addition, his stress on the centrality of deriving concepts from the Islamic intellectual tradition had reinforced a

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similar lesson that I was taught by my father during the years that I was a young lecturer at the National University of Singapore.

The result of my anti-colonial intellectual upbringing had unfolded over a period of decades. I have adopted the same anti-colonial approach in my own work. Beyond that, I have also learnt from Alatas about the reconstruction of knowledge. The decolonization of knowledge is not merely about colonial critique but also about reconstructions that correct and oppose colonial ones. Also important are original constructions in terms of theory building and concept formation.

But, Alatas did not only critique colonial knowledge and Eurocentrism. He was also concerned with the domination by other hegemonic orientations in knowledge creation in the social sciences and humanities as well as in political discourse and conduct. He called for the creation of an autonomous social sciences tradition. The task was to attain freedom not only from Eurocentrism but also other hegemonic orientations: This was to become a major influence on the generation of scholars that Alatas trained, including myself. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the result of Alatas' emphatic concerns with the state of knowledge creation had resulted in his students developing research agendas that went into the critique of various hegemonic orientations such as

traditionalism, culturalism, ethnonationalism, and psychological feudalism.

### Anti-colonial Social Thought

Decades later, I continue to promote the anti-colonial spirit of Alatas in various ways, not only through my own scholarship (see Alatas 2006) but also through the republication of my father's works as well as the publication of his unpublished works after he had passed away in 2007. This included the reissuing of *Thomas Stamford Raffles* in 2020, and more recently the Malay translation of that work (Alatas 2020, 2024), intended to provoke the captive mind to emerge out of the abyss that the slavish mentality is, and to call for a decolonizing sensibility.

I have also attempted to be more explicit about the meaning of anti-colonial thought. From the 1950s onwards, scholars from Asia, Africa and Latin America called for alternatives social sciences and humanities under labels such as indigenous social science, endogenous intellectual creativity, autonomous knowledge, post-colonial theory, decolonial thought, globalization of knowledge, deimperialization of knowledge, and the decolonization of knowledge. Despite the differences in labels, these prescriptions often overlapped in terms of aims, theoretical approaches and methods.

A number of observations can be made about this literature. One is that the category, 'anti-colonial' generally is not to be found in this literature. This, of course, does not mean that this literature was not anti-colonial. 'Anti-colonial' is to be seen as an umbrella term that encompasses the variety of perspectives that critique Eurocentrism and Orientalism, even if the term anti-colonial is not used (see Patel 2023: 4). It is also important to note that there was little metatheoretical reflection on the types of anti-colonial thought that had emerged thus far (Patel 2023: 2).

In my own work I take a long-term historical perspective, trace anti-colonial thought to the sixteenth century as Patel does (Patel 2023: 2), and offer a typology of anti-colonial thought that had developed during the last four hundred years (see Alatas, forthcoming).

I see anti-colonial thought within the context of the decolonization of knowledge. The later can be understood to consist of three dimensions,

that is, the critique of colonialism, the discursive reconstruction of colonial history, society and ideas in a non-colonial, non-Eurocentric mode, and the original construction of ideas from hitherto unknown, lesser known and under-utilized non-Western intellectual traditions and historical experiences (see Alatas, forthcoming). The critique of colonialism makes up anti-colonial thought, while reconstruction and original construction represent the constructive dimensions of the decolonization of knowledge.

The types of anti-colonial thought themselves can be grouped according to the types of colonialism they are directed against. For the sake of discussion, we may say that there are five principal types of colonialism, that is, (i) extractive, (ii) plantation, (iii) settler, (iv) semi-, and (v) internal colonialism. Furthermore, different dimensions of anti-colonial thought can be brought in to the discussion. In other words, whatever the types of anti-colonial thought, they can be seen to exist along several dimensions. These dimensions are: (i) anti-colonial thought that ranges from being normative to positive; (ii) anti-colonial thought emerging from the colonizer during the colonial period; (iii) anti-colonial thought emerging from the colonised contemporaneous with the colonial period; (iv) anti-colonial thought that developed during the post-colonial period, that is, after political independence; (v) anti-colonial thought directed against colonial ideologies, that is, the subjective dimension; (vi) anti-colonial thought that is critical of objective dimensions of colonial society, that is, political economic and legal structures, for example; (vii) anti-colonial thought directed against existing colonialism today in a largely post-colonial world; and (viii) anti-coloniality thought (Alatas, forthcoming).

### The Re/Construction of Knowledge

The decolonization of knowledge does not stop at the anti-colonial phase. There is also the constructive phase that involves both reconstruction and original construction.

An example of the former is my work on Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun. I had been interested in Ibn Khaldun from the time I was a teenager when my father introduced me to an unpublished manuscript on Ibn Khaldun that he had written as a student in Amsterdam. Arising from my concern

with the Eurocentric nature of the social sciences, I was interested in seeing the extent to which it was possible to draw upon a non-Western tradition to develop a sociology that was neither Eurocentric nor nativistic. So, I turned to the work of Ibn Khaldun. I had started writing on Ibn Khaldun as a graduate student, having participated in some conferences that required me to think more systematically about his work. I started publishing articles on Ibn Khaldun in the early 1990s, and moved away from merely proclaiming him as a founder or precursor of sociology towards developing a systematic Khaldunian sociology for the modern world.

This interest culminated in two books on Ibn Khaldun (Alatas 2013, 2014). The first, entitled *Ibn Khaldun*, which appeared in the Oxford University Press *Makers of Islamic Civilization* book series, deals with the life and thought of Ibn Khaldun and is not restricted to the sociological aspects of his work. I spend a bit of time talking about the intellectual and social environment of Ibn Khaldun's thought and then devote more space to discussing his theory of society and the rise and decline of states, its methodological underpinnings, as well as his views on knowledge and education.

The second book, *Applying Ibn Khaldun*, is a very different work. It is an attempt to systematically apply Ibn Khaldun's theory of the rise and decline of states to various empirical cases in geographical locations and historical times outside of his own. The main theoretical model I used merges Ibn Khaldun's theory of state formation with Karl Marx's concept of modes of production and Max Weber's concept of prebendal feudalism. The resulting application of this theory to the rise and decline of dynasties is an exercise in reconstructing history.

Original construction, on the other hand, refers to the development of ideas and theories from scratch, as it were. An example is my work on the Filipino thinker, polymath, nationalist and activist, José Rizal (1861–1896), who was among the first systematic social thinkers to emerge outside of the West during the formative period of the social sciences in the nineteenth century. Although he was not trained in what we today refer to as the social sciences, his work contains much that is relevant to sociology. It is therefore possible to formulate a sociological theory based on his thought, a theory of colonial society that centres on the nature and

conditions of Filipino colonial society, and the requirements for liberation from colonial rule. He is most famous for his two novels, *Noli Me Tangere* (*Touch me Not*) and *El Filibusterismo* (*The Subversive*) but also authored numerous essays and poems (Alatas 2011). This type of work is an original construction rather than a reconstruction because a social theory was created for the first time from a body of non-sociological writings. My attraction to Rizal's writings was in large part due to the passion for learning about the Philippines anti-colonial revolution that I developed from listening to my father's discussions.

Another example of original constructions comes from my current interest in developing stupidity studies. Stupidity is rarely the subject of systematic research. The general meaning of stupidity, the lack of intelligence or reason, or slow-mindedness, is conveyed by the Malay and Persian terms, *kebodohan* and *hamāqat*, respectively. Ali Shariati (1933-1977), the celebrated Iranian figure, whose lectures and writings had played a major role in the Iranian revolution against the imperialist powers and the corrupt political elite, is among the few thinkers who paid attention to the problem of stupidity, through the understanding of *istihmār*, derived from the Arabic word *himār*, which means donkey. In the Malay World, Alatas introduced the theme of stupidity through concepts such as *bebalisme* (Alatas 1992) and *jadong* (Alatas 2000b). I am currently working on the comparative study of stupidity, looking at Alatas and Shariati on this theme. The reflections of Alatas and Shariati on stupidity allow us to comprehend the nature and function of stupidity in both the practice of government as well as the ideology of the ruling elite. This too is an exercise in original construction as the attempt is made to engage in concept formation from the languages of everyday life and in a non-Western setting.

### Pluralism in Methods

Trained as a sociologist, I was introduced to the sharp distinction made between the so-called scientific method, on the one hand, and those of literature and the arts, on the other. Resulting from this strict dichotomy between art and science is the idea that truth and beauty are entirely separate domains. This is a methodological dualism (Brown 1978: 15), according to which there are "two orders...separate

but unequal” (Gouldner 1962 cited in Brown 1977: 26–27). In the methodological dualistic world of social science, the choice is to either emulate physics or art (Brown 1978: 16). The former engaged in science, seen to be higher up in the hierarchy of knowledge, as only science truly represented reality. But, being true to science meant that the subjective states, feelings, interpretations and imagination of the scientist had to be excluded from any scientific account. Such an attitude takes us away from the idea that knowledge can also be attained through the stirring of the imagination, and that poetics, for example, is as valid a method of reasoning or argumentation as demonstration or the scientific method. In the world of Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), these methods did not divide the community of scholars. In his world, not only demonstration but also poetics and other methods, such as rhetoric and dialectics, were recognised as valid methods of making truth claims (Alatas 2013).

### **The Context of Knowledge Creation**

Colonialism did not only take the political economic destiny of whole peoples out of their own hands but was also responsible for both the physical and epistemic destruction of peoples. This destruction or marginalization of non-Western intellectual traditions persists till today and takes place within a particular global structure of knowledge production, referred to as intellectual imperialism.

Both intellectual imperialism and the related concept of the captive mind were conceptualized by Alatas (1972, 1974, 2000). Intellectual imperialism is analogous to political and economic imperialism in that it refers to the “domination of one people by another in their world of thinking (Alatas 2000a: 24).” Intellectual imperialism was more direct in the colonial period, whereas today it has more to do with the West’s control of and influence over the flow of social scientific knowledge rather than its ownership and control of academic institutions.

My own contribution towards understanding the global structure of knowledge creation had been to develop the idea of academic dependency. Academic dependency theory is a dependency theory of the global state of knowledge creation, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. It defines academic dependency as a condition in which the knowledge creation of certain scholarly

communities is conditioned by the development and growth of knowledge of other scholarly communities to which the former is subjected. This definition of academic dependency parallels that of economic dependency in the classic form in which it was stated by Theotonio dos Santos (1970: 231).

A vital feature of the structure of academic dependency is the global knowledge division of labour which is founded on a three-fold division as follows: (a) the division between theoretical and empirical intellectual labour; (b) the division between other country and own country studies; and (c) the division between comparative and single case studies (Alatas 2003). It is important to know that academic dependency is not merely another term for intellectual imperialism, just as economic dependency is not a substitute term for economic imperialism. The structure of intellectual imperialism does not automatically lead to academic dependency. Individuals and institutions certainly exist under the yoke of intellectual imperialism but may attempt to achieve some degree of academic independence. Indeed, this is what the decolonization of knowledge is about.

Essential to the task of lessening academic dependency is teaching in the decolonization mode. Basic introductory courses in the social sciences remain biased in favour of American or British theoretical perspectives and reading materials. The logical consequence of the critique of Eurocentrism in the social sciences is the development of alternatives concepts and theories that is not restricted to Western civilization as the primary sources. In order for this to be done, the critique of Eurocentrism must become a widespread theme in the teaching of the social sciences. My colleague at the National University of Singapore, Vineeta Sinha, and I documented our attempt to teach sociological theory in a non-Eurocentric mode, and also eventually published a social theory text that challenges the Western canon (Alatas and Sinha 2001, 2017).

### **The Struggle for Autonomous Knowledge**

With the emergence of the modern social sciences in the nineteenth century came recognition of the problem of knowledge imperialism. It has long been established that Eurocentrism is a dominant or hegemonic orientation as far as knowledge

creation in the social sciences and humanities is concerned. However, the scholars of my generation who were trained by my father recognise several other hegemonic orientations that affect knowledge production in the Third World/Global South, many of which predate the colonial period by centuries. These include androcentrism, traditionalism, culturalism, ethnonationalism and sectarianism. This suggests that the task of decolonizing knowledge is insufficient. Some of us in the Malay world speak of the need to struggle for autonomous knowledge, that is, knowledge that is autonomous from not only Eurocentric but also other hegemonic orientations.

Alatas had initiated such a tradition that began in the field of Malay Studies. The Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore has had a tradition of creating discourses that ran counter to the various hegemonic discourses mentioned above. The department was founded by Alatas in 1967 at the then University of Singapore, and was headed by him for almost two decades. As discussed during a conversation with one of his former students, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, on 28 July 2018, a distinctive approach in sociology and other social sciences emerged during that period and influenced many of the students he trained who had later joined the department as lecturers.

Some of them had been or are my colleagues. Chandra Muzaffar, Shaharuddin Maaruf, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, Azhar Ibrahim, Norshahril Saat, and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, all of whom studied or taught at the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore, had all been intellectually socialised into the tradition of autonomous knowledge begun by Syed Hussein Alatas. In addition to them, there are several cohorts of undergraduate, MA and PhD students from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia who have studied at the department. Azhar Ibrahim has a strong presence in some Malaysian and Indonesian humanities circles. Syed Farid Alatas, Azhar Ibrahim and Mohamed Imran regularly conduct reading sessions that thematise autonomous knowledge in Malaysia and Singapore.

Is it possible to speak of a School of Autonomous Knowledge in the social sciences and humanities that has emerged from the Malay World? Something along these lines was suggested by the

Filipino journalist, John Nery, who referred to it as the 'Alatas tradition', that is,

the lineage of elite Malaysian scholars begun by that towering pioneer, the late Syed Hussein Alatas...We can use the appropriation of Rizal as object of study or source of inspiration to trace this living tradition of inquiry, beginning with Hussein Alatas' own influential deconstruction of "the myth of the lazy native," to Chandra Muzaffar's founding of a Malaysian social reform group on Rizal's death anniversary, to Shaharuddin Maaruf's brave but unjustly neglected discussion of "the concept of a hero in Malay society," which posited Rizal as one of three ideal heroes; down to Farish A. Noor's web-based ruminations on Rizal and especially Syed Farid Alatas' important, ground breaking work on alternative discourses, with Rizal as both precursor and paragon. The Alatas tradition is a living lineage... (Nery 2012; Mignolo 2014).

In other words, there is a tradition of thinking in terms of autonomous knowledge, and it is possible to speak of a School of Autonomous Knowledge in the social sciences and humanities that has emerged from the Malay World, a tradition of knowledge creation that I am a part of.

### **Concluding with an Attitude**

I believe firmly that the task of education to create an appropriate culture, emphasising certain values and attitudes, so as to allow for the kind of personality development that is consistent with a more autonomous intellectual and cultural life, that is, one that is not dominated by intellectual imperialism and mental captivity.

Pinheiro calls this a "Southern attitude" (Ferreira and Pinheiro 2020). This suggests that the position against intellectual imperialism is not just an intellectual, but also an emotional one. It is above all the Southern attitude that inspires and drives autonomous, original and critical analysis, and forms of thought that seek to debilitate all hegemonic orientations. There are at least two specific attitudes that I personally find relevant to me as someone interested in decolonising knowledge. These are passion and shame.

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Our passion may also be driven by a sense of pride in the intellectual tradition of the community or society in which we grew up.

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Passion as an attitude is an important resource for creative work:

Individuals passionate for their work—whether they are scientists, poets, entrepreneurs, operations managers or something else—are able to use the energy afforded by their passion as a motivator of their work. It is not the case that they will be always happy or satisfied, but their desire and commitment will enable them to have a long-term view of work that ultimately makes it possible to work through the stress and frustration and keep the long-term goals in mind (Pringle 2019).

When it comes to the selection of topics, the formulation of research problems and research questions, our passion may be driven by many factors such as the desire to simply know or by inspiration from life-experiences, ideas we have come across, novels, music, film, and so on. Our passion may also be driven by a sense of pride in the intellectual tradition of the community or society in which we grew up. This brings me to shame.

Shame refers to susceptibility to the feelings of shortcoming or impropriety. The one who has shame is sensitive to disapproval by others. There is the shame of those who feel they are not good imitators of their Western teachers, a shame that is rooted in the sense of inferiority. As noted by Alatas:

A feeling of inferiority implicit in their behavior is certainly due to the more general historical and social setting, since it is recognized that if one country is dominated by another for a considerable length of time, a section of the populace feel that their

weakness is inherent in their way of life, and regard that of the dominating one as the cause of their superiority and strength. To get rid of this feeling of inequality they adopt the way of imitation. The classification of this group is not based on political concepts. They are to be found amongst those who are progressive or reactionary, for or against immediate independence, the high and the low economic classes, officials and civilians alike (Alatas 1956: 9).

I am referring to a more productive shame that is relevant to our interest in cultivating autonomous knowledge. We can speak of shame vis-à-vis three matters. They are the shame of 1) being a parochial imitator of the intellectual tradition of the colonizer; 2) being alienated from our own intellectual traditions due to our a) disrespecting and lacking interest in those traditions; b) regarding those traditions as subordinate and inferior to the dominant tradition of the colonizer; and c) having little self-worth; and 3) not being an autonomous creator of knowledge because we are imitators of parochial knowledge, that is, of knowledge that originates from only one civilizational source, that of the colonizer. Indeed, this is opposite to the shame of not being a good imitator

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> I am currently jointly appointed to the Department of Sociology & Anthropology and the Department of Malay Studies.
- <sup>2</sup> As noted by Patel, such discussions on anti-colonial social theory are few and mostly recent.
- <sup>3</sup> See the discussion in chapter 3 on bebalisme.



## Haitian Creole, A Perpetual Victory on Coloniality<sup>1</sup>: A triple chasm and a common denominator

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### Abstract

This article examines Haitian history and identity through the lens of Haitian Creole as both a cultural creation and a victory against coloniality. Jean Casimir argues that Haiti cannot be understood solely through frameworks imposed by European colonial states, but rather through the fractures and continuities that have shaped the nation since its revolutionary origins. Three ruptures are central: the divide between state institutions and colonial structures, the separation of coastal elites from rural “outside people,” and tensions among leaders of varied social and educational backgrounds. These fractures did not create rigid hierarchies but revealed tensions within a society bound by collective pride in autonomy and resistance.

Modern Haitian generations navigate a dual heritage: an imposed Eurocentric education system and a resilient culture transmitted through family, community, and Creole. Western institutions produced elites who saw themselves as guardians of civilization, yet their communities expected them to protect traditional structures. This duality produced a hybrid political and cultural agency, neither fully colonial nor wholly detached.

Haitian Creole, born from diverse European and African languages, became central to national identity. As a counter-language, it unified the population while excluding the colonial state. Creole preserved autonomy, provided categories of self-understanding beyond colonial modernity, and rejected imposed racial hierarchies. Unlike French, it captured the lived experience of the oppressed, becoming a vehicle of sovereignty and resistance.

Post-independence governments faced the paradox of ruling within colonial matrices while representing a decolonial nation. Communal property, counter-plantation economies, and cultural self-sufficiency clashed with efforts to integrate into global capitalist systems, tensions that resurfaced during the U.S. occupation, foreign oligarchies, and narco-politics. Yet Creole-speaking communities sustained a sovereign worldview. The article concludes that Haitian Creole crystallizes Haiti's historical experience, rejecting slavery and colonial modernity while offering strategies for future decolonial renewal.

European states imposed themselves on Haitians without giving them an opportunity to express their rejection and to chart their relations with them. The path taken to establish our difference deserves to be scrutinized. It shows a split between the state and the colony, and the assets we use to salvage our identity.

A second fracture, this time among us, sets aside the population of the seaports, intermediaries of the colonial state, and the former enslaved who, probably since the 1791-1804 revolution, started to perceive themselves as "the outside people", the real inhabitants<sup>2</sup>.

A third departure can be observed among the leaders: we had illiterate<sup>3</sup> generals of rural origin, and literate leaders from the seaports, who succeeded each other in power, maintaining a sneaky prejudice of color, which did not lead to a feeling of superiority of one or the other strata. Intellectuals were certainly convinced that the bearers of the Western civilization should occupy higher social echelons, and in fact, they praised themselves as obvious proof that Blacks could achieve the highest excellence granted to Culture, with capital C. But this superiority could be achieved by people of any skin color.

The scale of people's skin color did not correspond to differences in the production of material life nor in any extravagant economic success. Levels of living, modest all throughout society, were nonetheless several times higher to those of residents of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Caribbean living in chains or barely freed. A common pride united the Haitian leaders, and the indefatigable use of gun boat diplomacy by the colonial empires testifies that they could not breach their autonomy.

My generation of urbanites, schooled in staunch Eurocentric institutions, was groomed to be part of a Westernized elite, destined to lead our compatriots toward civilization, if not away from abject poverty, understood up to now as our underdevelopment. Our parents grew up during the 1915 US occupation

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of Haiti, under the guidance of grandparents who were, in turn, the products of the golden age of the counter-plantation system<sup>4</sup>. This epoch covers from 1870, the execution of Sylvain Salnave to 1908, the fall of Nord Alexis. Hence, those who raised my parents, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were self-confident people, proud of themselves, mainly from inland towns.

They were taught to respect their elders and stick to their advice. The zones of local sovereignty, bypassing the conflicts created by colonial domination, were not discussed, especially in front of 'foreigners', while the rules of the modern world, from which there was no escape, were applied religiously, like those of the Latin and Greek versions that were inflicted upon them. A structural gulf separated their private and community life from the modern state and the public life it promoted.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was customary to send at least the eldest male child to school and to make the necessary sacrifices for him to succeed within the outward oriented society. The survival of an urban cohesive family unit rested on the integration of this child into the modern world. A religious silence surrounded any information gathered at the school system disrespectful of existing community arrangements.

Western institutions (churches, schools, civil and military bureaucracy) led the supposedly “erudite” members of the community to consider themselves an elite. But the community expected them to simply guarantee the survival of the family, as structured. A feeling of superiority and even of self-sufficiency gave precedence to respect for traditions that were not obscured by any mastery of Western culture.

### **Two Cultures and One Public Administration**

The agency of my generation of urbanites is rooted in the dual layer of values and norms of a dominant and an oppressed culture. This generation indeed had a greater mastery of the dominant culture than the rest of the population. The crux of the matter, however, is to determine what this Western knowledge was used for.

The few Haitians who survived the passage of the Spanish from Castile, rebuilt themselves as modern France emerged. They evolved by synchronizing the two façades of the colonial universe, the one that colonialism found in place and the one dictated by the public life it implanted. The incessant need for collective torture to implement its diktats testified to the inflexible resistance of the colonized; and, conversely, their tireless re-existence confirmed the modesty of their success in the face of colonial brutality.

Originally, an adult population comprising essentially male European marginals – sailors, pirates, and filibusters from the western sea coast, Jews, Huguenots and other heretics, – settled on the western coast of Haiti. They imagined new forms of living and a language, Haitian Creole, different from what obtained in their mother country.

The first authorities from Paris arrived with Bertrand d’Ogeron in 1665, together with the commercial mercantilist companies. They initiated a modern economic development with White slaves (36

month indentured) but soon intensified this growth with the absorption of African born persons. The transformation of these captives into slaves was presented as a civilizational mission. Their ensuing invisibility allowed colonialism to dress itself up as colonization, leading to a historical narrative that pretended to obscure and to criminalize and deny the victims’ agency.

The slaves, as inputs of colonial enterprises, were commodities renewed on the market according to the ups and downs of their demand and supply. Their lives had a meaning in as much as it enhanced material production. Similarly, the State ignored the well-being of the poor settlers (petty Whites); its objectives being the only compass of the colonial administration.

Given the short life expectancy of the enslaved, their supply had to be constantly renewed. Their conversion into slaves accelerated, but the blindness of the state canceled the need for supervising this process too closely. So, as the colony grew richer, local communities tended to satisfy their needs without state intervention. They became better equipped every day to provide for themselves or to challenge official policies. Their Creole language, a marker of identity, was absent from the colonial administration.

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As a language, Creole cements the components of the nation and keeps them away from the thinking of the French state. It testifies to its absence in private and community life, as well as in the conflicts between local social forces. This language carries contradictions with the political power, as well as the acrimonious relations of its speakers with slave traders and the international community. The relexification of the concept “White” to signify the “foreigner” testifies to the role that it plays.

A second set of contradictions refers to the management of power within the state, i.e. the equally bumpy interface of local forces. The indigenous army that created the state in 1804 was born from the mutineers of the colonial army. It got the better of the French after having treacherously assassinated the Guinean leaders. The new nation did not invent a specific name for this appendage of the colonial army; it retains the indigenous qualifier that Creole uses nowhere else.

Madiou’s definition of what the indigenous person<sup>5</sup> is distorts the reality that the population constructs. Beaubrun Ardouin, for his part, reported that the Civil Commissioners informed the National Assembly that “it is with the natives of the country, it is with the Africans, that we will save France’s property in Saint-Domingue” (Dezobry and E. Magdeleine 1853, pp.179) In the same sentence, he unties the concept from the people’s place of birth, and reintroduces the Blacks in front of the Whites, in a community that exclude the foreigner, the ‘White’.

This falsification of reality that Haitians construct escapes a thinker as shrewd as C.L.R. James, who translates the term as “the native army” (1980). This narrative enshrines the invisibility of the majority of African-born Haitians and blunts their agency. It is easy to understand why the word indigenous has no meaning for them and why they do not use it in their speech.

Through this army, unable to integrate the popular vision of the world, the birth, organization and management of the state/public administration were monopolized by the Eurocentric oligarchs who led it. They dreamt of Haiti’s participation in the club of colonial powers; and the assiduous courtship made to them by the French state ended up miring the country in the famous debt of independence.

The national majority can only observe this militarized façade seduced by the siren song of deceitfully civilizing people. The oligarchs who could have become national elites cut off the branch on which their eventual ascendancy rests to secure the control of public administration.

### Liberty and Death

The confinement of political authorities in the imperial language ignores or obscures the relevance of the categories and institutions produced by the experience of the subordinate classes. In their language, they do not in any way qualify their rejection of the foreigner. The logic of popular institutions escapes the objectives of state codification, which it dodges and even challenges through family and community education.

Moreover, the prestige, conferred by the state to French, tended to endow this language with a role it certainly cannot play in Saint Domingue. Creole resulted, first, from a combination of languages from the western sea coast of France, that, at the time of their encounter in the island of La Tortue, were reproducing their difference with Francien, the language of *l’île de France*, and their opposition to the institutions sponsored by the crown (the opposition of the Huguenots and the Jews to the Catholics is a point in case). In any event, the influence of Francien on the regional languages did not cross the Atlantic.

It can be assumed that this predisposition to linguistic autonomy is reinforced by the arrival of newcomers who speak a variety of West African languages. Their gradual appropriation of Creole thus forces the observation and narration of local behavior from points of view that are increasingly divergent from that of the State. Creole, an autonomous vehicle of communication, prunes and redefines the official vocabulary that does not fit in with the local experience.

For Haitian Creole-speakers, the colonial social structure is absurd. The words ‘person’ (moun), Nèg (negro) or ‘Christian’ are synonymous. These concepts emerge from local community relations where the fundamental dichotomies of modernity and colonialism do not operate<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the transmission by the state of its extreme contempt for the so-called inferior races and mestizos does not cross the language barrier<sup>7</sup>.

Given the small number of Francophones in the colony, the state could not develop a school system adapted to the locality. Formal education remains restricted to the metropolitan setting. Aimed at improving public order, it served the civil servants whom the state sent to France to learn how to administer a colony. This is the case for the sons of senior officers such as Toussaint and Christophe.

The rejection of colonialism is constitutive of Haitians as a people. It keeps in check their participation in the institutions of the colonial period, based on the consummation of their existence. The magnificence of the pearl of the West Indies is coupled with the annihilation of the inhabitants like the faces of the same coin. A school system based on the enrichment of the planters by the extermination of captives can teach nothing to their children, even if they are freemen or freed slave. The ambiguities in the definition of the *cultivators*<sup>8</sup> deceive no one, and the number of maroons (bandits) under the government of Toussaint was higher than under that of the French General Rochambeau.

The enslaved population became aware of its situation in an anti-colonial world, and therefore outside of modernity: they were 'people from the outside'. Torture transforms her into conscripts of this modernity<sup>9</sup>, slaves or cultivators, a mass of disposable goods used as inputs to the plantation system. They are certainly too fragile to prevent this development, but they reserve revenge for themselves. They are sovereign beings, living in prison, certainly, but endowed with a self-propelled power to act, existing and re-existing as such, independently of the modern world.

For a local community to become the central agent of its political regime, it must be aware of its agency, of its successes and failures. This process involves the joint management of freedom and death, or the choice to be an autonomous person, even when one chooses to be killed. Haitians cannot escape the policies of their aggressors, but they are fighting tirelessly for their freedom. Freedom **or** death is a slogan of the fight. Freedom **and** death together depict their daily conditions of living.

### Language, In Lieu of decolonial Options

A decolonial reading of Haitian history shows that we created ourselves as a collectivity by transcending circumstances superimposed by Europe. The latter

tried to produce slaves, while we invented our person by rejecting this repugnant proposition.

After independence, governments claimed to run a modern, *unthinkable* and *irrational* black state. *Unthinkable*, because the international community set itself up by constructing the black man as a slave. *Irrational* for a nation that emerged at war against any compromise that contains the slightest whiff of this absurdity. This was the dilemma of the new state: its governments navigated a colonial matrix of power with a resolutely decolonial nation.

After the victory of 1804, the sharecropping promoted by Pétion contradicted the development of large plantations, encouraging an inward-looking economy, based on a system of undivided family property. Thereafter, governments strive to prevent the West from physically establishing a foothold in Haiti and leave the well-being of the population to the care of local communities. Haitians unable to integrate into the modern world while respecting their value orientation adapted their counter-plantation, fragile and isolated, to the diktats of an expanding imperialism.

The American occupation of 1915 inflicted the physical presence of foreigners by imposing their access to land ownership and the development of a plantation economy. State racism was reintroduced, and community life was persecuted by governments, Christian churches, and the school system. But the structural obstruction of undivided family property system diverted the development of plantations to neighboring territories that siphon off 'cheap' labor. Then, for a short period, the export of tourist services replaced those of agricultural products.

Self-proclaimed urban elites initiated in managing government institutions were humiliated in the press. They negotiated a subordinate participation in the administrative machinery, while forbidding the invader from any entry into their private lives. The essential thing about an educated person remained his conformity to the rules of the local community. This was the revenge of oppressed culture. Dispositions taught by the Eurocentric school system disseminated a set of information that was essential to take advantage of colonial tutelage. But graduates of the school system learned at home to jealously guard the assets of the family and the local community. They went to school to serve as shields for local traditions.

Faced with the resistance of my parents' generation, the American Occupation grafted onto local society a brand-new economic oligarchy, coming from the South of the United States, the British West Indies and the Levant. After the Second World War and the short-lived breakthrough of the tourism industry, Haiti found itself with its comparative advantages defined by the liberal market economy: cheap labor and proximity to consumption centers. Labor rushed to find job opportunities abroad, while the traditional import-export sector was gradually turning to the lucrative transfer of narcotics.

The surplus captured by the public administration was no longer enough to woo the votes of the inhabitants by regularly offering a minimum of social services. The narco-state, for greater efficiency, was gradually privatizing its monopoly on public violence.

But the communities still mastered the transmission of the local culture and language. The latter ended up monopolizing the public sphere and demanding the presence of its values in the management of power. Arbitrariness was obvious in the face of the demands of a sovereign world. A narco-state in a poor country could not solve this crisis.

By 1791, Creole had proved to be the most Haitian contribution to the production of national identity. It was the precipitation of its historical experience, its trials and errors, its successes and failures. It was imposed on the day when, faced with the danger of total extermination announced by Napoleon, the local forces put aside their differences to drive out the French state. Once this was done, this uncomfortable truce moved towards a semblance of a solution until the end of the following century. In 1915, the United States of America landed, the banner of its manifest destiny unfurled from coast to coast.

The deterioration of the national economic situation initiated by the invader is accelerating and is leading in the first quarter of the twenty-first century to a threat of disappearance like that of the end of the nineteenth century. Just as in the twilight of French colonization, the national language sounded the rallying point against the allied imperial powers in the famous 'Core Group'<sup>10</sup>.

The reflection I submit concerns a limited aspect of the history of Haitians: the need to manage

our two cultures. I suggest that a twofold path be opened before us: the first is to deepen our studies of Creole and to become aware of the norms and values that identify us and testify to our strength, and the second invites us to promote in our country all the imperial languages that can help us to recover and engage in the national struggle our diaspora in the Dominican Republic, in the Bahamas, the United States, Latin America, and France. Through it, we will participate in the struggles of the wretched of the earth who engage in it. More united, the nation and its allies will be able to negotiate a way out of the crisis.

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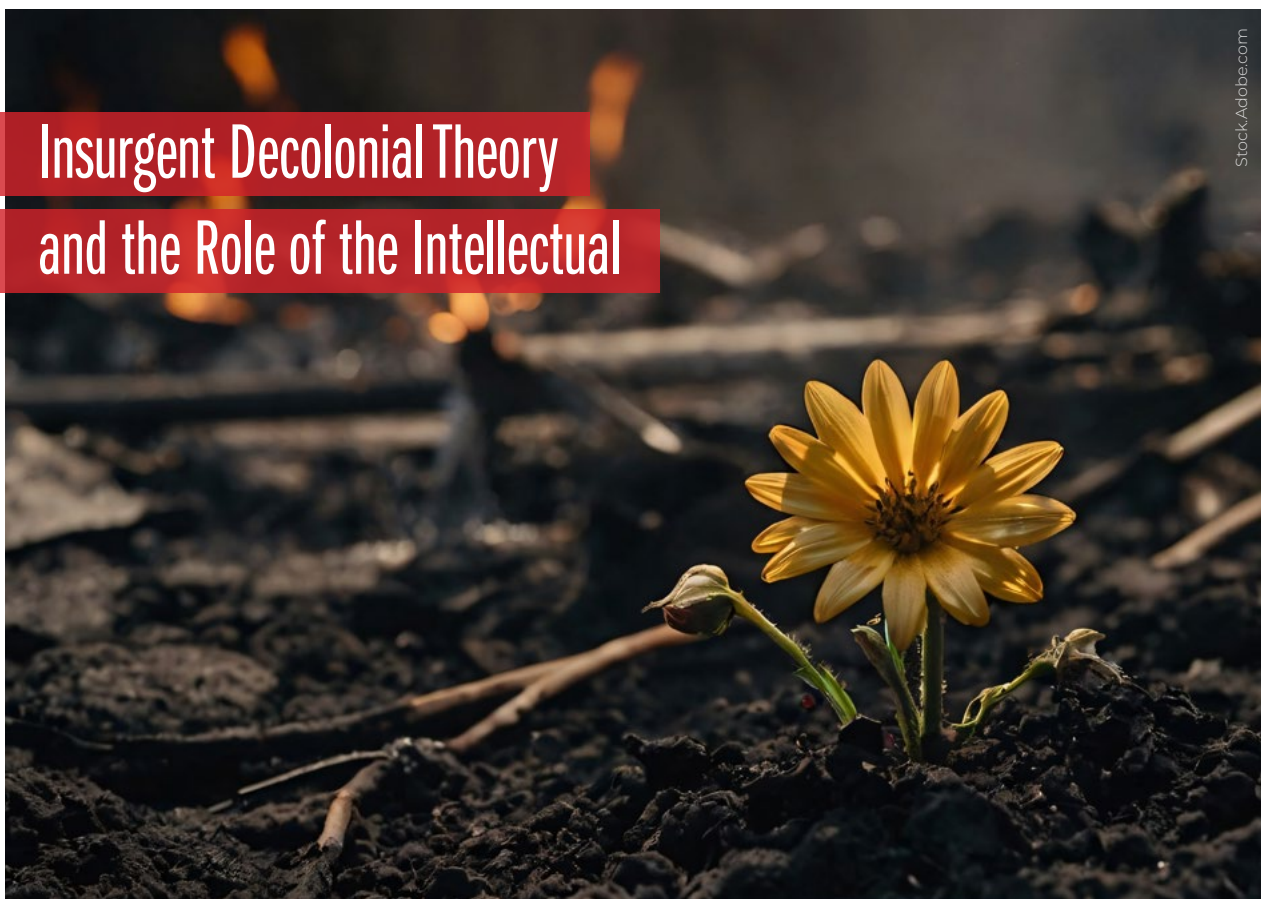
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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This reflection continues on from my previous work (see *Casimir 2018, pp. and Casimir 2018, pp. 281-328*).
- <sup>2</sup> In Creole “abitan”, meaning *settler* in English.
- <sup>3</sup> They were rather a-literate, speaking an unwritten mother tongue.
- <sup>4</sup> A way of living opposite to slavery plantation, based on reciprocity and cooperation.
- <sup>5</sup> Madiou, referring to the events of 1802, wrote: “Dès à présent, nous entendons par indigènes, non seulement les Noirs et les hommes de couleur nés à Saint-Domingue, mais encore les Africains transplantés” (Translates as, “From now on, we understand by indigenous, not only the Blacks and colored people born in Saint-Domingue, but also transplanted Africans”.) (Madiou 1848, pp.162).
- <sup>6</sup> The different meanings of the word race put in evidence the incompatibility of the local and imperial vision of the world. The *White* race built its modern supremacy while exploiting *inferior Indian and Black races*. In Creole language, the word *Blan* (White) does not refer to a race or to a color. Moreover, Haitians kept the old French meaning of the word race. It refers to consanguinity of extended families.
- <sup>7</sup> One observes, indeed, a preference for intermedium shades of skin color between black and white, with no implication of feelings of inferiority or superiority among the people of these shades of colors.
- <sup>8</sup> After general emancipation, the former slaves were called “cultivators”
- <sup>9</sup> The expression is borrowed from Scott (2004).
- <sup>10</sup> The set of Ambassadors of the Great Western powers called themselves ‘Core Group’ without specifying of what they are a core. They represent the major donors of assistance to the bankrupt narco-state.

# Insurgent Decolonial Theory and the Role of the Intellectual

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## Abstract

This article explores the various ways the intellectual committed to liberation and decolonization has been represented and how combative and insurgent decolonial modes of theorizing contribute to this radical tradition. First, I provide an overview of decolonial thought to challenge the notion that decolonial theory is a coherent whole without contradictions and tensions. I then offer varying ways anticolonial and decolonial intellectuals have contributed to combative scholarship. I propose an insurgent decolonial theory that makes connections between texts and contexts, between theory and praxis, and between the symbolic and material dimensions of coloniality and decoloniality. Insurgent decoloniality resists modernity/coloniality's project of death while planting and cultivating life.

## Introduction

*Insurgency is an exigency of life and of survival*  
—Khatibi

What does it mean for decolonial thought to be radically situated in insurrectional movements? To begin to answer this question, I could very well start with the etymological meaning ascribed to the term radical, that is, the root, situatedness,

and material grounding of thought. But what does it really mean to be an engaged intellectual or a guerilla intellectual (Rodney 1990) who not only wages decolonial resistance with pen and paper in hand but also through collective action? How about an insurgent *sentipensante* who uses theory as a weapon (Cabral 1979; Lao-Montes 2007; Fals-Borda 2009; Lozano Lerma 2019)? What is an ethically and (geo)politically and ethically

committed thinker who challenges intellectual colonialism (Fals-Borda 1970; Dussel 1980; Restrepo 2001)? What does it mean to militantly engage the sign (theory) and the stone (praxis) in our everyday knowledge practices (Peña-Pincheira and Allweiss 2022)? Is it not true that alternative modes of reading and theorizing the world emerge from historically specific material contexts, like the flower that springs from the rubble in Gaza despite the incredible odds to do so? What does this all have to do with the science of the word (Césaire 1982), the poetics of relation (Glissant 1997), and the sociopoeisis (Wynter 2001, 2003) of radical decolonial thought? Like the seed that germinates and breaks through the cold, lifeless world designed by modernity/coloniality, radical thought too spreads its roots (if I were a Deleuzian scholar I would, perhaps, say rhizomes) to crack open systems of domination that previously seemed indestructible. The worldliness and materiality of the text (Said 1983) point to the saliency of reading and theorizing the world anew, which hence becomes a radical, transgressive, decolonial hermeneutic act (Fúnez-Flores 2021) that engraves in stone every spoken and written word by working with and alongside sites of struggle.

In a time of genocide, to speak and write truth to power while so many remain silent and complicit is indeed a radical act. The emerging sites of struggle seeking to delink universities from their material and symbolic investments in colonial projects of death and destruction reveal their decolonial potential. Student encampments, for instance, are one of many movements seeking to dismantle the colonial and capitalist foundations of universities. They have made it more visible that universities not only justify colonial domination through Eurocentric epistemologies, the geopolitics of knowledge, and the coloniality of curriculum, but also produce technologies of violence tested on Palestinians. While decolonial scholars have done brilliant work to examine the former's epistemological concerns, the latter is not always made as explicit as one would like in terms of thinking about universities as active participants of coloniality rather than mere knowledge producing institutions that ideologically justify coloniality. Certainly, knowledge underpins the production of technologies of violence used to maintain coloniality, but it is nonetheless important to

shed light on the material dimensions of these institutions in order to sever the colonial links or at the very least sabotage the production of signs (symbolic/epistemic power) and stones (material power) that, in the last instance, respectively become the canons and cannons used to reproduce coloniality. The cultural and physical bombs, as Thiong'o (1986) would put it, are equally destructive.

In this article, I aim to explore the various ways the intellectual committed to liberation and decolonization has been represented and how combative and insurgent decolonial modes of theorizing contribute to this radical tradition. First, I offer varying ways anticolonial and decolonial intellectuals have contributed to combative scholarship. I then build upon Walsh (2008) work to further conceptualize insurgent decolonial theory, which makes connections between texts and contexts, between sign and stone, between theory and praxis, and between the symbolic and material dimensions of coloniality and decoloniality.

### **Combative, Insurgent, Guerilla Intellectuals**

*Decolonisation ... is a historical process ... it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content*

—Frantz Fanon

*The practice of theory is informed by struggle—*  
Cedric Robinson

When Fanon (1963) stated that movements provide the historical form and content of decolonization, he was referring to the intimate relationship between material and symbolic modes of resistance and liberation. The political no longer simply referred to seizing power by occupying the modern/colonial nation-state, as orthodox Marxists would have it. More than anything, Fanon's pithy statement underscores liberation movements' epistemological and political dimensions—an insurgent politico-epistemological project (Walsh, 2008). As Fanon (1963, p.255) expressed at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*, "we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man". Fanon believed it was urgent to set afoot a new mode of knowing, being, and co-existing. Cedric Robinson (2021,

p.307) echoes Fanon's sentiment by stating that "the practice of theory is informed by struggle". Anticolonial and decolonial modes of theorizing the world are therefore an integral part of a praxis of liberation insofar as thought remains intimately linked to and informed by struggles.

What then is the role of the committed, organic, guerrilla, and decolonial intellectual? From Marx (2012) we have learned that it is insufficient to solely contemplate and interpret reality and that we must do what we can to change it. Gramsci (1971) also advanced the notion of the organic intellectual who could be aligned to dominant political-economic and sociocultural interests or conversely with what he referred to as the subaltern who opposes the symbolic and material hegemony of a particular social structure. His understanding of the intellectual was broad and inclusive of non-academics, but he was aware that not everyone took on the role of the intellectual in any given society. Today, anyone who participates in the production and diffusion of knowledge can be considered an intellectual whose work either upholds or unsettles said interests. Fanon also wrote about the anticolonial intellectual's role in shattering "the whole material and moral universe" of colonialism. However, for intellectuals "permeated by colonialism and all its ways of thinking" (1963: 45), it does not come easy to recognize how they, too, reproduce coloniality after political/administrative decolonization or "independence." For those countries that did not experience what Fanon referred to as hasty decolonization,

the intellectual is grounded in the struggle of their people. In the colonial countries where a real struggle for freedom has taken place, where the blood of the people has flowed and where the length of the period of armed warfare has favored the backward surge of intellectuals toward bases grounded in the people, we can observe a genuine eradication of the superstructure built by these intellectuals from the bourgeois colonialist environment. The colonialist bourgeoisie, in its narcissistic dialogue, expounded by the members of its universities, had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain eternal

in spite of all the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course. (1963: 46)

Fanon also addressed the importance of shedding the individualism of intellectual work in order to radically situate oneself in the collective struggles taking place outside of the ivory tower. In the *Representation of the Intellectual*, Edward Said explicates the primary concern at hand: what is the role of the intellectual? The intellectual, according to Said, "is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going her/his business" (1994: 11). In this sense, the intellectual should not dwell in the ivory tower to solipsistically contemplate, interpret, and theorize the world. This detached knowledge practice reproduces the Cartesian subject whose interiority is all that matters, whereby exteriority (Dussel 1980)—the concrete historical and social contexts, and everyday existence—is rendered philosophically insignificant, especially those who dwell on the underside of modernity. For Said, the intellectual has the responsibility of "representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion" that challenges rather than reproduces the order of things (1994: 11). In another text, Said suggests that "The intellectual's role...is dialectically, oppositionally, to uncover and elucidate ... to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power wherever and whenever possible" (2002: 31). In other words, the intellectual must seek to unsettle normalized silence and complicity within and beyond academia.

Along a similar yet more radical vein, Walter Rodney (1990, 2019) had already proposed the notion of the guerilla intellectual. Adeleke (2000) believes Rodney's guerilla intellectualism is a combative countervailing historiography that sought to disrupt what the latter referred to as "European cultural egocentricity" (Rodney 1969: 56). As Fanon also proposed in relation to individualist knowledge production, this European cultural egocentricity can be challenged insofar as the guerilla intellectual is committed to co-creating knowledge of liberation. This ethical commitment to knowledge production seeks to unsettle, in material and symbolic terms, the Eurocentric

knowledge wielded for centuries as a weapon of domination to subjugate colonized and negatively racialized peoples who, under colonial occupation and ongoing coloniality, receive a distorted history that simultaneously obscures the colonial present. Broadening our historiographic horizon, as Vincent Harding (1981) suggests, requires "breaking beyond past western traditional understandings to some new understanding of our identity, our history, and our destiny as human beings" (Harding in Adeleke 2016: 121). This necessarily requires a different type of education, curriculum, pedagogy, theory, and methodology since it is through the miseducation of colonized peoples that the distortion of history is made possible (Woodson 1933), and thus the distortion of the present and future.

Critiquing dominant regimes of truth is key but critique alone will not dismantle coloniality. In other words, theorizing for theorizing's sake or producing knowledge for knowledge's sake is insufficient and indeed may fall into the academicist trap designed to exclude praxis. As Adeleke notes, "Knowledge is useful only to the degree that it is used to advance the cause of liberation. It is the ability and willingness to use knowledge to advance the cause of freedom that distinguishes a GI [guerilla intellectual] from an armchair philosopher" (2000, p. 44). This demands going beyond intellectual posturing by taking collective action. Similar to Freire (1970), thought, action, and reflection are necessary to realize a liberatory praxis that transcends the ivory tower's mode of theorizing, debating, and critiquing texts that are too often disassociated or uprooted from their geopolitical, sociocultural, and economic contexts. As Walsh (2025) puts it, a decolonial praxis is more than resistance; it is about re-existing against the incredible odds to so. It is about fighting for other worlds and not simply fighting against the modern/colonial world. A decolonial praxis resists coloniality's project of death and plants and cultivates life. It is open, relational, and radically situated since it would otherwise contradict the historical, political, and dialectical/analectical dimensions of praxis (Dussel 1980). A decolonial praxis is open precisely because defining what decolonial praxis is or is not would fix it in time and space as an abstract universal.

Contributing to decolonial praxis, Mireille Fanon Mendès-France and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2021) advance what they call combative

decoloniality. By building upon Fanon's work, they argue that "the struggle against coloniality demands first and foremost a combative attitude" (Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres 2021). Paralleling Rodney's contributions, they distinguish combative decolonial thought from academicist decolonial critique. As they observe, "critique and criticism are often praised as the counter-liberal attitudes or actions par excellence, [but] they are often mobilized to take attention away from coloniality" (Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres 2021). Critique for critique's sake, once again, is insufficient when critique is predicated on textualist analyses that downplay the importance of reading and interrogating the material contexts of coloniality or, worse yet, conceive of social reality or social totality as overdetermined symbolically or discursively. It is not surprising, therefore, that so many academics are more concerned with "decolonizing" a specific field of research, while paying little attention to the concrete violence of the present.

Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres assert that "Critique is as necessary as insufficient, and it can easily align itself with conservative attitudes if it is not deployed in a combative decolonial direction" (2021). It is imperative, therefore, to engage in praxis (thought-action-reflection) within material contexts or sites of struggle as much as we like to critique texts, theories, and knowledge systems (Fúnez-Flores 2022, 2023, 2024a). It is apropos to cite Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres (2021) at length to fully understand what they are proposing:

Different from critique, combativity emerges when racialized subjects start to address other racialized subjects in the effort to generate the sense of a collective struggle. While critique draws its power from crisis, decolonial combativity addresses the catastrophe of modernity/coloniality. Combativity goes beyond cries of protests, laments, and appeals, even as these may be necessary moments of the struggle. Combativity is about the path from individual to collective responsibility, and it requires the will and ability to connect with others and to engage in collective movement against coloniality. The combative attitude is, like combative literature, "resolve situated in

historical time” (Fanon, *The Wretched*) and it is dedicated to the effort of building “the world of you” (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*).

The combative decolonial intellectual is someone who is committed ethically and politically to unsettling both modern/colonial symbolic and material structures of domination and exploitation, while making evident the equiprimordiality of discourse and structure, as Wynter (1992) put it. As a new science of the word (Césaire 1982), Wynter offers a combative decolonial approach by contributing to the transgressive and insurgent politico-epistemological project initiated by Césaire (2000), Fanon (1963), and Glissant (1997). Her work serves as a counter-cartography or as decolonial sociography (Fúnez-Flores and Wheat 2024) that conceives human and nonhuman life, material and symbolic, structures and discourses, as relationally entangled on a planetary scale. It makes evident the equiprimordiality of power and knowledge (Wynter 1992). As a craft, Wynter’s decolonial approach gestures toward other modes of being human, which departs from “Man” and moves toward a mode of human existence that is “made to the measure of the world” (Cesaire 2000, p.73) rather than Western Europe. This task demands relational and heterogeneous modes of reading the world. A new science of the word complements Fanon’s and Wynter’s sociogenesis with Glissant’s (1997) poesis and relationality, which enables us to think about relations and assemblages beyond colonial modes of being and modern ontologies of separation dividing the social from the natural (El-Malik 2023). Glissant’s work is not only focused on social interactions between people but also on the heterogeneous ways in which the relations of memory, place, and sensory affections assist in constituting new worlds.

Building new worlds thus requires a decolonial praxis and poesis. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon teaches us that racism’s sociogenesis and governing fiction is social, structural, and historical. In this text, he expresses with clarity that negatively racialized people who are “exploited, enslaved, despised by a colonial, capitalist society” must take action to set afoot a new mode of existence (Fanon 1967: 157). The historical-structural-racial-colonial-capitalist order Fanon unveils is meant to be understood and unsettled materially and discursively. More importantly, our interrogations

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Building new worlds thus  
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must create the conditions to become self-determined, actional and sociopoetic beings that work toward building other worlds.

By thinking from a position of exteriority and alterity, “Wynter uncovers ... the conditions of possibility—the context of emergence of the refiguring of the ‘discourse of race’ (Silva 2015: 99). By privileging exteriority, Wynter makes more visible the material conditions of possibility that generate alternative onto-epistemological positions to be constituted, ones that counteract the dominant mode of being human–Man. She thus seeks to amplify subjugated knowledges to critique coloniality from the darker side of modernity (Mignolo 2011)—that is, from the exteriority modernity hides to naturalize its emergence, misrepresented as an endogenous process attributed to the genius of Europeans (Dussel 1994). This ethical and geopolitical standpoint to think with and from systematically excluded places challenges the onto-epistemological primacy of the Cartesian subject whose epistemological hubris denies other vantage points to interpret and act upon reality. Wynter’s work, in this case, serves as “a critique of ideology that targets the symbolic itself and returning to a serious consideration of the juridical-economic dimensions of the political existence” (Silva 2015: 99). She makes these material and symbolic connections with her conceptualization of the sociogenesis of race, coloniality, and decoloniality as an entangled discursive and material process. As Wynter cogently expressed, “To be effective, systems of power must be discursively legitimated. This is not to say that power is originally a set of institutional structures that are subsequently legitimated. On the contrary, it is to suggest the equiprimordiality of structure and cultural conceptions in the genesis of power” (Wynter 1992: 65). The equiprimordiality of the symbolic and

material is key in situating decolonial thought in sites of struggle, avoiding the tendency to empty radical concepts from their political and ethical content. Wynter's contributions to combative decolonial thought are, therefore, neither post-structural in the discursive Foucauldian sense nor structural in the Marxian-Althusserian sense.

If combative decolonial thought is to contribute to these transgressive efforts, it must situate its interpretive methodological craft within sites of struggle that create the possibility of reconstituting new worlds. Stuart Hall draws on Fanon to suggest that it is imperative to "consider the conditions for the production of a new kind of subject and the decolonisation of the mind as the necessary subjective conditions for the decolonisation of the world" (1967: 19). The politics of decolonization necessarily demands unsettling modern/colonial representation and subjectivity.

The principal counter-strategy here has been to bring to the surface – into representation – that which has sustained the regimes of representation unacknowledged: to subvert the structures of 'othering' in language and representation, image, sound and discourse, and thus to turn the mechanisms of fixed racial signification against themselves, in order to begin to constitute new subjectivities, new positions of enunciation and identification, without which the most 'revolutionary' moments of national liberation quickly slide into their post-colonial reverse gear (Hall, 1996: 19)

By unveiling the equiprimordiality of knowledge and power, as well as dominant modes of representation, the combative decolonial intellectual thus critiques dominant discursive practices and refuses to "remain isolated and disconnected from collective movements and struggles" (Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres 2021). A combative decolonial intellectual committed to material and symbolic acts of transgression do not conform to academia's complicit knowledge practices and meritocratic standards, nor do they aspire for recognition and multicultural representation. Rather, their aim is to find points of convergence "between the condemned of the earth and between their various struggles" (Fanon Mendès-France and

Maldonado-Torres 2021) without flattening their geopolitical and colonial differences.

A necessary step to unlearn and relearn is to engage the thought and action that is systematically excluded from academia. This includes the epistemologies and radical traditions that do not make their way inside the white halls of the ivory tower. While it is an ethical responsibility to *think with* others rather than to do *research on* them, one must still be aware of power imbalances. Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres posit several questions to consider when thinking alongside sites of struggle:

How do we support, work with, and learn from those who do not count with institutional resources? How can we effectively counter the extraction of ideas from social movements, community organizers, and social movements' leaders? How do we transform medical, artistic, and scholarly training and direct them to oppose extractivism in all its forms? How do we transition to more relational forms of engagement, communication, and collaboration in support of movements that combat systemic racism, coloniality, and antiblackness? What can everyone learn from existing combative movements, and what combative movements do we consider particularly critical from our own situated position and point of view? (2021)

Within the context of the state-sanctioned colonial violence and genocide (Fúnez-Flores 2024b), we must not only challenge the "cooptation, mistranslation, and ensuing domestication" (Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres, 2021) of decolonial thought but also modestly ask what we can do to contribute to emerging social, territorial, and liberation movements. What must be done within a violent reactionary context that aims "to contain the impact of these movements" (Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres, 2021) by silencing dissenting voices. Why should we speak out and organize in a time of genocide? If decolonization and decoloniality have been reduced to what privileged individuals in academia write and textually analyze, it is correct to assume that they both risk becoming commodifiable ideas, as opposed to what was initially intended—that is, a radically situated praxis makes this point clear in terms of challenging the commodification

of decolonial thought that has solely focuses on engaging texts to produce more theory on coloniality at the expense of engaging the material contexts from which thought emerges. As he asserts, decolonial theory is also a double-edged sword insofar as it can underscore systematically excluded histories, knowledges, and experiences, while reproducing “the hegemonic liberal ethos” within academia that tends to result in the “elite capture” (Táíwò) of radically situated concepts by emptying them of their combative or insurgent content. The neoliberal academy not only commodifies knowledge, but it also leads to forming the professional class of intellectuals “who lack organic connections with those who inhabit the underside of history and who are working to build an-other world”.

Even those who have said ‘organic connections’, however, are not immune to critique, since they, too, can fall into the aforementioned traps of producing knowledge that is more aligned with dominant interests. Important to consider within the multicultural neoliberal academy is to question those “racialized intellectuals who are sometimes conveniently positioned as brokers in discussions about racism and colonialism by state leaders of the north while sidelining combative social movements in the north and south” (Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres 2021). This double critique, as Khatibi (2019) invites us to engage in, disrupts the essentialism of knowledge production while unsettling Eurocentrism, no matter who is doing the enunciation. As it is colloquially articulated by Black scholars and activists, ‘skin folk aren’t always kin folk’, which implies, as Ruha Benjamin<sup>1</sup> expressed during a commencement speech, “Black [and Brown] faces in high places are not gonna save us,” (Al Jazeera English, 2024) revealing that one’s mode of identifying culturally and racially is not in and of itself trustworthy nor somehow radically situated epistemically, ethically, and politically.

### **Insurgent Decolonial Thought, Praxis, and Situated Concepts**

Now that I have discussed combative decolonial thought, I want to end this article with a discussion on insurgent decolonial thought. What is an insurgent decolonial thought and how is this similar and/or different from the combative decolonial thought? To begin, my preference for insurgent decolonial thought over combative decolonial thought boils

down to the subversive, transgressive, revolutionary, and countervailing connotations of insurgency, where contestation may take various forms: manifest and latent, macro and micro, militant and subtle, tactical and strategic. Insurgency maintains Rodney’s (1990) guerilla intellectualism and its ability to permanently ground and militantly articulate insurrectional work in multimodal forms. To be an insurgent decolonial intellectual here refers to someone who collectively rises in revolt and insurrection from below, like a spring of water (surge) that can no longer be contained as it bursts out to bring life and new modes of co-existence in a modern/colonial world that only knows how to effectively design projects of death and destruction. The insurgence and resurgence of decolonial movements and struggles affirm life<sup>2</sup> and create the conditions of possibility to think and to build a world otherwise. Insurgent decolonial thought is “the practice of theory [that] is informed by struggle” (Robinson 1983) and not the other way around, whereby the ivory tower dictates the terms and conditions of decolonization, decoloniality, and liberation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Ndlovu 2025). An insurgent, though combating against domination and exploitation, is not necessarily a combatant who enters into a battlefield with clear objectives against a known enemy. An insurgent decolonial intellectual also moves subversively and unpredictably within dominant institutions, such as universities, while working with the insurgencies unfolding beyond. An insurgent is not only someone with a clearly defined enemy insofar as the ‘enemy’ may also reside in us and in those with whom we may very well identify socially and culturally. The archive of counterinsurgency teaches that no one is immune to upholding and reproducing coloniality.

Insurgency, as Khatibi addresses, entails “subversion, the power of speech against the speech of power that seizes all society” (2019: 32), including all the spheres of social existence in which we participate. Transgressing exclusive spaces while maintaining and strengthening connections with sites of insurrection is one of the tactics employed as a means to sustain the decolonial strategies that require a protracted struggle that will certainly outlive us. Being an insurgent means being the dissident voice that speaks out when it is most urgent, even when the majority remain silent. It

means not conforming to normalized silence and complicity; it means unsettling the “unseen power wherever and whenever possible” (Said 2002: 31), even if that means risking one’s career in the process. While the concept of combativity points to the militancy required to think and act, insurgent decolonial thought and praxis may add other layers in terms of rethinking agency beyond reaction and resistance between two opposing forces, as alluded by the term of combativity. Although this is not what Maldonado-Torres proposes, I am simply adding clarity to terms to show their politico-epistemic affordances to avoid future misappropriation and co-optation of radical concepts and theories.

There is a positive meaning to insurgency that proposes or affirms other modes of relating, being, and knowing with one another. Insurgency hence transcends defensive resistance. To be an insurgent should not be reduced to a reaction against something or limited to mere opposition. As Betty Lozano proposes, insurgency

is neither opposition nor the capacity to endure an oppressive effort or situation for a long time. Nor does it imply challenging; rather, it involves building. It is more about forms of thought, self-representation, relationships, and knowledge that promote the construction of other worlds that prioritize life and do not assume the State as the main interlocutor. Therefore, it is not limited to political practice in relation to the State. It is a profound questioning of everything that exists, paving the way for a completely different world (2019:23).

Insurgent decoloniality is a world-making praxis that extends far beyond academia. Being an insurgent decolonial intellectual thus entails being able to recognize that collective struggles tend to be ahead of academia in terms of theorizing the world and acting upon it to change it. As Lao-Montes (2007) points out, Black Panthers used terms such as internal colonialism to understand their reality before it obtained currency in academia. The same thing could be said about decolonial thought situated in sites of struggle, such as the Zapatistas and other struggles for liberation.

Catherine Walsh writes in the introduction to Betty Lozano’s (2019) book that insurgency underscores Black women’s “unceasing social, cultural, political,

epistemic, and existential insurgency that continues to fight and to sow life where there is death. Hopes that crack the wall of despair” (Walsh in Lozano 2019: 17, my translation). Insurgent decolonial thought can be considered “*senti-pensación*” (feeling-thinking-action), which means that insurgency is embodied, corporal, and politico-epistemic-existential, which not only resists interconnected systems of domination and exploitation but also affirms the existence of all life positioned in the zone of non-being, as Fanon (1967) would put it. Insurgent decolonial thought and praxis is a politico-epistemic-existential project that simultaneously resists against and reexists within and beyond the heteropatriarchal, racist, Christian-centric, and capitalist modern-colonial world.

Lozano (2019) states that insurgency corresponds to a notion that etymologically alludes to rejection of authority, uprising and rebellion, and to revolutionary struggle. Those who take up arms as guerrilla fighters are usually referred to as insurgents. Insurgent, however, are not necessarily combatant; they can also be subjects who engage in subversive actions that are not always visibly violent, but which can nonetheless disrupt, unsettle, and sabotage what seems indestructible. Drawing on Catherine Walsh’s (2008), work, Lozano points out that insurgency aims to transgress all spheres of social existence, including the cultural, political, economic, and epistemic domains. Insurgency hence goes further than direct confrontation in terms of proposing and affirming relational modes of co-existing in the present while collectively taking action to dismantle coloniality by any means necessary.

Insurgent decoloniality also addresses the feminist praxes that have always formed part of liberation struggles yet are erased from the histories of decolonization. It reconstitutes life where death seems to only prevail. Insurgency proposes, projects, and affirms what modernity/coloniality systematically denies—the right to dignity, land, and existence. Perhaps insurgency, in comparison to combativity, enables one to think of alternative forms to resist and re-exist beyond conventional masculinist visions of liberation that tend to downplay the crucial role women play, not only as armed combatants but also as revolutionary decolonial thinkers and insurgent agents that transgress social norms and practices.

Along these lines, insurgent resistance and re-existence entail maintaining collective memories, narratives, histories, knowledges, and experiences in order to create the conditions to militantly think and act in the present, without which we would otherwise be unable to think and enact an alternative political-epistemic-existential horizon within and against the totalizing project of modernity/coloniality. Maintaining the conditions of possibility for transgression, subversion, and insurgency to exist within a modern/colonial world that seeks to violently erase difference thus becomes a radical revolutionary act.

### **Insurgent epistemology and radically situated concepts: Re-signifying discursive spaces**

The radical aim of decolonial movements is liberation from multiple, interlocking systems of domination and exploitation, yet this cannot be achieved without reclaiming the ability to articulate concepts that assist in thinking, interrogating, and constituting the world anew. The politico-epistemic act of creating concepts is ethical and geopolitical insofar as these concepts seek to show the complicity of discourses that uphold concrete structures of power—systems we are seeking to dismantle and transition from. After all, concepts are windows through which we can view and interrogate reality.

The value of concepts is based on their ability to seriously interrogate the problems generated in the social world. Concepts enable the search for solutions, although they are not solutions in and of themselves, which tends to be the case in neoliberal academies where concepts are co-opted and commodified. Concepts nonetheless open up alternatives to the present and enable the imagining of possibilities (Pratt 2022). This resonates with Stuart Hall's (2018) situated approach to theorizing political conjunctures whereby political moments create the conditions for theoretical movements to emerge. This means that anticolonial, decolonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-heteropatriarchal struggles create the conditions of possibility to imagine and build a world otherwise, a world where many worlds can fit, as the Zapatista's dictum illustrates with so much clarity.

Struggles have thus radically changed the knowledge, histories, and stories we have access to today. Ethnic Studies, Black Studies, Feminist and Gender Studies, and Decolonial Studies would not exist if it was not for concrete movements. The Zapatistas (Marcos 2023), Landless Workers Movement, Via Campesina (Barbosa 2022), the Palestinian struggle against Zionist settler colonial dispossession (Sabbagh-Khoury 2023; Molavi 2024; Abu Zuluf, Kilani and O'Rourke 2025), student and feminist movements (Fúnez-Flores 2020), and a multiplicity of Indigenous territorial struggles have also created the conditions of possibility to think and do otherwise. Indeed, they have initiated a theoretical insurrection and revolution (Mignolo 2002) the theoretical revolution they enacted it is here to stay. Theoretical revolutions are not supposed to come from popular sectors, without the necessary research and communicating the results by interviews, the internet, or newspapers. The theoretical revolution of the Zapatistas consists, precisely, in changing the perspective. Those who, in the long history of colonialism, or coloniality (the hidden side of modernity). These movements remind us that radical theories are always derivative rather than the result of the genius of an individual intellectual. Ultimately, radical thought derives from the "true genius" that emerges from sites of struggle where, whereby thought is much "more than words or ideas but life itself" (Robinson 1983: 184).

Although I recognize that concepts are not solutions to the dominant structures we are trying to dismantle, they are nonetheless indispensable insofar as they correspond to the problematics we are trying to address. Concepts make more visible what has been systematically made invisible through the myths of modernity, such as salvation, progress, development, globalization, and liberal democracy. Radically and insurgently situated concepts are not only epistemically disobedient but are also methodologically subversive as they enable one to think in relational, planetary terms that unsettle the methodological nationalism and individualism of dominant knowledge practices and social movements (or methodological obsession and inhibition as Fals Borda (1970) and Mills (1959) referred to it respectively).

Thinking seriously about concepts does not only make more visible how capitalism restructures

itself according to the logic of coloniality, but it carries the potential to inform our collective praxes across geographical boundaries. By thinking with social and territorial movements, for instance, our concepts regain the geopolitical and ethical content they were meant to have initially. This will assist in refusing the academic tendency to decontextualize radical thought from sites of struggle. Epistemological critique or deconstruction is without a doubt necessary but insufficient when praxis is ignored. It is insufficient when we are incapable of learning from and committing to collective action and actually existing communities resisting colonial domination, dispossession, and, in the case of Palestine, the annihilation of an entire people.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) reminds us, deconstruction and critique is great and all, but it does not stop people from dying. Or, as Freire (1970) taught us, praxis is indispensable whereby thought informs collective action and collective action dialectically informs thought and reflection. Important to consider is that we must also avoid the vanguard positions of the past where intellectuals prescribed the best paths forward for social movements. Today, social and territorial movements are teaching us that they are not passively waiting for the intelligentsia to show them the path forward. They, too, are producing knowledge, theories, and concepts that unsettle the hierarchical vanguard position of the past. It is perhaps best to take a rearguard theoretical position as we listen to, learn from, and work alongside those who are resisting domination while affirming another possible world.

To conclude, I want to say that a radical critique of the Eurocentered modern/colonial capitalist world must seek to dismantle the symbolic and material structures of power—that is to say, the dominant epistemologies, histories, narratives, subjectivities,

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...deconstruction and critique

is great and all, but it does not

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as well as the institutions and structures of domination and exploitation in which we participate. In the end, our struggles are epistemic and world-making projects moving toward a decolonial present and future. In the words of the late Anibal Quijano, “it is time to learn to free ourselves from the Eurocentric mirror” (2000: 574). In other words, we must shatter the theoretical lenses and subjectivities that have reflected a distorted image of ourselves for over five centuries. It is time to stop aspiring to be what we are not and will never become, so that we can reconstitute ourselves and our worlds. Ultimately, the insurgent decolonial intellectual “ought to use the past with the intention of opening up the future”, which consists of “an invitation to an action and a basis of hope” (Fanon (1967) as cited by Hall (1996: 14)). In the end, decolonization is not a project seeking to create a seemingly postcolonial society that maintains and indeed fortifies coloniality. Instead, decolonization and insurgent decoloniality are global projects that aim to dismantle domination in all its forms, while insurrectionally affirming life by any means necessary.

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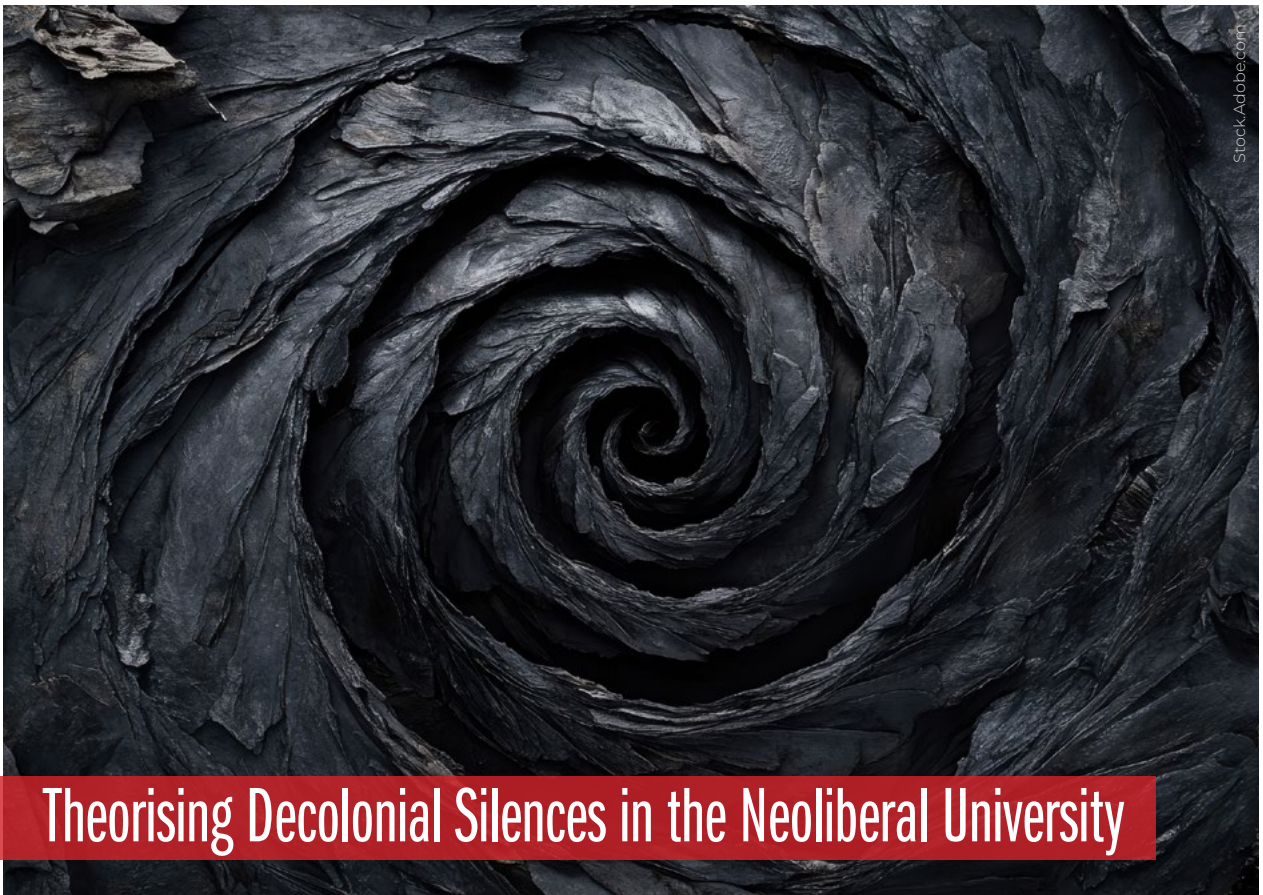
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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Referring to Black ambassadors at the UN voting against a ceasefire, Benjamin goes on to state that “our Blackness and womanness are not in themselves trustworthy. If we allow ourselves to be conscripted into positions of power that maintain the oppressive status quo.” (Al Jazeera English, 2024). She breaks from the essentialized view that being a racialized, colonized, and subjugated person guarantees a radical epistemological and political position.
- <sup>2</sup> When Palestinians cook for one another, play music and sing, or when children take care of other living things, including cats, dogs, birds, and plants, they are affirming life in the face of death. They are teaching the world that, despite the attempts to annihilate them, they will continue to resist and re-exist. Joy becomes a means through which resistance endures despite the overwhelming exhaustion liberation movements face. Palestinians teach us every day that smiling in the face of oppression in the ruins of colonialism is a form of insurgency that cannot be so easily destroyed. This is not in any way an attempt to romanticize resilience (Bonilla 2020) but rather a way to show how collective subjectivities give us a glimpse of what this world could become if it was not for the project of death of modernity/coloniality—*solo queremos vivir bien, vivir dignamente, y vivir sabroso*.



# Theorising Decolonial Silences in the Neoliberal University

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## Abstract

During the summer of 2020, several universities and academics made highly radical and progressive statements about their positionality and progressive aims in the context of the Black Lives Matter Protests. The same was observed in 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and in the UK, several universities even offered admissions and fellowships to Ukrainian students and academics. This culture of 'radical politics' and protection of academic freedom was soon to change.

In 2023, as the state of Israel ramped up its settler colonial tactics against Palestinians (still ongoing at the time of writing) with a genocide directed at Gazans, the silence from universities and prominent decolonial scholars is heard loudly. In all the cases, there is a clear understanding of the embedded power relations and how these contribute to the construction of the oppressor and the oppressed, which would be obvious to any scholar who has engaged with the decolonial school of thought. As an academic who is minoritized in the West but has significant caste and class capital in her 'home country', and is at the receiving end of these silences, this paper is an attempt to make sense and theorise these decolonial silences and their implications within academia.

The article seeks to do this by using an autoethnographic method complimented by a study of the dominant discourses within UK universities in the aftermath of the aforementioned events. This article, first, provides a comparative review of University statements on BLM, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's genocide in Palestine. Then, it draws upon my own engagement with prominent decolonial

scholars and their silence post October 2023. This paper seeks to critically interrogate the power of scholars and universities who have employed decolonial language within their research and projects but refuse to engage in decolonial praxis. Based on this understanding, the paper recommends some strategies of 'being' within academia that counter these decolonial silences to challenge, expand and in a minuscule way, contribute to decolonising the university.

Keywords: decolonial, university, neoliberal, academia

## Introduction

Universities have long been spaces of political education and organising. From playing an integral role in anti-colonial movements where revolutionary thought has developed and spread, it is hard to deny the unique placement of universities in anti-colonial movements. It is the students, both within and outside of the university, who have been at the forefront of historical and contemporary anti-colonial struggles movements (Honarpisheh 2020) such as the Rhodes Must Fall Movement (Kwoba, Chantiulke, and Nkopo 2018), Fridays for Future, *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage) (Barua 2018) and the more recent global student encampments in support of the liberation of Palestine and its peoples.

However, as decolonial scholars point out, universities have been complicit in the promulgation and normalisation of the colonial-modern world order firmly embedded in eurocentrism and capitalism (Mignolo 2003). To ensure the dominance of these structures, universities, especially those located in the 'West' have not shied away from co-opting the language of decolonisation while firmly reproducing colonial hierarchies. In fact, as Gopal points out, decolonial projects in universities often end up fixating more on concerns of language and ideas rather than material concerns (Gopal 2021).

This becomes even more apparent in the case of Palestine as several scholars have pointed out (Tatour 2024; Funez-Flores 2024). The implementation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism that equates the criticism of Israel to antisemitism in universities across the US, UK, Europe and Australia demonstrates attempts to silence any discussion on Israel's colonial policies and has been utilised by staff and students for the same, often against their racialised colleagues (Tatour 2024). Ultimately, it serves to "protect the persistence of racial domination of Israeli Jews over Palestinians" (Gordon 2024) and the investment of states and universities in enforcing this definition signifies a well-orchestrated effort to silence criticisms of Israel.

In this context, the brutal crackdown on the encampments in the US in 2023-24 (Pilkington, 2024) demonstrated the unwillingness of universities to decentralise power within universities, recalibrate their priorities according to the interests of their own students and staff. Instead, they chose to support their corporate and monetary interests. This was replicated in major western countries such as Canada and the UK. In fact, these bastions of 'free speech' have policed their own members from exercising their academic freedom. In the US, an Assistant Professor at Texas Tech University, Dr Jairo Funez-Flores was suspended for allegations of antisemitism which were later found to be wrong. Funez-Flores notes the implications of the "institutional and political machinations" in silencing critics of the Israeli state and how academic freedom is merely another tool for the neoliberal university to weaponise against those who challenge its very foundations (Funez-Flores 2024).

Hence, the façade of decolonisation of neoliberal universities is laid bare for all to see. As the colonial foundations of these institutions are once again laid bare to see, in this article, I explore the consequences of institutional and personal silences relating to Palestine. There are two key arguments here. Firstly, Universities in the West are complicit in the genocide in Palestine by material support to the colonial state of Israel and by forming discourse that generates consent for supporting the state of Israel. Second, I argue that 'decolonial silences' within universities originate from the 'white-saviour complex' and are carried out for the reproduction of colonial hierarchies and for economic profit. To make this argument, I focus on the United Kingdom, which was one of the largest empires that was integral in establishing the racial-capitalist world order today. I do so by using a mixed methods approach that focuses at a macro level on institutions combined with an autoethnographic record of engaging with decolonial scholars on the question of Palestine.

The next section provides the methodology employed in this article, followed by a brief discussion on the theorisation of ‘silence’ within decolonial scholarship. Next, I provide a quantitative summary of UK Universities political commitments along with a qualitative analysis of the discourse generated by Universities. This is followed by a personal account of engagement with self-acclaimed decolonial scholars on the question of Palestine and explores the relationship between their silence and decolonial credentials.

## Methodology

This paper is embedded in a decolonial methodology that aims to expose, challenge and reflect on all iterations of power. It seeks to do so in relation to coloniality of power (Quijano 2000) seeking to evaluate its colonial implications. In doing so, it raises questions of hierarchy and domination within systems of knowledge production and challenges the worldviews normalised by neoliberal universities. By utilising empirical and autoethnographic data, this paper uses a mixed methods approach to critically analyse and evaluate decolonial silences within university spaces.

To understand institutional responses, publicly available data was collected on all public universities in the UK. This database has been made available online (University database, 2025). For this paper, private universities were excluded for two reasons. Firstly, they are not funded by the government and hence are not seen as public institutions that have a ‘responsibility’ towards the public in any manner.

Second, since they are private institutions, they are extremely expensive and have very low number of students as compared to public universities. In the UK there are only seven private universities. Discarding these, a total of 130 universities formed the data set for this paper, out of which twelve universities had no public statements on any of these events. To limit the remit of this paper, public statements issued between 2020-2025 were considered. This time-period allowed me to study the responses of these universities to three major global events – the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (2020), the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) and the Israeli genocide in Gaza (2023).

These statements were then studied through critical discourse analysis where three-five keywords were manually drawn from every statement to study the discourse generated by these universities. This data is complimented with case-studies of two universities that have materially supported the Israeli state in its genocide of Palestinians and sustaining the settler-colonial regime. Through this discussion, I demonstrate how British universities monopolise ‘discourse’ to generate consent for their material support to the Israeli state. This discourse uses three strategies for this purpose – a. to utilise ‘decolonising’ rhetoric to build their ‘progressive’ credentials b. the portrayal of Palestinian colonialism as a religious/culture issue and c. silence to enable the dehumanisation of Palestinians (both, in discourse and materially).

For the last section of this paper, I employ autoethnographic experience as a research method for analysis of the self within the political and cultural context of an ongoing genocide enabled and sustained by the racial-capitalist modernity we are based in. Autoethnography focused on studying the self in relation to peoples and socio-political context, provides a basis for making sense of social phenomenon. Further, it can determine the response and future action to the socio-political context. Starr (2010) notes that autoethnography can be integral in “cultivating an authentic cycle of “action based on reflection, and reflection based on action” (Blackburn 2007)” (Starr 2010:2). This autoethnographic account then is to make sense of the silences in the neoliberal university, it is also to make sense of my response and further reflect on my experiences of navigating the neoliberal academy. I utilise this

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autoethnographic account in a decolonial spirit to use this experience to argue for the importance of using our privileges for speaking out as Said wrote “For despite the abuse and vilification that any outspoken supporter of Palestinians rights and self-determination earns for him or herself, the truth deserves to be spoken, represented by an unafraid and compassionate individual” (Said 1994: 101 cited in Funez-Flores 2024).

### **The Neoliberal University Machine at Work**

This section demonstrates the differences in responses of Universities in the UK and traces the production of discourse around three aforementioned events to study its impact. By noting the differences and the use of ‘decolonial silences’, these universities are able to prioritise their corporate interests over any ethical or community-based concerns. This section proceeds in the following way: it begins with a brief discussion of universities response to Ukraine and how that has differed from university responses to the other events. It then proceeds to visibilise the discourse generated on Palestine by these institutions and supplements this with the example of two universities complicit with the settler-colonial Israeli state.

Universities UK (UUK) is a collective organisation of all the universities in the UK that lists its cause as “thriving universities, serving society” (UUK website, n.d). In their report on evaluating the role UK universities can play in responding to humanitarian crisis around the world, the report notes the important role played by the UK University sector in supporting higher education in Ukraine through collaborative and locally led efforts (UUK 2023). It notes that, “It is through collective efforts and humanitarian support that the UK has contributed to continuing access to both higher education and research in Ukraine. Not only is education important in continuing personal attainment, it also supports participation in rebuilding and reconstruction, as well as future economic activity.” (UUK 2023: 7). This demonstrates the intention of UK universities to be actively involved in periods of humanitarian crisis and playing an active role in ongoing political conflict.

In line with this, it is noteworthy that after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, UUK published a collective statement condemning the actions

of the Russian government and went on to call all universities part of its association to review their relationships with Russian universities and any other Russian institution (UUK 2023). The response was that of 93 Universities in the UK making a pro-Ukraine statement condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine with at least 6 Universities promising to review their relationships with Russian partners and The University of Nottingham pledging to end all such relationships (Website 2021).

In the report on evaluating UK universities response to the Ukraine invasion, UUK’s director Jamie Arrowsmith noted that

response to the invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated what is possible when policy, funding and political interests align with the goodwill, creativity, and commitment of colleagues in the UK’s higher education community. The broad spectrum of responses – which has drawn together funders, regulators, government agencies, universities, and both private sector and charitable organisations – has meant the UK’s response to supporting the higher education community in Ukraine has been significant (UUK 2023: 5).

The same report calls for universities to coordinate and respond to future humanitarian responses in a collective manner. This showcases not only the capacity of universities to provide and garner support during a crisis, but also the role played by political intent and will where in the interests of the government in opposing the Russian state and the universities management were aligned – leading to benefit so many researchers, students and civilian Ukrainians.

This has not always been the case. After the kick-off of the Decolonising the University movement in South Africa and its journey to the University of Oxford in the UK, challenging the institution’s imperial legacy, universities were forced to reckon with their colonial histories and legacy. Student movements were central to organising this political movement (Kwoba eds 2018). Forty-eight universities in the UK published statements in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, with a few of them calling for contributions to Black Lives Matter or local charities, and signposted support for racialised staff. During that time, I was pursuing

my doctoral studies (2018-2022) at the University of Westminster. Their BLM commitment was direct, action-based and written in a collective manner (University of Westminster website 2020).

Universities followed this by publishing anti-racist strategies, primarily promising to diversify their staff bodies and reckon with their colonial lineages. At the same time, increasingly the word ‘decolonising’ began propping up on university websites and communications as the majority of the universities in the UK promised to “decolonise the curriculum”. Universities such as the University of Aberdeen and University of Newcastle also began teaching courses around themes of ‘decolonising’. However, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni reminds us, “Just like the Euro-American constituted international system, the university and its episteme is resistant to radical decolonial change” (2013: 48), the decolonisation project has often been co-opted by the university with their decolonial commitments remaining limited to discourse only, or as Moosavi terms it “tokenism” (2017).

While initiatives such as Black History Month are useful, they can often be performative, essentialise identity and end up extracting additional (often, unpaid) labour from Black people (Girvan, Dove and McGreer 2023). Another example of this is the work of universities in covering their role in the transatlantic slave trade, spearheaded by the University of Glasgow. Their study and subsequent published report led to the setting up of the first institutional restorative justice scheme that would pay £20 million in slave trade reparations (Carrell 2019). Several other universities such as University of Liverpool, Oxford, Bristol have centres focused on studying institutional links with the slave trade but until now Glasgow remains the only one with plans for economic reparations. This contributes to the notion of universities discursively committed to progressive projects without making any structural changes.

This façade of discursive progressiveness was dropped like university workers on zero-hour contracts when it came to Palestine. The “Palestine exception to academic freedom” has been noted by scholars such as Shwaikh & Gould (2019) who have been viciously attacked for taking pro-Palestine and pro-BDS stances with no support from their institutes. This has only worsened at the

time of writing. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, scholars have not only been suspended without any evidence, fired from their posts but have even been referred to counterterrorism agencies as in the case of Dr Amira Abdelhamid. After a complaint by her employer, University of Portsmouth, Amira’s house was raided in the early hours of the morning with her electronics confiscated without any notice. The case was later dropped due to lack of any evidence on the charges pressed by the University (Ullah 2024).

It is not surprising then that not a single university in the UK has published a statement in support of Palestine or Palestinians. The previously mentioned role of the UK universities in responding to humanitarian crisis, even as the toll on Palestinian lives and land continues to increase, has disappeared. Even UUK has been absolutely silent – though this silence has spoken louder than any statement could and the message is clear – Palestinian lives do not matter to universities in the UK, and by extension, their pro-Palestinian community members do not matter to universities.

Even so, forty universities did publish statements in the aftermath of 7<sup>th</sup> October (Statements A) however, these statements differed vastly to the post Ukraine invasion statements (Statements B). They were different from previously issued statements in these ways; firstly, the Statements A were often quite vague with no direct placement of responsibility. In contrast, in Statements B, the responsibility was placed squarely on Russia and the invasion was labelled as ‘unprovoked’, framing Ukraine as an innocent country that must be aided. Post BLM 2020, Universities talked about their racist histories and slave traders who had contributed to the University such as Edward Colston in the University of Bristol (Website 2020). However, Statements A very rarely even mention ‘Palestine’ with ‘Israel-Gaza’ or ‘Conflict in the Middle East’ being the most used term, contributing to the erasure of Palestine and Palestinians. Often, universities such as the Open University referred to the events as “Israel-Hamas War” falsely equating a colonial regime with support from the world’s largest military to a political organisation governing a colonised territory.

Second, Statements A often referred to the impacted staff and students in religious terms and

directed them to university chaplaincy services. In fact, Manchester Metropolitan University thought it appropriate to issue a statement with Muslim and Jewish chaplains. In contrast, only two universities, Keele University and University of Wolverhampton directed students to their chaplaincy services for support in Statement B. This is quite problematic because it ends up reducing the settler-colonial regime of Israel in Palestine to a matter of a religious conflict. This is integral to Israel's claim over Palestinian territory and its ability to weaponize antisemitism to silence any critique, including the recent campus protests calling for the end of settler-colonialism in Palestine (Montaq 2024; Young 2023). As Palestinian scholars painstakingly remind us, the issue is one of settler-colonialism with the dispossession of Palestinians as central to its project (Sabbagh-Khoury 2023: 153-154) and the erasure and denial of Palestinian existence – that includes Muslims, Jews, Christians, and atheists (whether it be as a nation or not) (Khalidi 1997).

Why are these universities using such language? Is it to provide a safe environment for their staff and students, in line with the university's duty of care? The fact that a Jewish chaplain, Zachariah Deutsch, Chaplain for several universities in Yorkshire, including for the University of Sheffield, was still allowed on campus after he had re-joined the IOF (Israeli Occupation Forces) and celebrated Israel's genocidal actions in Gaza (complete with a video), contradicts any intention of making a 'safe environment' or providing any care to students. Despite resistance from Unions as demonstrated by Sheffield and Leeds branches of University and Colleges Union (Sheffield UCU, Leeds UCU, 2024), Deutsch remained as a chaplain and has subsequently, returned to Israel. There has not been a single word from universities addressing his role in the Israeli military.

Then, language becomes a tool to maintain the status quo that ends up supporting the oppressor, in this case the Israeli state. As shown above, universities choose to be silent or to represent the ongoing Israeli genocide of Palestinians as an issue that is too complex (University of Arts website 2024) and as a religious issue which is beyond the purview of university business, unless it is about antisemitism. The consequence of each of these facets is the dehumanisation of Palestinians. This decolonial silence pushes us to believe that Palestinian lives

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are unworthy of comment, their rhetoric pushes the notion of Palestinians as Islamic fundamentalists (due to association with Hamas) and as peoples without a history or voice, hence universities are unable to decipher settler-colonialism in action. This is dehumanising in so many ways that one has to ask, how does the dehumanisation of Palestinians benefit universities?

The response to this is bleak and here I draw attention to the material benefit accumulated by UK universities dependent on the dehumanisation of Palestinians. Palestine Solidarity Campaign UK has reported that UK universities “collectively invest nearly £430 million in companies complicit in Israeli violation of the international law” (website, n.d). Staff and students at institutions such as the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) have reported that LSE holds £89 million worth investments in companies complicit in maintaining Israeli settler-colonialism in Palestine (LSESU Palestine Society 2024). The staff-student campus coalition for two Sheffield based universities found that the University of Sheffield received the highest amount of funding from military companies in the UK and has directly been involved in the production of weapons used in the ongoing Israeli genocide of Palestinians (SCCP 2024).

The helplessness of complexity, the overemphasis on religion and the silence of these Universities is then integral for universities to generate consent for continually profiting off the lives of Palestinians. It enables university to hide behind one-off student scholarships for persecuted Palestinian

students without making any structural changes to stop the conditions which dispossess these students in the first place, forcing them to search for educational opportunities where they will not be attacked by weapons researched and developed in these universities.

This section highlighted the process by which UK universities generate discourse for their material benefit. They did so by mobilising progressive discourse to garner support for their institutions and then by their (lack of) discourse on Palestine that seeks to dehumanise Palestinians and justify Israel's genocidal actions whilst continuing to make profit on the bodies of Palestinians. In the next section, I shift from the focus on institutions to individuals, exploring the 'decolonial silences' of self-acclaimed decolonial and critical scholars.

### **Autoethnographic experience**

This paper began taking shape when one of the co-editors' of this special issue reached out to me addressing a critique I had made of their work. As an early-career scholar, genuine engagement of a scholar who is very well-reputed in their field, seemed surprising and it led me to address other engagements I have had in similar situations. In this section, I provide a brief overview of my interaction with two scholars whom I have worked with closely to raise questions about our decolonising movements. I bring this interpersonal engagement in an academic paper with a sole objective – to reflect on the various facets associated with decolonising academia. Despite the neoliberal university, we continue to work within spaces and with people, which we think may contribute towards our collective goals of decolonisation. In that situation, it becomes incredibly important to be aware of the spaces we occupy and its implications, the people we work with and how/ what we enable, and to reflect on where does our work fit in relation to our decolonial hopes/futures? This reflection is an attempt towards that.

To begin with, I never thought of myself as an 'academic'. Even though I come from an upper-caste and middle-class family in India with access to formal educational structures, the idea of a PhD was never in my imagination. A PhD was this grand thing reserved for 'super-genuises', not someone like me. Yet, as my MA program was ending, I was

advised by my lecturers to consider doing a PhD. A senior academic who was an expert in the area I wanted to work on provided me with integral advice on pursuing a PhD without which, I am unsure if I would even be here. This began my journey into academia.

During my PhD, I had the privilege of working with academics whose seemed to care about issues beyond academia. While examining the Indian state's exercise of colonial power in the region of Jammu & Kashmir, I collaborated with scholars focused on communities and justice. Some of them identified as 'scholar-activists', some just considered it a part of their role and responsibility while others considered it a 'payback' to the communities they had produced research on which, in turn, directly benefited these scholars. For a mixture of reasons, I came to be associated with several groups working towards self-determination of communities such as Students for a Free Tibet, the Jammu & Kashmir Reading Room, The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons and strongly identified with anti-colonial movements globally and, to an extent, political organisation within Leftist movements. I have been public with my involvement in these groups, and I am currently a Union member as well as involved in organising for Palestine. In this regard, my politics, through my research and with my non-academic work, is visible and I would like to believe, transparent.

To my absolute surprise, some of these academics that I have worked with in different groups and capacities have not only been silent since the Israeli genocide of Palestinians began but have even taken openly, anti-Palestinian stances. Two of them, with whom I have worked in close capacity and currently occupy senior academic positions, have gone to the extent of taking pro-Israel stances while actively dehumanising Palestinians. One of them has even shared fake news on their social media that feeds on the sexual dehumanisation of Palestinian/Arab/Muslim men and refused to remove it, despite being proven false and the story revoked even by *The New York Times*. The fact that a so-called postcolonial scholar was doing this, was shocking and worrying. As Steve Salaita, writing from and about an American context reminds us,

These compliant radicals purport to raise principled criticism of injustice as a universal

ideal, equally applicable in any situation, but in their choice of condemnation, in their choice of language and timing and audience, they simultaneously choose to reify the logic of U.S. imperialism. They aren't rewarded with professorships and prominent media platforms through some special insight or scholarly rigor. Lack of imagination is precisely the attraction. And they know it. Whatever creativity they possess is used in service of convention. (Author's website 2024)

This became even more apparent when these two scholars were co-editing a book on coloniality and wanted to include a chapter from my PhD thesis in their edited volume. Initially, I had provided a verbal agreement about contributing a chapter of my PhD thesis to their co-edited book. Post submission, almost two years passed without any communication regarding this book. Due to the lack of communication and the co-authors pro-Israel stance, I assumed that either the book was no longer going to be published, or my work was no longer part of it. This was not the case. When I reached out for clarification, I was told that my work would be included, and the book would be out in a couple of months. As there was no contract, no reviews, and no communication, this was a complete surprise to me.

I could not imagine a book on coloniality by two scholars who had claimed to be post/de/anticolonial but were currently supporting the genocidal and settler-colonial regime of the Israeli state. Hence, I refused. However, I had forgotten that one cannot refuse their academic seniors, to do so is to refuse future publication, future recommendation letters, future grants, future mentors, future jobs ... a future. I was aware of this but as we witness the genocide of a people with the neoliberal world order making us all complicit through our taxes to governments and our money and labour to businesses that support Israel, is it even possible to think of a future? This lack of optimism might be personal, but once you have seen an occupying army defacing a graveyard of the occupied people they murdered – what future does one think of? That is a question for another day, but I was sure, that future, if it did exist, did not include genocide enablers.

The conversation that followed was a discussion where I laid out the reasons as to why I could not

be part of the co-edited collection – emphasising upon these academics' complicity and the tension between their post/de/anticolonial credentials and current stance. I was accused of being totalitarian and a purist – though I did not realise taking a stance against genocide accounted for being a totalitarian. Finally, one of the academics thought it appropriate to remind me that they had written me a recommendation letter that, according to them, got me my current job and how they regretted it. This academic was the research head for a university, and I cannot imagine they mentioned the recommendation letter for any other reason than to emphasise their power over me, and to demand my gratitude in return. The conversation ended with them agreeing for my work to not be included in their work and, needless to say, on a sour note. Admittedly, all of this could have been avoided if the two scholars had kept me informed about the publication process, where I could have objected earlier, if needed.

Since the incident, I have thought several times about it. Two main questions still bother me – first, why did these scholars feel so much ownership over my work? And second, why were these post/de/anticolonial pro-Israeli academics publishing on coloniality? Here, similar to universities, I come to separate conclusions, however both demonstrate an intricate web of coloniality that links the neoliberal universities and such academics to uphold contemporary colonialisms. Let me explain.

These academics, as former research advisors, felt they contributed to my intellectual development and research (rightfully so) and as senior members were obligated to 'something' in return. This is where the academic hierarchy between the supervisor and the PhD student, teacher-student, Professor and Early-Career Researcher all come into play. While this is not new and has been a topic of discussion for a long time, it makes an important point about academics. Academics, contrary to widespread belief, don't do what they do because they are super passionate about it (the selfless teacher/educator), instead, they do it for their own interests. Judging the interests themselves is a discussion for another time, but we may observe this in several instances. Academics who represent communities in conflict often enjoy a lot of support and gratitude from them. Academics who undertake extra responsibilities

or sit on committees to reach managerial levels within university spaces (like the senior academics referred to here).

This maintains the hierarchy between the researcher-researched, teacher-student, knowledge-generator and knowledge receiver; or what Mignolo has referred to the “colonial difference” (Mignolo, 2002). This enables the academics in this case to maintain their power under a garb or progressiveness – which may be utilised occasionally for the oppressed, but largely in service of the neoliberal institution that continues giving them rising pay checks and titles that almost sound made-up to demand their loyalty. The impact of this to academia in general, and more importantly, on the lives of Palestinians, and other anti-imperialist communities is absolutely devastating.

### **What is the role of ‘decolonising’ then?**

In this paper, I have demonstrated how universities and powerful academics within these universities generate a discourse that co-opts decolonial language with the objective of accumulating profit (both material and social). The compliance of senior academics with this academic system further entrenches a culture of obedience within academia (Salaita 2024) that only has interests of the neoliberal establishment at heart. Then, we must ask, what is the role of decolonising and the decolonial school of thought within academia? How do we ensure that as academics our daily practices are aligned with the radical decolonial and anticolonial thought we talk about in our courses? Or, do we just drop the show and align ourselves with the neoliberal institution and focus on our tenure applications and promotions?

Here, I turn to decolonial theory and Palestinian thinkers for guidance. If decolonial theory emphasises on the importance of praxis (Walsh 2018), we must refer to the theory to define our praxis. Decolonial theory, despite its criticisms, tells us strongly to centre the marginalised and to embody a praxis derived from deep and honest engagement with them. Hence, I turn to Palestinian scholars to understand how to navigate this time of utter hopelessness within academia.

During my visit to Birzeit University in the West Bank as part of an academic delegation organised and funded by Friends of Birzeit University

(FOBZU), I was told by several staff and student members about the importance of education within Palestinian society. The university workers have a dedicated campaign, called the Right to Education, that is a grassroots Palestinian movement that seeks to “document, research and raise awareness about the issues facing Palestinian students, teachers and academic institutions under Israeli military occupation.” (Website, n.d). This has been echoed by the Gazan university collective in a statement to assist them in challenging Israeli scholasticide by enabling them to continue living, working, studying, learning, building their lives and universities, on their land (Statement, 2024). This straightforward sentence clearly lays out the stakes for Palestinians –the settler-colonial regime of Israel is devoted to the erasure of Palestinians for its Zionist projects. Palestinian people and academics are calling upon us, especially those of us who claim to care about social justice and self-determination and the end of neoliberalism, none of this exists without the liberation of Palestinians. So then, noting the urgency of this situation, what do we do, as decolonial scholars?

First, as scholars, thinking and writing is an integral part of our job. Tabkhi (2023) demands that this scholarly work must be put in service to a cultural or symbolic intifada, hence we must stop making excuses and hiding behind forms of tenure and promotions. Putting ourselves (often minoritised) and our vulnerabilities forward is crucial, when I walk into my class, I talk to my students about the absurdity of continuing as if the genocide isn't real, enables us to realise our shared fears, griefs, hopes and dreams, few of which are in service of the neoliberal institution. As I have often learnt from the students at the Sheffield Encampment for Gaza, ‘radical’ doesn't mean anything if it doesn't call for the liberation of oppressed peoples. Our writing must then be utilised to expose the industrial-military complex our universities are embedded in and to educate and mobilise people against the complicity of our institutions.

Second, drop the civility. Salaita (2023) has demonstrated to us the farce of academic freedom due to its liberal co-option. Drop the notion of normalcy, of friendships with people supporting genocide and of maintain academic hierarchies for the purpose of promotions and lucrative opportunities. As Salaita states,

“you can no longer expect audiences to accept social climbing as a method, no matter how meticulously it is branded as courageous or conscientious. Today’s intellectual economy is growing more competitive and subsequently more insipid. The change benefits a small class of content creators but has also increased cynicism among consumers toward the sources of that content. The revolutionary promise of decentralized information never materialized. The ruling class is stronger than ever, in no small part based on the consent of those who claim to be its enemy.

Do it or don’t do it. Keep in mind, though: you can go up on the university’s front page, all smiles and sartorial splendor, an avatar of all the great things the institution can offer, happily having avoided the disrepute that comes of the wrong type of obedience, but the world is no longer made to sustain old habits of subservience. It has grown tremendously precarious, which means it has also become simpler to understand. So go ahead and make your choice. We’ll revolt either way” (2023).

Finally, dedicate your time, energy, and resources to fostering a community that would never tolerate injustice. Imagine a society where everyone feels safe and respected, where the suffering of others is met with immediate action. Build a community that would refuse to stand idly by if genocide were being perpetrated against your own people. Once you have established this foundation, organize with these individuals to fight for the liberation of all oppressed people. Work collectively until the very end, until liberation from all forms of oppressions.

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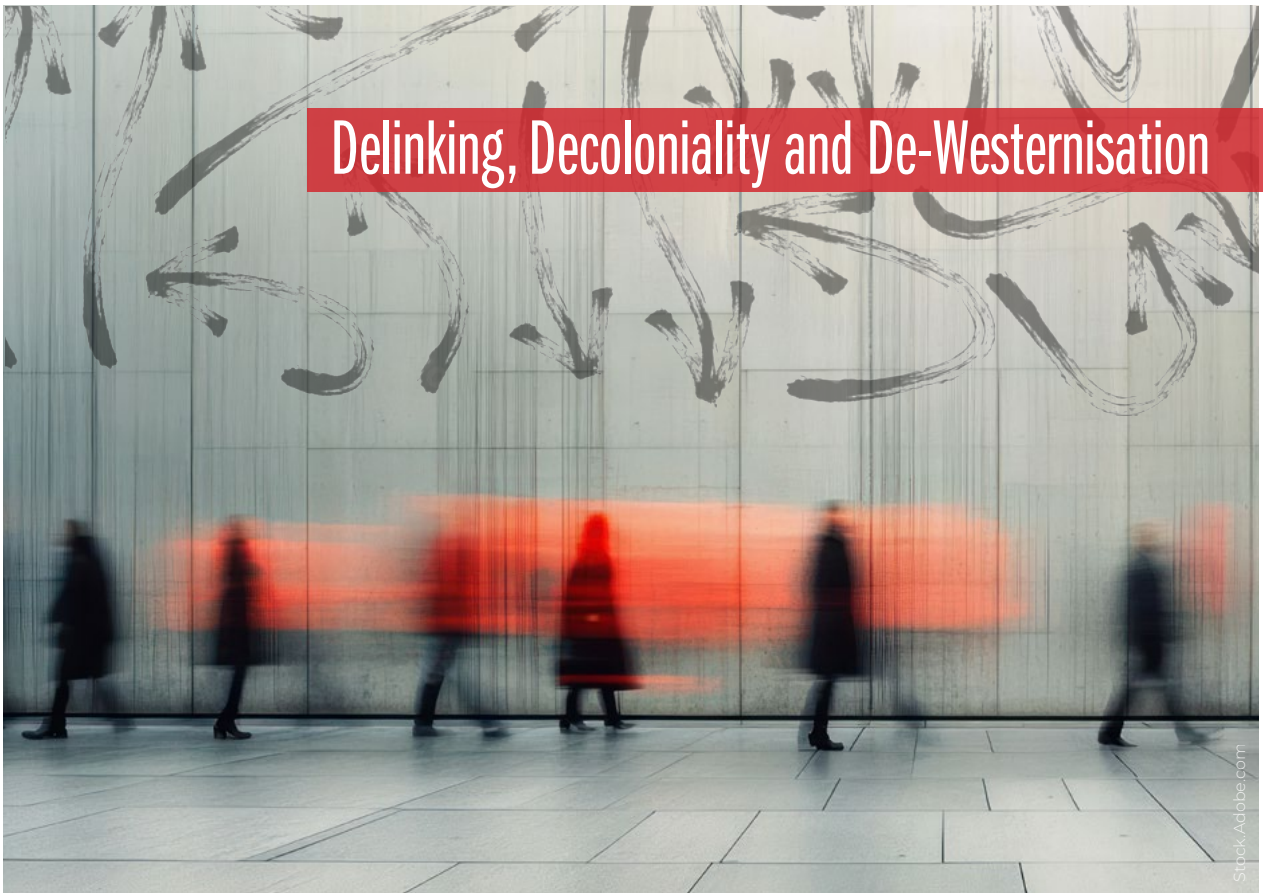
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# Delinking, Decoloniality and De-Westernisation



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## Abstract

The planetary world-wide conversation on decoloniality, there has been some conceptual confusion that in this essay I am attempting to elucidate. The elucidation is not based on the premise that decoloniality is endowed with a universal meaning, like modernity, but it is based on the analytic and prospective meaning that decoloniality acquired after the seminal work of Peruvian sociologist and activist Anibal Quijano. Additionally, my argument is based on the conceptual distinctions I have been making since 2010, between decoloniality and de-westernization.

I

The meaning and extent of decolonization in the third decade of the twentieth century have grown exponentially. My goal is to explore one aspect of its proliferation: the invocation of the decolonial by scholars and public intellectuals of the so-called “far right”.

Several essays and op-eds have highlighted the use of decolonization by the so-called ‘far right’ scholars and state officials. Miri Davidson, an

assistant professor of political science at Warwick College, published a well-read and translated essay in “Sidecar”, a publication of the *New Left Review*. I received a copy of the Spanish translation from friends in Buenos Aires. They were surprised not only by the fact that the so-called far right was invoking the decolonial but also by the parallels Davidson drawn with Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo. Regarding Russian political theorist

Alexander Dugin, Davidson observes:

Dugin asserts we live in a “pluriverse” of distinct civilizations, each moving according to its rhythm. “There is no unified historical process. Every person has their historical model that moves in a different rhythm and sometimes in different directions.” The parallels with the decolonial school of Mignolo and Anibal Quijano are hard to miss. Each civilization blossoms out of a unique epistemological framework, but such efflorescence has been stunted by the “unitary episteme of Modernity” (Dugin’s words, but they could be Mignolo’s) (Davidson 2024).

Among the essays and op-eds addressing the issue, some detail the disparities behind superficial appearances (see Menon 2022 and Shah 2024). In my perspective, argued in this essay, there is a failure to distinguish decoloniality from de-westernization, which leads to confusion between decoloniality and Eurasianism in the case of Dugin, and Europeanism in the case of de Benoist (2024).<sup>1</sup> I will return to this later. In the meantime, let’s recall a long essay by Alexandra Lewis and Marie Lall, which perceives the nuances beneath the surface similarities:

Mignolo’s work (and those of the other authors mentioned) is far more nuanced than anti-Westernist co-option indicates. He advocates delinking from Western knowledge hegemony for an epistemic shift towards “plural-versatility.” Delinking doesn’t imply cutting off knowledge exchange with the West but instead raising non-Western ways of thinking and knowing within global discourse to liberate humanity from the conceptually parasitic shackles of colonialism (2023: 1475).

Lewis and Lall explain in the same article “how the critique of the monopoly of Western liberal thought through the decolonization movement that increased the number of voices heard has been co-opted by nationalist politics in India and Russia” (2023: 1472). My goal here is neither to critique the uses of decolonization by the “far right” nor to defend my position. I am responsible for what I say, not for what my critics claim I say. I will speculate on who, where, when, why, and what decolonization is invoked. The appeal to decolonization by right-

wing scholars and intellectuals intrigued me. I researched what the decolonial perspective could offer to the so-called ‘far-right’. During the initial research stage, I realized it was necessary to distinguish three spheres of the ‘far-right’. The reason for my insistence on ‘so-called’ will become apparent below.

The first sphere is the state, encompassing public statements from governing bodies such as presidents, ministers of foreign relations, and state offices of communication. In this context, Davidson invokes Vladimir Putin and Serge Lavrov.<sup>2</sup> It is also noticeable that right-wing state officials in the European Union and think tanks appeal to decolonization. Former Polish president Andrej Duda called for the decolonization of Russia (see Korybko 2024), and the neoliberal Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, based in Helsinki and sponsored by the US, made the same call in two related conferences (see U.S. Helsinki Commission 2022).

The second sphere is illustrated by well-known writers like Renaud Camus in France, recognized for his infamous theory of the “great replacement” (immigrants replacing the white European natives). In his writings, he mentions social organizations like the Identitarian Generation (Valencia-Garcia 2018). Davidson quotes Camus as saying: “All the major texts in the fight against decolonization apply admirably to France, especially those of Frantz Fanon”—and claimed that Indigenous Europe needs its own FLN” (Davidson 2024). Camus seems to fuse “the fight against (French) colonization,” which is Frantz Fanon’s case, to justify the far-right in France’s fight against decolonization (Davidson 2024). In my view, Camus cannot be paired with Alain de Benoist. Not all the ‘far-rights’ are the same, even in France.<sup>3</sup> What is the logic allowing the analogy of decolonization in the Third World during the Cold War and decolonization in the First World thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union? What prompted De Benoist to claim, in 1988, that the Third World and Europe are involved in the same combat? (1988).

I will focus on the third sphere shaped by scholars, activists, and public figures. Alain de Benoist, a French philosopher and founder of *La Nouvelle Droite* in the late sixties; Alexander Dugin, a Russian political theorist known for his book, *The*

*Fourth Political Theory*, published in 2009; and Sai Deepak, an Indian legal scholar and active lawyer, are often associated with decolonial thought.

My use of quotation marks around ‘so-called far-right’ will become clear now. While it makes historical sense to place De Benoist on the right (he founded the French New Right) which doesn't necessarily mean a generic ‘far right’. I find it questionable to use the same descriptor for Dugin and Deepak. Although geographically, Russia is in Europe, like Belarus and Ukraine, in the current geopolitical power dynamics, it is not. The European Union and Europe are distinct entities, distinctively self-fashioned and separated from Asia. The former upholds the privileges of Eurocentrism and Westernization, while the latter challenges them. This distinction is crucial to understanding De Benoist's call for rebuilding Europeanism, Dugin's promoting Eurasianism (see Pizzolo and Michael 2020, Laruelle 2012, Bassin Glebov and Laruelle 2015) and Deepak defending Hindu civilizational identity. Understanding the unique histories of De Benoist, Dugin, and Deepak is crucial. They share common adversaries and critique the three Western ideologies while their common adversaries form the basis of three distinct horizons of meaning. Delinking from Western liberalism is what they have in common, although each horizon is singular and neither of them proposes the type of universalism enforced by Western Christianity, liberalism and socialism-communism.

Geopolitically and culturally, De Benoist works within the three major Western ideologies that emerged by the mid-nineteenth century: Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism. The three ideologies share a common ambition: Colonialism. These ideologies, rooted in Imperial Western Europe, underpin Eurocentrism. They support the political rhetoric of modernity and its darker side, the logic of coloniality. Modernity reflects Europe's internal organization, while coloniality drives European expansion. In this ideological framework, De Benoist operates within European modernity and Western civilization, while Dugin and Deepak contend with the intrusion of coloniality in their local histories.

De Benoist's way out is the reconstitution of European Paganism. In contrast, Dugin and Deepak contend with the imposition of these ideologies on

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“In Europe, we were  
hangers-on and slaves whereas  
in Asia we shall go as masters”  
(Dostoyevsky 1977:38).

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their local histories. These ideologies are products of Western imperial Europe (Eurocentrism), not all of Europe. Russian intellectuals, though geographically and intellectually close to Europe, did not contribute to the creation of these ideologies; they experienced their effects. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's famous quote captures this sentiment: “In Europe, we were hangers-on and slaves whereas in Asia we shall go as masters” (Dostoyevsky 1977:38). The dynamics have shifted more in Asia than in Europe.

When Russia is considered part of Europe, it is always debatable whether Russia can be counted within Western Civilization, either by Russians themselves or by Europeans. It would be misleading to think that the current rapprochement between U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin is not aimed at maintaining the global primacy of Western civilization. Consequently, De Benoist and Dugin may be geographically European but belong to two geopolitically distinct civilizations. Both Western and Russian civilizations trace their foundations to Greece and Rome, but they differ. For Russia, Greece is the source of Orthodox Christianity, and Moscow was declared the Third Rome in the early sixteenth century. From the perspective of Western civilization, Greece is the cradle of democracy, and Rome is the cradle of Western Christianity.

It is important to distinguish settlers' colonialism with coloniality. Russia never experienced settler colonialism like India did, but it did not escape Western coloniality. Ignoring the intrusion of Western modernity/coloniality in their local civilizations, placing Russia and India (Dugin and

Deepak) in the same category as France (de Benoist) and labeling it 'far right' overlooks the imperial difference with Russia and the colonial difference with India created by Western modernity. The imperial difference destabilized Russia, while the colonial difference destabilized India. The British dismantled the Mughal Sultanate, a historical event equivalent to the dismantling of the Aztec and Inca civilizations. For Deepak, both the Mughal Sultanate and the British Empire disrupted the continuity of Hinduism, which he sees as the soul of Indian civilization. Unlike Dugin and Deepak, de Benoist comes from a country that projected coloniality (the colonial and imperial differences) in the constitution of Western modernity (see Tlostanova 2018, Hendi, Burlyuk, O' Sullivan and Arystanbek 2018). Each appeal to the decolonial is linked to their efforts to break away from Western modernity.<sup>4</sup> De Benoist's assessments occur within the decline of Western hegemony, Dugin and Deepak aim to accelerate the reconstitution of their civilizations, which the West had taught them to despise, inciting them to become modern. Which means, to become like *us*.

## II

Before invoking decolonization, De Benoist (and the New Right) claimed Gramsci. 'Gramscian from the Right' becomes a common expression among members themselves as well as scholars analyzing the trajectory (see Abrahamsen, Drolet, Williams, Vucetic, Narita and Gheciu 2024, and Platonova 2022). Why is the New Right transposing (for some will be appropriation) Gramsci and the decolonial? The appeal to Gramsci's key concepts (the construction of counter-hegemony and the war of positions confronting liberalism and the dominance of fascism) doesn't mean that the New Right became the New Left of the 1960s that also needed Gramsci to break away from the communist party.<sup>5</sup> Thus, invoking the decolonial doesn't mean that De Benoist, Duda, and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe seriously engage in decoloniality: look at what they do, not only at what they say. The questions then are: In what context is Gramsci or the decolonial being invoked, and what needs is the invocation fulfilling?

At the end of the eighties, De Benoist published *L'Europe, le Tiers Monde: Meme Combat/Europe, the Third World. Same Struggle* (1986). The Third

World struggle for decolonization meant liberation from European colonialism. In the Third World, decolonization meant liberation from Europe. For De Benoist in Europe, 'the same struggle' means decolonization as liberation from Europe. This claim is central to De Benoist's Europeanism, which implies freedom from liberal and neoliberal Europe, and the reconstitution of European ethno-pluralism based on his reconstitution of Paganism. The reconstitution of ethno-pluralism is a counterproposal to homogenization in its Western Christian, liberal/neoliberal, and communist forms.<sup>6</sup>

Dugin is not interested in the reconstitution of Europe but in the liberation of Russia from Western liberalism and its avatars. His position counters that of Duda and of the Helsinki Commission for the Security of Europe. He categorizes Western liberal ideologies into three: Liberalism, Communism (socialism), and Fascism (conservatism). His vision is the reconstitution of Eurasianism, often referred to as neo-Eurasianism to distinguish it from the classic Eurasianism of the 1930s. It all depends on what interests you defended and what is your position in the colonial/imperial matrix of power. As Davidson states:

Dugin, a close associate of de Benoist, has integrated this decolonial Spirit into his worldview even more deeply [...]. *Russia, he claims, shares much with the postcolonial world: it, too, is a victim of the assimilating drive inherent to Western liberalism, which forces a world of ontological diversity into a flat, homogeneous, de-particularized mass* (2024).

Dugin's invocation of the decolonial, which Davidson interprets as postcolonial, is synonymous with liberation. During the Cold War, decolonization and liberation were two key and complementary terms. The goal of decolonial struggles was to liberate the natives from colonial settlers. It is in this context that Dugin uses the terms liberation and decolonization:

We need to *liberate ourselves* and all the peoples, Turkish people, Russian people, Chinese people, European people, and American people from this international liberal swamp. We need to *liberate ourselves* from the totalitarian discourse constructed on the 'self-evident' dogma that only liberalism can be accepted as a universal

ideology, that only Western values should be assimilated as something universal (2020: 10).

Davison observes that these words sound like those enunciated by Anibal Quijano in 1992. And she is right. Here is Quijano,

*epistemological decolonization*, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, *as the basis of another rationality* which may legitimately pretend to some universality. Finally, nothing is less rational than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnos should be considered universal rationality, even if such an ethnos is called Western Europe, because this is a pretense to impose a provincialism as universalism (1992: 117).

In the case of Dugin's and other similar claims, it is indispensable to uncouple the meaning of liberation from decolonization.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above, Russia did not endure settler colonialism but did not escape coloniality. Liberating from Westernization (delinking from the three master ideologies) of the world should be understood as de-westernization rather than decolonization (see Latouche 1989, O' Gorman 1958). Dugin, De Benoist, Deepak, Quijano, and I share a common critique of Western global designs to homogenize the planet, from Western Christianity in the sixteenth century to Western neoliberalism since the second half of the twentieth century (see Mignolo 2012, Mignolo 2014). Still, decolonization and de-westernization are two distinct kinds of responses. Although liberation is the aim, the historical and political circumstances in which they are conceived and implemented, as well as their purposes and aspirations, are significantly different.

Decolonization, in its various global forms, is driven by political society in the public sphere and is currently incompatible with state projects (Mignolo 2021). Conversely, de-westernization is led by the state and can be supported by scholars and intellectual activists, such as Dugin and Deepak (Mignolo 2020). De Benoist's arguments do not align with the French state or the European Union. From a decolonial perspective, Dugin's calls for Russian liberation from liberal and neoliberal ideologies must be seen as part of the global movement

towards de-westernization. Ignoring these calls would endorse the belief in the universality of Western political ideologies and the unipolarity of the global order. While Westernization equates to unipolarity, de-westernization equates to multipolarity (Mahbubani 2008).<sup>8</sup> Progressive ideologies also seek to eliminate non-conforming elements, whether in the U.S., France, or the European Union.

De-westernization, though originating in Asia, is not confined to Asia or to non-settler colonial countries, like Russia, China or Japan. Brazil and South Africa, both BRICS members with settler colonial histories, are also embracing de-westernization. Decolonization, however, is driven by political society in the public sphere and often clashes with state projects. De-westernization does not challenge the colonial power structure, which includes capitalism and digital technology, but disputes control over it. Decoloniality, on the other hand, questions the very existence of this power structure. Both narratives point towards divergent horizons of meaning.

Within de-westernization conceptual frameworks, *The Fourth Political Theory* (2012) serves as a foundational work in Alexander Dugin's Eurasianism ideology. Eurasianism is a de-western delinking from the three main Western ideologies: Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism. *The Fourth Political Theory* derived from Eurasianism, cannot be integrated into these ideologies. It marks a break from Dugin's earlier thoughts from the late eighties, when he sought liberation from Western liberalism and Soviet communism. During the eighties, Dugin explored spirituality and saw fascism as a potential solution. However, the fall of the Soviet Union shifted his focus to geopolitics, leading to his 1997 publication of *Foundations of Geopolitics*. That same year, Zbigniew Brzezinski published *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and the Geostrategic Imperatives* (1997), a key neoliberal geopolitical work. While Dugin is an informal Russian government ideologue, Brzezinski served as an ideologue for the US government. Brzezinski emphasized the U.S.'s control over Eurasian landmasses, rich in population and resources, as key for economic future. Dugin's *The Fourth Political Theory* focuses on Eurasia's autonomy, opposing the U.S. perspective. Brzezinski saw NATO's expansion from Europe to Vladivostok as inevitable, with Ukraine

crucial for curbing Russian ambitions. Dugin's sees Eurasianism as the political and epistemic path towards autonomy. Choose your perspective.

De Benoist's vision of Europe, detailed in the *Manifesto for a European Renaissance* (1999), promotes acknowledging differences to counter neoliberal homogenization by the EU. It calls for reconstituting what Christianity, liberalism, and neoliberalism have destituted, with paganism and ethno-pluralism as key concepts. Four years later, Jurgen Habermas published his own *Manifesto of European Renaissance* (2003), signed by postmodern intellectuals like Derrida, Eco, and Rorty. They called for a revitalized European identity beyond the nation, respecting differences and embracing enlightenment, modernity, and technological progress. De Benoist, however, opposed the enlightenment, unlike Habermas, who is heir to the first Frankfurt School. Habermas's renaissance was widely discussed among progressive and postmodern intellectuals, while De Benoist's was largely ignored, with the progressive machine effectively silencing him.

De Benoist and Habermas differ in their visions of European Renaissance. Habermas supports a strong (neo)liberal EU, while De Benoist advocates for reconstituting European roots dismantled by liberal modernity and postmodernity. Critics that question decoloniality overlook that the colonial matrix of power produces differences and hierarchies while Westernization is a project of homogenization that devalues differences while producing them. The decolonial perspective aims at revealing the double standard (devaluing differences while producing them) of Western modernity while at the same time promoting communal respect for ethnic and sexual differences without hierarchies, sustainable economies, awareness of living organisms. The decolonial perspective, like de-westernization, delinks from Western universalism (Christian, Liberal and Socialist) promoting peoples liberation and planetary pluriversality beyond states' regulations. In both cases, civilization states (de-westernization) and people's public sphere, they are manifestations of the upcoming cosmopolitan localism.

De Benoist's use of *pluriversum* in the manifesto refers to the reconstitution of Pagan *pluriversum*, which was replaced by Christian *universum*.

This aligns with Mahbubani's idea that de-westernization means the return of history and Quijano's notion of the decolonial return of the future. Europe's cultural heritage, acknowledged by all political views, includes ancient Greece, Western Rome, Western Christianity, and the European Renaissance. These elements shaped European modernity and justified colonial expansion, displacing local Pagan traditions. De Benoist's *pluriversum* is based on cultural, not biological, ethno-pluralism. He rejects closed ethnic-national formations, contrary to the myth of one nation to one state. Accusing De Benoist of "federalist fascism" and "dreaming of a pan-European empire" may reveal the ideology of the accusers rather than his arguments. It's uncommon to label someone as a 'neoliberal fascist dreaming of a homogenous European garden' extended over the planet. Neoliberalism is rarely seen as an aberration of Liberalism, like Fascism and Stalinism were aberrations of Conservatism and Socialism (see Eggers 2021).

De Benoist's *pluriversum* and Dugin's *pluriverse* aren't the same as the decolonial concept of *pluriversality*. They use similar words but have different meanings. Think of Humberto Maturana's multi-verse in science, which aligns with the decolonial pluriverse in humanities and social sciences. All of them confront Western universalism and the will to homogenize. During the Kosovo war, Bill Clinton urged us to focus on our common humanity. On the contrary, The Zapatistas claims that "because we are all equal, we have the right to be different." Often critics of de-westernization and decoloniality overlook how neoliberalism aims to homogenize the planet (see Davidson 2024).

Dugin and Deepak reject Western interferences in Russia and India, respectively. Similarly, De Benoist's New Right opposes liberal and neoliberal interferences in the Europe's pagan foundations. Understanding local histories disrupted by coloniality helps avoid labeling De Benoist, Dugin, and Deepak as generic 'far rights' or "fascists." It also prevents the assumption that their differing thoughts and projects should be condemned because it is not like ours. Ancient Greece is significant for Dugin due to shared Orthodox Christianity with Russia, a key part of Eurasianism, but it differs from de Benoist's Greece. Deepak's project to replace the name India with Bharat, rooted in Sanskrit, is indifferent to Greece and

Rome. *Pueblos Originations* in the Americas have replaced America and Latin America with Abya-Yala. However, there is no state ideology in the Americas that would promote the reconstitutions of Abya-Yala, like the reconstitution of Europeanism, Eurasianism or Hinduism.

### III

In the Americas, there are three main decolonial paths. One is the decolonial project of Indigenous peoples, from the Mapuches in Southern Chile and Argentina to the First Nations of Canada. Despite numerous nations, tribes, and cultures, two important concepts are resurgence (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, First Nation in Canada) and *Bien Vivir* (*Sumak Kawsay* in Ecuador's Quichua language and *Suma Qamaña* in Bolivia's Aymara language). Another key aspect is the decolonial praxis by actors of the African Diaspora in South America and the Caribbean. This legacy spans from enslaved revolts in the sixteenth century to the Haitian Revolution and includes rich scholarly, intellectual, and artistic contributions. Figures like Aime Cesaire and Frantz Fanon are heirs of the Middle Passage which grounds the Afro-Caribbean and Afro-South American diaspora.<sup>9</sup>

The third is the one I am elaborating here, introduced by Anibal Quijano. Quijano's decolonial reconfiguration of decolonization as manifestations of decoloniality (like modernization means manifestations of modernity), conceived after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the limits of decolonization during the Cold War, is neither an Indigenous nor an Afro-diasporic project. The *Pueblos Originarios* and the African diaspora in South America and the Caribbean have their own experiences, languages, and ways of living to confront coloniality and elaborate on their own decolonial visions and ambitions. Therefore, the concept of decoloniality introduced by Quijano, which is grounded in the history of people of European descent coexisting with *Pueblos Originarios* and African diaspora, is equivalent, parallel and complimentary, but is grounded in the local histories of European migrations to South America. If decolonization is a familiar expression to the three projects, because colonization is a common experience to the three demographic heterogeneous components, none of them can be subsumed under the other. It's crucial, however, to

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work together, which has been and continues to be the case confronting coloniality, based on our respective local histories and personal storytelling.

It's worth re-reading my initial quote of Davidson, where she points out the parallels between the far right and the Latin American decolonial school. These parallels show the surface, not the conditions of their occurrence. As mentioned earlier, Quijano and Mignolo's local histories differ significantly from those of De Benoist, Dugin, and Deepak. Think of Peru and Argentina vis-à-vis Russia, India, and France; they occupy distinct positions in the colonial matrix of power. Colonial legacies in Peru and Argentina range from early Spanish and Portuguese settlers to British and French and the US coloniality without settler colonialism. This isn't the case for India under British settler colonialism; Deepak will add the Muslim colonization of India (Bharat) before the formation of the colonial matrix of power from 1500 on, France was an imperial country, and Russia was never under Western colonial settlers. So, to throw the words decoloniality and decolonization out of context, are just to create empty words floating around.

Quijano and Mignolo, like De Benoist and Deepak, critique imperial Christianity. For Dugin, Eastern Orthodox Christianity isn't an adversary, but Western Christianity is for De Benoist. While Western Christianity drove early colonial expansion and laid the foundations of secular imperialism after the 18th century, it also carries the seeds of its self-criticism. Pope Francis and theologies of liberation around the globe are examples. Quijano and Mignolo also share a critique of modernity with De Benoist, Dugin, and Deepak. In 1993, Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel linked modernity with Eurocentrism and noted that:

Modernity includes a rational "concept" of emancipation that we affirm and subsume. But, at the same time, it develops an irrational myth, justification for genocidal violence. The postmodernists criticize modern reason as a reason for terror; we criticize modern reason because of the irrational myth it conceals (1993: 65).

De Benoist's, Dugin's, and Deepak's focus on specific cultural horizons like Europeanism, Eurasianism, and Hinduism does not align with decolonial goals promoted by Quijano, Dussel and Mignolo. Quijano's 1990s decolonial shift is based on three core principles:

- Breaking away from the three major ideologies of Western modernity
- Engaging in epistemological reconstitutions
- Promoting and contributing to a) the return of the futures disrupted by the interference of modernity/coloniality and b) promoting and contributing to building the conditions of *Bien Vivir*.

Epistemological reconstitutions drive decolonial liberations without a fixed horizon of meaning, unlike Eurasianism, Europeanism, and Hinduism. Huntington sees Latin America as a civilization, but reconstituting Latin Americanism isn't as clear-cut. The idea of Latin America was created after independence by people of European descent, collaborating with French politicians, to stop Anglo America's advance south. So, Latin America has a European origin, unlike Eurasianism and Hinduism. Europeanism wasn't imposed by a foreign civilization but is a project by and of Europeans themselves. Plus, Latin Americanism coexists with Pueblos Originarios and the African Diaspora in South, Central America, and the Caribbean, who

aren't keen on being Latin Americans. These "isms" emerged from colonial expansion, each with its own decolonial task. So, reconstituting Latin Americanism isn't really a decolonial task, although Latin American "identity" has been and still is a concern of liberals and conservatives alike.<sup>10</sup>

Decoloniality and de-westernization share common goals: breaking away from Western modernity, engaging in epistemological reconstitutions, and ensuring the return of interrupted futures. The de-westernized version proposes transforming the nation-state into the civilization state, advocated by Russia, China, India, Turkey, and Iran. Nation-states, a Western civilization concept, assumes one nation per state. The civilization-state, however, merges multiple nations into one civilization. This shift aligns with the emerging multipolar inter-state world order which the decolonial perspective supports, although it is not its primary goal: *Bien Vivir* is a project of political society in the public sphere, not state and inter-state one. *Bien Vivir* doesn't have a predetermined semantic horizon of meaning such as Europeanism, Eurocentrism, or Hinduism, but it is an open horizon to be worked out by all and everyone who finds in the decolonial a path to healing colonial wounds. It is not an identitarian horizon, such as Latin Americanism, but rather open horizons of aspirations and efforts to be realized locally by the political society in the public sphere. Nevertheless, it's not surprising to see similarities between decolonial and de-western confrontations with neoliberal global designs aiming to homogenize and manage an intended unipolar world system. For Quijano's decolonial perspective, the civilization state is an analytic issue, not a goal, unlike de-westernization.

But that's not all. Decolonial and de-western critiques of Western modernity, seen in Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism, share another common feature: they don't fit into the same system of these three ideologies. Dugin's "fourth political theory" (which for Dugin is the spirit of Eurasianism) is a clear example of de-Western epistemological delinking from the three main ideologies of Western modernity. It could be added that Deepak's Hinduism is also a fourth political theory vis-à-vis Western modernity while De Benoist's Europeanism is a sort of fourth intramural political theory (2000). And so is the decolonial perspective grounded on the radical

decolonial delinking that could be summarized by invoking the Bandung Conference of 1955. Although Quijano's did not invoke the Bandung Conference, its legacy is relevant to understanding Quijano's reconfiguration of decoloniality (see Mignolo 2012). The 'return of the future' is not just one, the one envisioned by the ideologies of Western modernity, but the de-western and decolonial return of the futures disrupted, since 1500, by the expansion of Western modernity. Which shall not be confused with the 'return of the past'.

Exiting the failures of modernization, to borrow Yuko Hasegawa's expression, is today an increasing demand and a necessity. The horizon of hopes that Western modernity has shattered, do not have preordained designs. Is a wide horizon to be conquered by many reconstitutions of interrupted futures. It cannot be an homogeneous horizon. Consequently, it would require common work to delegitimize the colonial and imperial differences that Western modernity created. If the de-western horizons of hope are different from the decolonial ones, the decolonial in South America and the Caribbean will differ from those pursued or that could be pursued in South Asia, Southern Africa, North America, Russia, China, or West Africa. The Kurdish women's liberation in Rojava and the Zapatistas in Southern Mexico share similar horizons of hope (see Mesbah 2024). However, each implements its designs according to local possibilities, needs, and constituencies. The Zapatistas is primarily an Indigenous project led by both Indigenous women and men, while Rojava is entirely an organization of "Indigenous" women.

In 2011, Quijano published "*Bien Vivir entre el Desarrollo y la colonialidad del poder*" (2016). *Bien Vivir* and development are decolonially incompatible. For de-westernization, development is not a problem, but it cannot be a predetermined horizon. Economic development is detached from liberalism and neoliberalism and integrated into states that lead de-westernization. However, *Bien Vivir*, based on *Sumak Kawsay* and *Suma Qamaña*, and development cannot coexist. *Suma* and *Sumak* translate as "plenitude" (Latin "plenus," English "full"), and *Kawsay* as "living" and "knowing." Thus, the decolonial task is to work towards living in plenitude and harmony. To do so requires delinking from the failures of modernity to build horizons of hopes. The task requires epistemological and aesthetic (sensorial) reconstitutions.

Having said that, it shall be remarked that the decolonial perspective introduced by Quijano, that requires an analytic of the logic of coloniality and the rhetoric of modernity, doesn't imply that the horizon of meanings relevant in South, Central America and the Caribbean shall be the same for the rest of the planet. To think like that would be to think in terms of homogeneization and universalization of the local, established by Western modernity. The women's liberation in *Rojava* and the *Zapatistas* in Southern Mexico are working towards the decolonial horizon of *Bien Vivir*, *Sumak Kawsay* that, in their own words are "a world where many worlds could coexist" (the *Zapatistas*) and "Jingology" (*Rojava's* women's liberation) (see Mesbah 2024). Although neither of them uses the term 'decolonial' to describe their projects, it could be understood as such from Quijano's perspective. This does not mean they are decolonial, but they could be seen as such from the South American decolonial perspective. Decoloniality is being elaborated in Africa, based on their own local histories, colonial experiences, needs and desires. Similar considerations shall be made for any decolonial project in thoughts, deeds and desires.

#### IV Closing Reflections

The era we're all experiencing on this planet is making the old premises, beliefs, and concepts we took for granted obsolete. This change is noticeable, and many have already pointed it out. This essay focused on the difference between decolonization and de-westernization, which is shaking up the international order previously dominated by Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism, along with their ties to Colonialism. Decolonization and de-westernization are breaking free from these ideologies and their control over economic, military, media, and academic institutions.

Decolonization rose during the Cold War, coinciding with the defeat of Conservatism's totalitarian regimes like Nazism and Fascism by Liberal and Socialist/Communist regimes. De-Westernization gained momentum after the fall of Stalinism in the Soviet Union responding to the increasing totalitarian bents of Liberalism and its neo-liberal version emerged victorious, grounded on the belief in the 'end of history'. Now, decades later, we're facing the totalitarian side of Liberalism,

especially its Neoliberal version in the U.S. and E.U. In response, decolonization and de-westernization are rising to challenge the common thread of historical Colonialism and its logic, Coloniality.

After the Cold War, de-Westernization took over the goals of decolonization in the interstate system, aiming to form strong states to resist totalitarian Neo-liberal designs. The 1955 Bandung Conference sparked decoloniality and planted the seeds of de-westernization. As circumstances changed, decoloniality became crucial in public struggles for meaning and community formation while de-westernization became interstate confrontations for controlling the colonial matrix of power. Both decolonization and de-westernization attracted and are attracting increasing attention, causing discomfort among “progressive” scholars, intellectuals, and activists still tied to the three major Western ideologies and their aftermath, especially in Euro-centered spheres of post-modernity and neo-Marxism.

The nation-state, a cornerstone of Western civilization and anti-imperialism, is confronted by de-westernization. The logic is clear: if Russia and India are nation-states, Western civilization is the only civilization (unipolarity). If Russia, India, China, Turkey, and Iran reconstitute themselves as civilizations, unipolarity is displaced, and multipolarity means the coexistence of several civilizations rather than the privilege of just one. The ‘clash’ of civilizations could become ‘cooperation among’ civilizations without one indispensable nation setting the rules. De Benoist’s argument aims to delink from the EU’s Europe and Western civilization to reconstitute Europeanism, meaning Europe as a civilization, among others. The call is significant: Europeanism displacing the neoliberal EU, and becoming one among many civilizations. In this context, *pluriverse* or *pluriversum* is parallel and complementary to a multipolar global order that defies universalism and unipolarity. However, the civilizational *pluriversum* shouldn’t be confused with decolonial *pluniversum*, which is *pluri-gnosis* building rationality tangential to the hegemony of Western *epistemic* rationality and, at least in principle, to the inter-civilization states global order (see Mignolo 2012).<sup>11</sup>

Decoloniality and de-westernization both use the word *pluriverse*, but they mean different things.

Decoloniality wants to break away from universality, while de-westernization aims to move away from unipolarity. De-westernization is driven by strong, capitalist states, while decoloniality is led by public actors within and outside existing institutions (museums, universities, hospitals, governments). Hegemony, as we learned from Antonio Gramsci, isn’t a material thing but the invisible force of ideas taken as reality. Reality differs for Conservatives, Liberals, and Socialists, but Western ideological hegemony impacts on the beliefs of people in the public sphere. People in institutions come from and return to the public sphere. Institutions don’t govern themselves (yet?).

Yes, you read it right: the hegemony of the three ideologies and their mutations, in the West, are the backbone of Eurocentrism. That’s why it’s common to talk about the right or the left, conservatives, social democrats, and the like in Europe and the rest of the world from the North Atlantic perspective. This perspective is framed within the avatars of the three ideologies. Hegemony, as Gramsci taught us, must be confronted with ideas, narratives, arguments, in other words, knowledge. Based, of course, on the ‘materiality history’, of what is going on around, on and in us. Eurocentrism controlled institutional knowledge globally, but no longer. Decoloniality and de-westernization are breaking away from Western ideological (and epistemological) hegemony and embark on ‘other rationalities’ (epistemological reconstitutions). However, the goals of non-Western rationalities differ for decolonial and de-western actors and institutions. Decoloniality presupposes de-westernization, but de-westernization doesn’t imply decoloniality.

In October 2020, during the pandemic, while working on *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, I couldn’t do much with the manuscript then, except acknowledge that the cycle of Westernization was over. The agony will last decades and won’t be pretty. Multipolarity in the interstate system displaces unipolar Westernization; pluriversality displaces Western universality of knowing and sensing. Decoloniality in the public sphere and de-westernization in the inter-state system have opened the gates for Western totalitarianism in its three branches, Conservatives, Socialists/Communists, and (Neo) Liberals. Consequently, it’s no surprise to find commonalities between decoloniality and de-

westernization, which is different to the similar vocabulary of the 'far right'. Gramsci has been employed by Conservatives intellectual since the past century. That doesn't make the 'far right' Marxist, as it doesn't make it decolonial either because of common critiques of Liberalism, Neoliberalism, state Communism, Fascism, Nazism and Zionism. The commonality of the enunciated hides the divergences of the enunciations.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> An expanded version of this argument deepens the confusion. “On the concept of the pluriverse in Walter Mignolo and the European New Right.” On my Sai Deepak’s endorsement, I should have endorsed it as a powerful de-western argument, and a serious reading of the Latin American decolonial school, to which he devoted chapters 2 and 3 of *India, that is Bharat. Coloniality, Civilization, Constitution*. See the conversations that ensued, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/7TKAjjv87K3UZir1/>
- <sup>2</sup> A double misreading of my position in the Ukraine-Russian conflict is circulating. One is that Putin’s expression is anti-colonialism, not decolonization. The other are the reasons to explain Russia’s special operation in Ukraine. It all depends on where you start: it was an unprovoked invasion, or it was an invasion provoked by NATO to “contain” Russia. See Walter D. Mignolo, “It is a change of era, no longer an era of changes”. The European perspective is also noticeable in the superficial parallels between, decolonial thoughts and de Benoist Europeanism in France, Dugin’ Eurasianism in Russia and Deepak’s Hinduism in India.
- <sup>3</sup> See Alain de Benoist, “The Time of the Civilizational States.” A comprehensive analysis of de Benoist’s arguments in Alberto Spektorowski, “Identity Politics and the Decolonization of the Western Mind: The Intellectual Resilience of Alain de Benoist and the Nouvelle Droite.”
- <sup>4</sup> On this concept see Walter D. Mignolo, *La désobéissance épistémique. Rhétorique de la modernité, logique de la colonialité and grammaire de la décolonialité*. For a reliable interpretation of the concept see Lewis and Lall, “From decolonization to authoritarianism.”
- <sup>5</sup> The New Right and the New Left are sort of European brothers, born both in the 60s the latter and in the seventies the former. Both were updating of the two basic ideologies of Western modernity, Conservatism (the New Right) and Socialism (the New Left). Liberalism was the winner of WWII, and neoliberalism was born in the late forties, at the University of Chicago. A key figure of the New Left was Stuart Hall, who introduced the colonial question in the left. A sensible reading of Hall’s trajectory in James Vernon, “When Stuart Hall was White.” For the New Right, Pierre André Taguieff, *Entretiens, Origines et métamorphose de la Nouvelle Droite*. ; and Daria Platonova Dugina, « A History of the Ideas of the New Right.”
- <sup>6</sup> Ethno-pluralism shall not be confused with multiculturalism. The latter was a necessity in the U.S., after the civil right movement, to sideline the previous idea of the melting pot. Multiculturalism is a mask for the mono-cultural state to accommodate the immigration from the Third World. The former is a concept calling into question the ethnic hegemony of the modern nation-state: one state for one ethnos. Natio is the Latin translation of the Greek ethnos.
- <sup>7</sup> A Russian artist and geographer at the Dutch Institute, Nikolai Smirnov, published a detailed titled “Left-Wing Eurasianism and Post-Colonial Theory.” One of his goals is that “[...] we should consider Eurasianism, along with Négritude, as one of the first experiments in postcolonialism, as a forerunner of postcolonial theory. Eurasianism was strategic essentialism *avant la lettre*. Its abrupt break with the Romano-Germanic culture that enthralled contemporary Russian elites functioned like decolonization, deploying the Oedipus complex in terms of geography. As I argue here, it would be more appropriate to describe Dugin’s and Smirnov’s arguments as de-western rather than decolonial, as I explain below.
- <sup>8</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, “Dewesternization: The Return of History.” I underscore the subtitle: the return of history, not the end of history.
- <sup>9</sup> One example, among many, Jean Casimir, *The Haitian. A Decolonial History*.
- <sup>10</sup> In fact, Mignolo’s argument goes in divergent directions in relation to the de-western will to reconstitute a geopolitical civilizational identity. See *The Idea of Latin America*.
- <sup>11</sup> I have been opting for *gnosis over epistemology* since *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*. Epistemic reconstitution and border thinking are two key gnosis concepts.



## Epistemic Freedom: Itineraries of a Concept

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### Abstract

The concept of epistemic freedom, which I introduced in *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (2018), is elaborated in this article to give it context and to highlight its itineraries. This reflective article provides five problematic epistemes that necessitates struggles for epistemic freedom. These are racist, (en)slave, colonial/imperial, endocentric/patriarchal, and capitalist/neoliberal epistemes. These inextricably intertwined epistemes are constitutive of Eurocentric epistemologies and its reproductions at a world scale and make it difficult for alternative epistemologies from the Global South to flourish. They also underpin contemporary global economy and its asymmetrical power dynamics, which continues to marginalise decolonial ways of thinking, seeing, and praxes.

### Introduction

Dominant ways of knowing cascading from empires, modern nation-states and ruling capitalist bourgeois elites invade the universe of others to impose themselves as the only legitimate, objective, scientific, and universally truthful epistemology. It is this imperialism of knowledge that is confronted by epistemic freedom as a multifaceted insurgent and

aspirational liberatory concept. Epistemic freedom encapsulates struggles and visions for freedom in the domain of knowledge. It unsettles genealogies, structures, economies, colonialities, and hegemonomies of modern knowledge. As an essential pre-requisite for all other forms and dimensions of freedom, epistemic freedom emerges within the broader discursive context of anti-racism, anti-

enslavement, anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, anti-heteropatriarchal sexism, and anti-neoliberalism.

While colonialism/coloniality works within the paradigm of difference resulting in binaries, classifications, and hierarchization; decolonization/ decoloniality as the framework of the combative concept of epistemic freedom which emerged from battles fields of history, is connected to the anti/decolonial interventions which embraces what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) depicted as “decolonizing the mind.” Decolonizing the mind emerges from the realization that a cognitive empire invaded the mental universe of the colonized and imposed coloniality of knowledge so deep that the dismantling of the physical empire left the cognitive empire intact. It resonates with what Walter D. Mignolo (2009) termed “epistemic disobedience.” Epistemic disobedience is a revolutionary call for delinking with coloniality of knowledge and to produce another knowledge from the underside of modernity. Kwesi K. Prah (2017) posited the need to construct “intellectual sovereignty” as a basis for all other freedoms. Therefore, struggles for epistemic freedom are driven and propelled by what Amber Murray and Patricia Delay (2022) named as “defiant scholarship.” This means that the concept of epistemic freedom is expansive. It is necessary to delve into its itineraries.

To realise epistemic freedom, three decolonial actions and epistemic positions have to be undertaken. The first is what Cathrine Odora Hoppers and Howard Richards (2012) termed “rethinking thinking”. This concept states that the epistemic instruments we employ to make sense of the world have become outdated, on the one hand, and, on the other, it entails recovery of subjugated and indeed museumized knowledges. The second is what Immanuel Wallerstein (1991) described as an act of “unthinking thinking”. This is a far more radical epistemic action which involves decolonizing, depatriarchising, dehierarchization,

deracializing, deparochializing, and decanonizing of thinking and knowledge (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). All these actions seek to re-make knowledge to be for life, thinking to be of service to humanity, and to pluralise and democratize knowledge into its ecologies. In this “unthinking thinking”, one confronts a decrypted knowledge and the cognitive empire driven by the hegemonic desire to control, repress, dominate, and exploit others (see Ricardo 2016).

The third is the painstaking process of “learning to unlearn in order to relearn” (see Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012). This entails shifting from what Carter G. Woodson (1933) termed the “mis-education of the Negro” to a relearned knowledge for liberation, freedom, and life. This is necessary because modern subjects have been subjected to coloniality of knowledge predicated on Eurocentrism with its scientific racism, classism, and sexism. In the opening chapter of *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (2018) there is a plea to “seek epistemic freedom first” as an essential pre-condition for other freedoms. This plea arose from a realisation that even though the physical empire was dismantled in the 20<sup>th</sup> century across most parts of the world and colonialism was condemned at the level of the United Nations, the modern world remained epistemically colonized. Eurocentrism, with its hidden scientific racism, did not suddenly evaporate. This is why “the definitive entry of descendants of the enslaved, displaced, colonized, and racialised peoples into existing academies across the world” was accompanied by them “proclaiming loudly that they are human beings, their lives matter, and that they were born into valid and legitimate knowledge systems” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018:3).

While academic freedom is more about rights, epistemic freedom is about both rights and justice:

Thus, epistemic freedom speaks to cognitive justice. Epistemic freedom is fundamental about the right think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism

(Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018:3).

The concept of epistemic freedom does not seek to replace the concept of academic freedom. Rather, it seeks to deepen it by bringing the demands for

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“

... “learning to unlearn

in order to relearn” ...

”

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epistemic rights and cognitive justice together into the centre of contemporary resurgent and insurgent struggles for epistemological decolonization. To elaborate on epistemic freedom, I introduced the concepts of “provincialising Europe” (deuniversalising and decanonizing that knowledge which has assumed a hegemonic status in the modern world). In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (1993) terms, this entails moving the centre in three ways. Moving it from the hegemonic Europe and North America to other geospatial spaces of knowledge generation. Moving it from the minority male bourgeois to the majority of peoples. Moving the centre from androcentrism to embrace knowledge generated by women.

The concept of “deprovincializing Africa” entails deparochializing and demarginalizing those African knowledges that have been subjugated (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3-4). Africa has to be a legitimate centre of knowledge generation and dissemination. The fundamental issue being what value is gained if we think from Africa into the world and reverse the colonial gaze where thinking was from Europe and North America. This question becomes urgent at the present moment of uncertainties of knowledge and whereby basic epistemological questions have been re-opened (see Wallerstein 2014: 58).

Building a strong case for epistemic freedom begins by asserting that all knowledges have a particularistic genealogy which make them partial and incomplete. This reality links well with what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) termed “ecologies of knowledges” or epistemic pluralism. The result is a shift from old colonial conception of knowledge in the singular to the new decolonial understanding of knowledges in the plural. It becomes possible in a context where decolonization is deployed to unsettle and interrupt the racist, colonialist, imperialist, sexist, capitalist, and neoliberal structures of hegemonic knowledge.

There are also scholars, like Miranda Fricker (2007), who come from analytic philosophy who contributed to the question of epistemic freedom. Fricker thought of epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression in terms of limitations of choice of epistemic endeavours of others who are not powerful, lack means to exercise epistemic freedom, and experience exclusion from participation in epistemic communities, and

ethics (see also Landstrom 2024). Fricker (2007) coined two widely used concepts of hermeneutic and testimonial injustices which speak more to prejudices of individuals rather than structures, systems, institutions, and epistemes that constrain epistemic freedom.

Fricker was not thinking from a decolonial perspective but from an analytical philosophical paradigm. The context was that of what became known as “republican epistemology” and “neo-republican philosophy” (see Landstrom 2024: 17). The legacies and indeed the afterlives of racism, enslavement, imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, heteropatriarchal sexism, and neoliberalism, as they impinge on cognitive injustices and epistemic oppression, resulting in the production of what Veli Mitova (2020: 3) termed an “epistemically colonized world” is not the focus of Fricker.

Fricker (2013) acknowledges that epistemic justice is an essential pre-condition for political freedom. There is liberal and if not neoliberal thinking in Fricker’s otherwise useful work. My own interventions are from the vantage points of the Global South in general and global Africa in particular, where racism, colonialism, racial capitalism, heteropatriarchal sexism, and neoliberalism as well as the afterlives of racial enslavement continue to wreak havoc on epistemic communities and knowledge domains. This article builds on this decolonial perspective to further elaborate on the itineraries of the concept of epistemic freedom.

## Context

As a concept, epistemic freedom has a context within which it emerges. It is a modern global historical context, which Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) depicted as characterised by racist/sexist/colonial/Eurocentric epistemology. It is a context dominated by epistemic theft, expropriation, encryption, and monopolization of knowledge by enslavers, racists, colonialists, capitalists, patriarchs, and sexists who turned it into expertise to rule-by, to control, dominate, and exploit the world and other peoples.

The concept of epistemic freedom confronts the cognitive empire which thrives on the invasion of mental universes of its targets and victims (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986). This invasion began with ontological extractivism known as “coloniality of being” (see Wynter 2003; Maldonado-Torres 2007).

Ontological extractivism is a foundation of coloniality of knowledge. Coloniality of knowledge names the processes of imposition of knowledge from provincial Europe and North America into the rest of the world. It also confronts cognitive/epistemic injustices entangled with other colonially induced injustices. In the process, epistemicides were committed concurrently with genocides. Colonial conquests were justified epistemically as civilizing missions and the spreading of enlightenment and development. Dispossession was preceded by epistemic denial of the humanity of the targets and victims. All this gives credence to the thesis that the “colour line” (see Dubois (1903), the “epistemic line” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) and “extraverted accumulation” (see Amin 1974) are inextricably intertwined in how they impinge on the global economy of knowledge and how they constrain epistemic freedom. This means that the existential, epistemic, and material problems are entangled.

The current global economy of knowledge with its uneven intellectual and academic divisions of labour continues to reproduce epistemic inequalities and asymmetries of epistemic capital and power. Forget about liberal feel-good concepts of network society, commonwealth of knowledge, partnerships, and collaborations. They hide the resilient and invisible power dynamics and imperialism of modern hegemonic knowledge (see Ake 1979; Hountondji 1990; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2024b). For example, what Maria Lugones (2008) termed as the “modern colonial gender system” and “coloniality of gender” continues to sustain epistemic androcentrism and epistemic sexism. Consequently, gender analysis, feminist science, and the general contributions of women scholars to knowledge remain marginalised in the global economy of knowledge.

What is underscored here is that the concept of epistemic freedom is not about epistemic liberalism which is limited to inclusion of the excluded, diversification and equality. No, it is about challenging and dismantling the structures and epistemes of hegemonic knowledge systems (Go 2020).

### **Five problematic epistemes**

Epistemic structures shaped discursive fields, disciplines, and mainstream schools of thought. The concept of epistemic freedom confronts five resilient and invisible epistemes. These are: racist

episteme; (en)slave episteme; imperial/colonial episteme; capitalist episteme/neoliberal episteme; and androcentric/sexist episteme. These epistemes are entangled and intersecting. They institute, inscribe, inaugurate, underpin, and sustain epistemic hierarchies. They dictate what counts as legitimate and scientific knowledge and define who can produce it. They are constituent elements of Eurocentrism as an epistemology and a power structure (see Amin 1989; Blaut 1993). Eurocentrism impinges on knowledge and academic cultures at a world scale. Ali A. Mazrui explained the impact of Eurocentrism this way:

It is the Eurocentrism of academic cultures as we know it today—the degree to which the whole tradition of universities is so thoroughly saturated with European values, perspectives, and orientations. The very institution of the university became in our type of situation virtually a mechanism for transmission of European culture to non-European parts of the world (1975: 393).

Wallerstein highlighted that even some celebrated efforts and struggles against Eurocentrism tend to degenerate into “anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism” (1997: 32). This speaks to how entrenched, hegemonic, ubiquitous, and resilient Eurocentrism interpellated its nemeses. This makes it necessary to examine the five epistemes that underpin Eurocentrism and propel its reproduction today. The foundational one is the racist episteme.

### **The racist episteme**

At the centre of the racist episteme is racist reason. Humans according to racist reason are nothing but races. White race is superior. Black race is inferior. Rationality and reason are embodied by the White race. In the racist episteme there is “the presumed illegitimacy of non-Euromodern knowledge” and “epistemic enclosure” (Gordon 2021:24). Knowledges and knowers from the majority world (Global South) are denied, muted and pushed to the margins of the academy as well as society. The epistemic mike is taken and monopolized by a minority of men from the Global North (Europe and North America). It is this epistemic reality that provoked Ramon Grosfoguel to pose four soul searching questions:

- How is it possible than men from five countries (Italy, France, Germany, Britain, and the USA) achieved such an epistemic privilege to the point

- that their knowledge today is considered superior over the knowledge of the rest of the world?
- How did they come to monopolise the authority of knowledge in the world?
  - Why is it that what we know today as the social, historical, philosophical, or critical theory is based on the socio-historical experience and world views of men from five countries?
  - How did they come to monopolise the authority of knowledge of the world?

(2013: 74-75)

It was the response to the operations of the racist episteme that provoked Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (1997) to pose the question of “the colour of reason” and trace it to Kantian philosophy. The racist episteme is resilient and has the quality of hiding in social theory, in methodology, in paradigms, in schools of thought, and in pedagogy. Reflecting on epistemic struggles, Françoise Vergès (2021: 13) posited that: “We are fighting against a system that has dismissed scientific knowledge, aesthetics, and entire categories of human beings as non-existent.”

The key point is that over centuries the racist episteme has been able to penetrate modern institutions, structures and agencies to embed itself and hide from the naked eye. The westernized modern university is a site within which the racist episteme is hiding. It has a quality of naturalising and routinizing itself. Worse still, the racist episteme invades the psyches of its victims (colonize the minds) and then lives like a parasite—indeed, what Ashis Nandy (1983) termed “the intimate enemy.” This is why decolonization of institutions, structures, agencies and minds is so difficult. The racist episteme works together with the (en)slave episteme to deliver devastation.

### **The (en)slave episteme**

Alys Eve Weinbaum (2022: 4) described the (en) slave episteme as “the thought system, brewed up and distilled over the course of four centuries, that initially enabled and continues to subtend the racialization of (re)production.” It is also an episteme of brutality. Achille Mbembe (2024 xiv-xv) explained brutality as “the practice and experience of power as an exercise in the demolition of beings, things, dreams, and life” as well as “a vast enterprise of occupying territories, of seizing hold

of bodies and imaginaries” that produces “states of emergency” and “states of exception.”

Weinbaum calls it “the slave episteme” and I prefer to term it the (en)slave episteme to underscore that it was not an episteme of enslaved people but that of enslavers. Epistemic efforts were expended in justifying enslavement as a structure of power, as an industry and indeed a “scene of subjection” (see Hartman 2007). Enslavement laid a foundation not only for the exploitative modern capitalist economic system but also for antiblack politics within which Black lives were denied and made to not matter (see Hartman 2007).

Enslavement was a terrain of dehumanization. Murder, rape, and thingification ceased to be exceptions. In the words of Mbembe (2024:16): “brutalism is about naturalising social war.” Dehumanization is the signature of brutality. The contemporary form of domination and deprivation is rooted in the (en)slave episteme. Currently, the (en)slave episteme is pulsating and reverberating within racial capitalism.

The (en)slave episteme began with the kidnapping and chaining of African people, their enclosure in the dark dungeons/stockages at the coast of Africa, their being sold as commodities, their packing like sardines and as cargo into the ships, their suffering in the Middle Passage, and their labouring in plantation and mines. For over four centuries there was the intensification in racism, violence, hyper-exploitation, physical killing, and the rape of enslaved peoples.

Weinbaum (2019) alerts us to how reproductive labour was extracted during the four centuries of enslavement where enslaved women became reduced to breeders of other enslaved labour as well as how this logic feeds into present day biocapitalism. The (en)slave episteme enables contemporary devaluation and extraction of women’s reproduction under biocapitalism. Such phenomena as surrogacy and marketing of biological life (stem cells, sperm, oocytes, babies, and human organs) is enabled by the (en)slave episteme (Weinbaum 2019).

Also, the (en)slave episteme is the base from which contemporary exploitative capitalist labour regimes and contracts are founded. How can one explain the contemporary realities of owners of

means of production across the modern world being predominantly male and white and the labouring forces being largely people of colour? The roots are in the (en)slave episteme. Verges (2021: vi) grappled with the question of “who cleans the world” and her answer was that it lies within “the racialization and feminization of underpaid and undervalued cleaning and care work” where women of colour are dominant.

It is a combination of racist and (en)slave epistemes, which is driving Donald Trump, the president of the United States, to launch an attack on Black history and Black Studies in universities, defunding them, and caricaturing them as nothing but identity and woke politics. At the centre of his agenda of “Making America Great Again” (MAGA) is a racist episteme and nostalgia for the pre-civil rights movements—specifically the Jim Crow period. MAGA is a product of a tragic racist thinking predicated on the idea of United States of America without others, especially migrants, as if whites are not the largest migrants to America who turned it into a colony.

### **The Imperial/colonial episteme**

The Imperial/colonial episteme generated imperial and colonial ways of seeing and knowing. At the centre was a paradigm of difference as a driver of what James Blaut (1993: 10) termed the “colonizer’s model of the world.” Besides the paradigm of difference, there was the paradigm of “discovery” lurking within the imperial/colonial episteme. The paradigm of “discovery” is a dirty one propelled by a mythology of terra nullius (empty spaces) which was a way of denying the existence of other people. It also fed into the practices of reduction of the planet earth itself into something to be discovered, conquered, mapped, colonized, named, owned, and exploited. Colonialism in its grandiose terms became a struggle about who owns the planet earth together with the beings and selves inhabiting it.

Modern social theory emerged within the context of imperialism and colonialism. There is an in-built imperial, colonial, and indeed a white gaze inside the imperial/colonial episteme (Go 2016). The imperial/colonial episteme entrenched itself in the modern disciplines and in the epistemic cultures of institutions of research, learning and teaching. Valentin Y. Mudimbe (1988) introduced the concept

of the “colonial library” to name an imperial and colonial order of knowledge. Like Wallerstein who highlighted how Eurocentrism interpellated even the efforts to subvert and transcend it, Mudimbe also underscores that even the best efforts to decolonize knowledge and delink from the imperial/colonial epistemological order tend to be shaped by it.

He explains how difficult it is to subvert dominant social theory as theory itself is failing to delink with mooring in a context and a history of imperialism and colonialism. This reality led Gurminder K. Bhabra and John Holmwood (2021: 1) to posit that “Modern social theory is a product of the very history it seeks to interpret and explain.” Binaries, dichotomies, and oppositions that characterise modern theorising are an inevitable sign of its modernist, imperial and colonial genealogy constituted by an “overriding anxiety about alterity” (Go 2020: 83).

The key point is that modern social theory, modern social science, and indeed modern scientific thinking emerged within the empire as racialised, androcentric and geographically confined enterprise that was universalised together with its hidden logics of difference. The contemporary demographic profiles of faculties reflect this genealogy. What is read and written by who tells a racist/colonial/imperial/sexist epistemic story. Who is acknowledged and privileged as theorists, who is undermined and silenced, and from which part of the world is a sign of how beholden the modern world of knowledge is to a contextual and historical emergence of social theory. Even the themes and the topics chosen for research and the units of analysis are a tale of the hidden imperial/colonial episteme. Currently, the racist, (en)slave, and imperial/colonial epistemes feed into the capitalist/neoliberal episteme

### **The capitalist/neoliberal episteme**

The modern world is subjected to what Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o (2016) depicted as the journeys of capital. The journeys are from mercantile capital, industrial capital, monopoly capital, financial capital/neoliberal capital to computational capital (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2024a). Across all this, the capitalist/neoliberal episteme justifies all sorts of extractivism. Its quadruple refrains are: I

conquer, therefore I am. I exploit, therefore I am. I accumulate, therefore I am. I consume, therefore I am. The dollar is the signature of the capitalist/neoliberal episteme. Cathrine Odora Hoppers and Howard Richards (2012: 24) captured very well the implications of the capitalist/neoliberal episteme for the wider world:

Thinking is calculating. Calculating is economics. Economics is development. Sell yourself, sell yourself, they utter night and day, buzzing with their mercantile message from ear to ear like bees seeking not honey in flowers but salt in wounds.

Maria Lugones (2008: 8) explained the key cognitive interests of capitalism:

The cognitive needs of capitalism include measurement, quantification, externalization (or objectification) of what is knowable with respect to the knower so as to control the relation among the people and nature and among them with respect to it, in particular the property in means of production. This way of knowing was imposed on the whole capitalist world as the only valid rationality and as emblematic of modernity.

The capitalist/neoliberal episteme is fundamentally extractivist. While Linda Martin Alcoff (2022) posited that extractivist epistemologies are generated by extractivist projects. The reality is that they operate in a two-fold manner. First, it is the capitalist/neoliberal extractivist epistemologies that enable and justify extractivist projects. Second, it is the extractivist projects that deploy capitalist/neoliberal episteme to justify extractivism. It is possible to distill the key aspects of the capitalist/neoliberal episteme:

- Nature is redefined as natural resource available for ceaseless exploitation.
- Planet earth as a habitat is objectified as that which has to be discovered, controlled mastered, and owned.
- Knowledge to live-by/knowledge for life is decrypted and transformed into expertise to dominate, control, exploit and rule-by.
- Everything of importance is assigned a monetary value and seen from the eye of monetary profits.
- Knowers are hierarchized and ranked with a view to dismiss or ignore others while giving authority and legitimacy to some.
- Use of intellectual property regimes and law to

turn the commons into private property.

- Corporatization, commodification, and commercialization of everything is promoted.

The capitalist/neoliberal episteme drives what are called market forces. They assign monetary and profit value to nature and being in the first instance. Bio-imperialism (taking control and exploitation of biodiversity for commercial purposes) and biopiracy (patenting and deployment of intellectual property legal regimes) are the contemporary consequence. It started with colonial habits of botanization and museumization of nature. Currently, the capitalist/neoliberal episteme has successfully invaded universities and Jonathan Jansen (2023: 27) summarised the consequences this way:

Students are clients. Teaching is inputs. Publications are outputs. Curriculum is (unit) standards. Measurement is accountability. Assessment is performance. Scholarship is metrics. Graduates (oven-ready) are for the labour market. Leadership is management.

Increasingly, the previous titles of leaders of the universities, such as Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice-Chancellor, are being replaced by new ones from the private sector, such as CEO and COO. Instead of the top leadership of the universities being decorated academics (men and women of letters), there is preference for those who have experience in fund-raising and in turning institutions of higher education into full-fledged business corporations. Peers and colleagues which were part of languages of collegiality are being replaced by bosses and subordinates. The professoriate is now the proletariat. Education is now a commodity. It is no longer a public good. Quality of research is replaced by quantity. Love for knowledge is replaced by love for certificates, diplomas, degrees, and titles. The last is the androcentric/sexist episteme, which cuts across the other problematic epistememes.

### **Androcentric/sexist episteme**

The modern dominant order of knowledge is constitutively patriarchal and sexist. Her-story is overshadowed by his-tory. This is the reality across all the major modern disciplines and fields of study. Conceptually, class analysis and analysis of race tend to overshadow gender analysis. Such indices of economy as GDP and GNP ignores “subsistence and reproductive labour” (see Imam and Mama

“

What emerges clearly from  
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of knowledge.

”

1994: 82). This derives from the fact that economics as a discipline, in its models and theories, excludes women epistemically. This has resulted in what Ayesha M. Imam and Amina Mama (1994: 87) termed “housewification” of women.

One of the seminal works that directly confronts the androcentric/sexist episteme is *Engendering African Social Sciences in Africa* (1997) edited by Ayesha M. Imam, Amina Mama, and Fatou Sow. It reveals that the androcentric/sexist episteme has given birth to such problems as gender-bias, gender-neutrality, and gender-blindness that characterise knowledge in general, disciplines, and scholarship. Ayesha M. Imam (1997: 6) specifically interrogates the issue of hostility to engendering knowledge and refusal to embrace feminism, making it clear that “engendering African social sciences is not a simple development of knowledge, but also necessarily and simultaneously profoundly a political struggle over power and resources.”

In a modern world where “at least half of humanity is of feminine genders,” “a social science which does not acknowledge gender as an analytic category is an impoverished and distorted science, and cannot accurately explain social realities and hence cannot provide a way out of the present crisis in Africa” (Imam 1997: 2). What is called for by feminist

scholars is a new scholarship that responds to Sylvia Tamale’s (2020: 9) prescient question: “Who will connect the ideological dots of racism, colonization, capitalism, sexism and heterosexism in ways that our children understand?” This dovetails with Imam’s (1997:21) argument that intersectionality of issues—“class, gender, race, imperialism” are seen as “simultaneous social forces” that are both interwoven and recursive upon each other” and must be put at the centre of the knowledge project.

What emerges clearly from this analysis of the problematic epistemes is that there would never be epistemic freedom without the depatriarchization of knowledge. The struggle for decolonization of knowledge which ignores depatriarchization is an impoverished one. The knowledge project in its entirety which ignores over 52% of the population and is satisfied with what Claude Ake (1997) termed “knowledge of equilibrium” which marginalises the contributions of women to society and normalises the inferiorisation and subordination of women is itself impoverished.

### Conclusion:

#### Seek ye epistemic freedom first

Epistemic freedom and academic freedom are in danger currently across the world. Those scholars and students who have actively condemned the genocide taking place in Gaza have suffered from expulsions from universities, especially in the United States of America. Their academic and epistemic freedom has suffered. Their lives have been made precarious. The flag of antisemitism is constantly being raised as a silencing method. These realities provoked me to delve into the five problematic epistemes as they are part of the itinerary that makes the concept of epistemic freedom central to struggles for decolonization of knowledge. Epistemic freedom is an essential pre-requisite for liberation and freedom in all their dimensions. It is not a metaphor as it has a potential to confront powerful structures, institutions, and agencies of dominant knowledge—the hegemonic epistemes—that underpin, sustain, and reproduce epistemic inequalities, epistemic exclusions, and indeed epistemicides. Epistemic inequalities and exclusions produce social, economic, and other exclusions at the empirical level.

The call of this article is for confronting the five problematic epistemes directly as part of decolonization. A recognition of the fact that knowledge is always partial, incomplete, and perspectival opens the path for possibilities of ecologies of knowledges, which banishes scientific racism and sexism. Epistemic freedom gestures beyond epistemic binaries, dichotomies,

hierarchies, and inequalities. Epistemic freedom is a central part of what Verges (2022: 98) posited as: “Daring to make the leap in time, daring to imagine a world in which humanity is not divided into lives that matter and lives that do not,” and is premised on: “Imagining a *post*(slavery, racist, capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal) future [that] is nonetheless a powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressed.”

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# The Emergence and Development of Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN) in South Africa: A Reflection on Trajectories, Challenges, and Prospects

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## Abstract

One of the fundamental challenges facing many of the decolonial initiatives today is the challenge of reproducing coloniality in the name its opposite, which is decolonization or decoloniality. This happens as a result of many reasons that include among them, the problem of entrapment in colonial mindset that comes with being socialized into a consenting colonial subject and the deliberate attempt to be part of the racket by selfish individuals, among others. Whether deliberate or not, the challenge of contradictions within the decolonial movement is a long-standing challenge that we cannot afford to neglect. For there are always invaluable lessons to be learnt in order to move the struggle to the next level. In this short treatise, I intend to review the challenges and prospects of the ADERN initiative within a modern university institution in South Africa with a view of unmasking some few lessons for the overall decolonial struggle after the demise of juridical-administrative colonialism.

## The ADERN initiative and the challenge a decolonial struggle in a modern/colonial forcefield

The struggle for decolonization in Africa after the demise of what can be considered to be the 'official' or 'classical colonialism' and apartheid is a struggle that has taken many forms and attracted various interpretations among scholars, policy-makers and activists. On one hand, there are those who view

this struggle as a continuation of the unfinished business of liberation from the clutches of what is now known as coloniality and/or neocolonialism and on the other hand, are those who are convinced that we now live in a post-colonial world; that is a world without colonialism.

This contribution is not about who is right and wrong about what constitute the presence or absence of colonialism. However, it is about what typically happens in the process of this second struggle for decolonization because I am one of those who subscribe to the notion of decolonization as an unfinished struggle. Thus, I am more concerned about excavating the challenges, issues and prospects that come with efforts to decolonize the 'postcolonial' world order where the colonial system remains intact, cunning and mutating even without the white settler governments in place. To me the postcolonial world order is just but an order in the colonial world system that is unchanging. In other words, this order hides rather than reveals the system which it is working to sustain. Thus, I am of the view that world orders have been mutating, giving the impression that colonialism as a system of oppression has collapsed, but alas, it remains hidden and unnoticed by those who are hoodwinked. In another treatise of this subject, I elaborated how the colonial system consists of both prescriptive and performative orders that enable it to reproduce itself even in circumstances where it appears not to exist (see Ndlovu 2013, 2018).

My observations of challenges, issues and opportunities that accompany decolonial efforts are based on my personal experience and interaction with decolonial initiatives within the university environment—a space in which I first came into contact with what some scholars have defined as 'decoloniality' or decolonization of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is an ongoing debate about the use of these labels with some arguing that the decoloniality project is a Latin American project and then others who have also found the term useful for capturing the struggle of our time. I am of the view that the term is useful though its origin is traceable to Anibal Quijano (2007), a Latin American sociologist. I am also of the view that a debate over the origins of terms and concepts is but a distraction whose purpose is to waste time and space that could have been used to discuss issues of substance especially by subjects whose lives are constantly under the threat of the unending colonial system. There are nonetheless several terms that have been used to characterise the struggles of the oppressed subject under the yoke of colonialism which their origins did not change the content and the objective of the struggle for liberation. One of them is the term

'Marxism' whose origin is traceable to Europe but has so far been useful to bring about some of the changes that we want to consolidate and deepen to finish the unfinished business of liberation. Others have chosen terms such as emancipation over liberation but to achieve goals that are more or less similar in nature.

In general, decoloniality is an umbrella term for various struggles against colonialism as a system and not just a mere event. In general, the debates that underpin the decolonial discourse of the Latin American decoloniality scholarship mirrors that of the epochal and the episodic schools of thought about colonialism among African scholars. These two schools of thought about the nature of colonialism pitted thinkers such as Ali Mazrui who insisted that colonialism amounted to a "revolution of epic proportions" since "what Africa knows about itself, what different parts of Africa know about each other have been profoundly influenced by the West" (Mazrui 1986, p.12-13), and against those such as Ade Ajayi (1969) who somehow reduced it to a mere episode or footnote in the history of Africans. In my view, decoloniality represents a perfect balance between recognising the epic impact of coloniality as a system and its failure to erase the ontological presence of the agency of the oppressed. This can be seen in the instance of the discussion of the subject of epistemicides that were committed and/or continue to be committed by the colonial system. In this discussion, there is a need to acknowledge the destructions that were made by the colonial system without insinuating that the colonised have no alternative worldview to turn to in order to raise a substantive challenge to the system. This is why decoloniality has an anti-coloniality leg whose focus is to unmask the true nature of the colonial system and a counter-coloniality leg that is propositional in terms of alternatives and options out of the quagmire.

Among the many decolonial initiatives that I have engaged with during the course of my academic career is the Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN). In general, ADERN is a loose network of the likeminded whose concern is to produce a rupture out of the colonial system. It was formed by a group of young black scholars who were mainly based at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and some few from the neighbouring universities such as the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of

Pretoria (UP) and University of Johannesburg (UJ). It was formed around 2012. The idea was conceived and initiated by Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni who, by then, was a new UNISA staff member within the Department of Development Studies.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni joined UNISA's Department of Development Studies on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2011. He was the first black Associate Professor to be hired by the department several years after South Africa attained democracy in 1994. Instead of being excited by the fact that he was the pioneering figure (as many would do) and the most senior staff member among those of his racial category to join the department, Ndlovu-Gatsheni was puzzled by the situation in which the professoriate of the department remained white while black colleagues constituted the junior staff complement. This was not the only department with a distorted reflection of the demographic makeup of the South African population but many others departments within this university had a similar structure except for the few. This was the same situation with many other 'white' universities in South Africa—a situation that is making mockery of the much vaunted democratic values of equality and equity.

At first, Ndlovu-Gatsheni established ADERN to address the short-term objective of correcting what was in front of him—which was the racial misnomer of black juniors and white seniors within the department. This was a typical 'Cappuccino syndrome' of a racial hierarchy that placed white individuals at the top and black individuals at the bottom using the ruse of merit that functions through the distortion of the level playing field. In this way, the idea of ADERN was to come up with a program that would accelerate the mobility of black academics within the academic structures of the university by helping them to obtain higher qualifications, publish scholarly works and gain confidence in presenting ideas in national and international platforms. Secondly, ADERN played a therapeutic role of a safe space whose role was to rehabilitate a people who have lost confidence in themselves by being consistently reminded that they were not capable of thinking. In other words, ADERN became a perfect response to Hamid Dabashi's rhetorical question in the title of his book, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (Dabashi 2015).

Beside the short term goal of accelerating the social mobility of academic staff in the department and the university at large, the ADERN group also developed medium and long-term goals that were designed to bring about positive change in the lives of academics within the South African university landscape as well as improving the life chances of the society at large. These medium and long term goals included among them the decolonisation curricula, pedagogy, the university and the archive, among other achievable goals in our life-time; all which in the long run will positively impact on the life chances of the members of the marginalised in South Africa. For we understood from decolonial literature that epistemology reproduced ontology and, as such, it is impossible to change the lived experience of the oppressed subjects without changing the knowledge foundation on which this experience is manufactured. Thus, as Mignolo & Walsh (2018) have argued: "Ontology is made of epistemology. That is, ontology is an epistemological concept" (Mignolo and Walsh 2028, p. 135). What, indeed, one can decipher from the above articulation of the relationship between knowledge and reality is the fact that the latter cannot exist without being enabled by the former. In other words, there is a co-production between the physical empire and the cognitive empire. Thus, to decolonise sites of knowledge production such as the modern/colonial university institution is to decolonise the very factories in which the normative experiences of coloniality are manufactured. Even political decolonization that was achieved through so much human expenditure could not translate into concrete manifestations of freedom because the political theory remained colonial hence leading to the current state of unfinished business. This is why Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) thesis on 'epistemic freedom' and wa Thiong'o's (1986) 'decolonization of the mind' are even more important for enabling the emergence of an extra-structural agency that is both counter-colonial and anti-colonial in the making.

In general, the first task of deracialisation through populating the senior membership of the academic structure with black bodies was a necessary but artificial form of decolonisation in that a black body alone does not translate into decolonisation. Thus, as a result of the fact that coloniality is a socializing system, many of the

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black bodies are already carriers of this coloniality, if minds are epistemically dislocated from the social location. This was the role of colonial education—to produce a consenting colonial subject by making the colonised to think from the coloniser’s dominant side within the colonial system of power differential in a situation that made the colonized work against him/herself through sustaining the very power structure in which he/she is oppressed. With this understanding, the other role of ADERN was to re-socialize the black subject in matters of self-love and thinking and/or acting from one’s vantage point and not against oneself.

Many of the short-term and some of the long-term objectives have so far been proven to be achievable. For example, between 2014 and 2024, almost 90% of the cohort that joined and participated in the formation of ADERN from the Department of Development Studies and other departments that faced a similar challenge have not only obtained their PhDs but have also gone on to attain the statuses of senior lecturers, associate professors and full-professors. This is the case with those who joined ADERN from other universities, such as the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg. Many of them were scholars who were struggling to rise above the rank of lecturership as a result of the epistemic and non-epistemic barriers. I vividly remember Ndlovu-Gatsheni lamenting the length of time that some of young academics took to complete their Masters and Doctoral projects within the university, with some taking up to 10 years to complete a doctoral project—a situation that he characterised as a challenge of epistemic dislocation that I have

elaborated on above. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argued that this delay was not only caused by non-epistemic barriers, such as marking large quantities of undergraduate assignments and a lack of time, among other legitimate obligations, but also because of trying to ‘stand up from where we are not seated’. He gave us an example of a poor individual who is forced to think from a position of the rich individual or female individual who is forced to think from the position of a male figure—a situation that leads to the overstretching of imagination as a result of dislocation between our epistemic and our social positions. This is how we discovered the colonial process that led to our stupidification until we almost lost confidence in our human-ness. It was only when we aligned our epistemic and social locations that we gained our voices to speak as ourselves and not anyone else, then we were able to write with confidence, reflecting on our own experiences. This only did not enable us to generate original ideas but also to think deeply about things that we took for granted, such as the application of received methodologies that we, all along, thought were neutral and, therefore, can be applied without critical interrogation.

The history of ADERN cannot be complete without the contribution of Latin American-scholars based in the United States. I need to emphasise the ‘contribution’ and not the ‘imposition’ of the Latin American scholars to our conversation about change that needed to happen. It can also not be complete without the history of our struggle for existence within the Westernised university institution, as well as opportunities that we were afforded by the same institution. With regard to the Latin American contribution to the development ADERN, the story has to be captured accurately to avoid misinterpretations and general falsehood that usually get propped up by those who are always bent on negating the concerted effort of racialised subjects. The association of ADERN with Latin American scholars stems from two developments that have not only enriched the decolonial discourse but have also enhanced its planetarity across subjects located in different parts of the world.

The first development is the quest to revive the long-standing academic exchange between African and Latin American scholars on the subject of decolonization. This long-standing history of academic exchange has seen the movement

of ideas from and to between the two groups of scholars in two interconnected regional locations as a result of their shared experience of colonial domination. During our interaction with one of the most eminent Latin American scholars, Walter D. Mignolo, he revealed that he learnt decoloniality from one of the eminent African scholars, VY Mudimbe, who is well-known for his groundbreaking theses namely, *The Idea of Africa* (1994) and *The Invention of Africa* (1988). Following in Mudimbe's footsteps, Mignolo went on to produce his own groundbreaking thesis on *The Idea of Latin America* (2000). It is not only Mignolo who has acknowledged the influence of African thinkers on his decolonial thinking but also Ramon Grosfoguel who disclosed that he was influenced by Bernard Magubane in some of his systematic thinking about decolonization and racism. This explains why many of us who have found the language of Latin American scholars resonant and attractive for articulating our struggle cannot reject it merely on the basis that some of the terms were coined by Latin American scholars. The act of sharing ideas and cooperating with the like-minded based on shared experiences of equal partners can never be another form of colonisation as our detractors have sought to propagate but as has always been the case, regions and people with shared colonial history have previously sought to cooperate on issues of decolonization. This, perhaps, is best exemplified by the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement at the Bandung Conference of 1955. These forms of cooperation and concerted effort are important not only because the colonising agency has always divided the colonised through brewing 'non-revolutionary violence' among them but also because coloniality is a global power structure that requires a planetary effort to dethrone it. As much as the success of coloniality can be credited to the unity of colonisers in their mission to maintain their privilege through colonial domination, the success of the decolonial project will also depend on the concerted effort of the colonised rather than non-revolutionary squabbles and competition.

The second development that informs ADERN's relationship with Latin American scholars and their scholarship is a result of some practical activities that cemented this relationship. In November 2011, I travelled to Australia to attend an Annual Conference of Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (CSAA)

on: 'Cultural Re-Orientations and Comparative Colonialities' which was organised by the Centre for Muslim and Non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia. During the course of the conference, I met Ramon Grosfoguel who was giving a keynote address in that conference. I then informed him of the formation of ADERN at UNISA and he immediately sought to contact Ndlovu-Gatsheni thereby making a critical connection that led to the current co-operative academic relationship. This relationship began with ADERN members attending a Decoloniality Summer School in Barcelona, Spain in 2012—a process that was funded by UNISA after the then Dean of the College of Human Sciences, Professor Rosemary Moeketsi persuaded the university to release funds to support this worthwhile endeavour. In general, the university management, which was predominantly constituted by some of the pioneering and progressive black professors, including the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mandla Makhanya, supported this decolonial initiative.

At the summer school, teaching was conducted by scholars of African and Latin American descent, which included among them Professors Kwame Nimmako from Ghana, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni from South Africa, Nelson Maldonado-Torres from Puerto-Rico, Ramon Grosfoguel from Puerto-Rico, Linda Martin Alcoff from the United States of America, Tiffany Ruby Patterson from the United States of America, to name but a few. From 2014 onwards, the Decolonial Summer School was replicated at UNISA in Pretoria, drawing on a diverse faculty that included scholars from India such as Professor C.K. Raju and a host of local scholars which included among them scholars such as Professor Siphamandla Zondi and Mogobe Ramose. This brief history is necessary to dispel the unfounded falsehood that decoloniality is another colonial project imposed by Latin American scholars on a supposedly naïve African subject who has all along been content to live under coloniality. Never at any given moment in the history of ADERN has any of the scholars involved in the decolonial project sought to impose his/her views on others. In fact, speaking from our own local experiences has always been encouraged including deploying our own 'grammars of change' such as Africanization or indigenization. Thus, for instance, the leading decolonial scholars Walsh

and Mignolo in his 2018 book, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* have flatly rejected the idea of a master plan but instead they advocate for relationality in our decolonial efforts. This is very important because though different regions of the world suffered and continue to suffer coloniality, the process of colonization took different forms hence our responses tend to vary from place to place and time to time even though we share a common objective. This has seen scholars of different persuasions such as those advocating for Africanization and indigenization expressing why they have chosen to frame their struggle in language instead of decoloniality or decolonization thereby enriching and expanding the vocabulary of dealing with the problem of Eurocentrism and coloniality.

While ADERN has been very exciting and has largely been successful in its short-term and long-term goals, it has also experienced some challenges since its formation more than a decade ago. Thus, it has faced and/or continues to face challenges that are worthy learning experiences for any other initiative of this nature. Among the challenges that ADERN faced over the years, is the challenge that one can liken to the prevalence of colonial egos that have manifested through ills such as jealousies, sabotage, gossip and badmouthing among its members. Since the network's short-term goal was to enable members to progress in their academic careers, the unintended consequence of this was an ugly competition that ensued among its members that culminated in negatives such as jealousy, competition and sabotage. This has led to divisions and factionalism between those who were competent and excelling on one hand and those who were not doing well enough to catch-up with their counterparts. Since ills such as jealousies are always masked in acceptable language, accusations and counter-accusation soon emerged between factions that classified themselves as 'activists' and those that were viewed as 'theoreticians' because of their commitment to scholarship and ideas. Xenophobic and tribal sentiments were also evoked whereby some members who accused others of not being the rightful individuals to lead or participate in the ongoing decolonial discourse within the university, while others were even expected to write for some members who cannot in order to be accepted as authentic members of the network. The zeal to

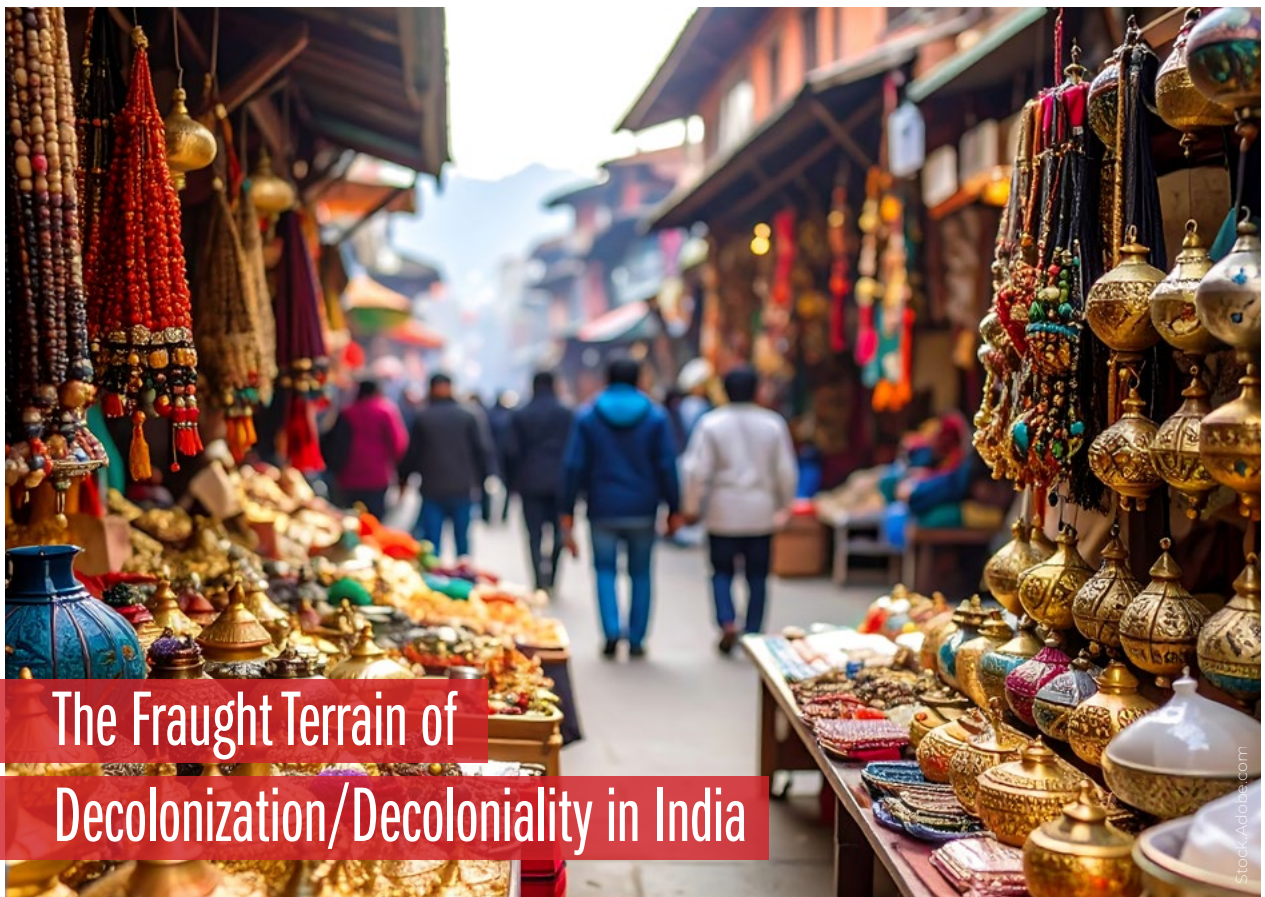
oppress was and/or remains more that the zeal to liberate—a development that one can liken to colonial egos within the decolonial movement.

At a certain moment, attempts were even made to prevent some members of the network from writing about certain subjects such as 'Soweto', 'Nelson Mandela', 'Archie Mafeje', etc., ostensibly because they were not born in a particular place or did not belong to a particular ethnic group. Deliberate conflation between decoloniality and nativism had been evoked to legitimise colonial tendencies of exclusion, oppression and dehumanization. At some instances, decoloniality was no longer against all forms of oppression, but it was made to accommodate certain forms of oppression that were seen as legitimate and acceptable to perpetrators. Incompetence, sloppiness, hatred, anger, laziness and witchcraft; all became decoloniality or worse still, 'African culture'. Noise, insults and shouting at innocent individuals became a measure of radicalism. With decoloniality gaining momentum and having some clout within the academy, those who were opposed to the discourse and initiative such as ADERN have started distorting its history by claiming to be its founders. The point of mentioning these problematic experiences is not to lay the dirty linen in public in order to shame the concerned actors, but it is deduce lessons that can be learnt in the struggles for decolonization.

They are quite a number of these lessons, but the most important of them, at least in my view, is the challenge of the seduction of the colonial office in which the decolonizer is also an aspirant colonizer thereby making him/her always a contradictory subject within colonial environment. Apart from epistemic dislocation brought about by the hegemonic colonial pedagogic discourse within and outside the modern/colonial academy that have turned many potential decolonizers into some unwitting consenting colonial subjects, colonial dispossessions has put the colonised in an unenviable socio-economic situations that compels him/her to aspire for colonial office as the only route for improving his/her life chances. This brings me to the point of a sympathetic gaze on decolonial contradictions that are happening within the decolonial movement at large—a gaze that makes one to magnify patience, perseverance, endurance and decolonial love as important ingredients for sustaining a decolonial movement.

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## The Fraught Terrain of Decolonization/Decoloniality in India

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### Abstract

The project of decolonization/ decoloniality in the Indian context is particularly fraught because the ruling proto-fascist party and its parent and kindred organizations routinely indulge in decolonization-talk, positing a simple West versus Indian binary, where 'Indian' is defined in elitist Brahmanical and homogenous terms. On the other hand, intellectuals and leaders of the historically most oppressed section of Hindu society – the untouchables – have from the late 19th century onwards, found British colonial presence and the modern discourse of equality and rights liberating. This division has become more exacerbated in recent years since the Hindu Right came to power in 2014. The crucial point that is missed is that the Hindu Right is, in fact, constituted by colonial knowledge in at least two ways. (i) The 'Hinduism' that they espouse is a 19th century invention (through the mediation of Orientalist scholarship and colonial institutions of historical and archaeological research) and formalized as a category by British censuses. (ii) Its entire political imaginary is predicated upon the European ideas of nation, nationalism and nation-statism. Indeed, its entire imagination of the Indian past is based on mimicking the European and the irrepressible desire (common among nationalists of other hues as well) to prove that everything that India too had, in the remote past, what defines Europe in modern times. Its decolonization is therefore about proving India's past greatness in European terms, completely obliterating in the process the counter-traditions that were rapidly marginalized through the collusion and colonialism and nationalism.

## The Hindu Nationalist Project of 'Decolonization'

Decoloniality 'as decolonization' means epistemic reconstitution, while the horizon of decolonization during the Cold War meant to build nation-states (Mignolo 2018: 382).

The project of decolonization/ decoloniality in the Indian context is an extremely fraught one because the ruling proto-fascist Hindu Right party and its parent organization routinely indulge in decolonization-talk, as it sits well with its "indigenist" politics. Positing a simple West versus India binary, it defines "Indian" in very elitist, Brahmanical and homogenous terms. On the other hand, intellectuals and leaders of the historically most oppressed section of Hindu society – the former untouchables or "Dalits" in their contemporary political self-description – have from the late 19th century onwards, found British colonial presence and the modern discourse of equality and rights liberating.

This divide has become more exacerbated in recent years as the Hindu Right's rhetoric has become more strident, now that it has been in power for a decade and is in a position to take over control of all institutions including universities. The actual situation is, however, far more complex than what this binary division allows us to see. The crucial point that I have discussed at length in my book (Nigam 2020) is that the Hindu Right is itself constituted by colonial knowledge in at least two ways: First, the "Hinduism" that they espouse is a 19th century invention that was assembled through the mediation of Orientalist scholarship and colonial institutions of historical and archaeological research and formalized as a category via British censuses. Second, the Hindu nationalist imagination was produced by colonialism in another sense – the sense in which colonialism spawns resentful and inward-looking forces of revenge and xenophobic nationalisms across the world, including monstrosities like that of Pol Pot's Kampuchea, which sought to re-establish ancient Khmer glory in the name of anti-colonialism. Nationalism itself was a colonial-Western import in the rest of the world, though scholars differ on the extent to which its immediate political discourse was directly derivative of Europe's (Anderson 1991, Chatterjee 1986). This point, as I will

discuss at greater length in the second part of this essay, is linked to the larger critiques of nationalism made by the poet-thinker Rabindranath Tagore and underlined in recent times by Ashis Nandy, drawing from Tagore and Gandhi (Nandy 1994, Nandy 2003).

The world of the nineteenth century Indian intelligentsia was a melancholy one, trying to come to grips with its status as a colonized population from which it only started recovering in the latter part of that century. The imaginative universe of Hindu nationalism was enabled by a whole new world that opened up before the defeated and despondent Hindu intelligentsia of the 19th century, following the work of Orientalist scholars of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, set up in 1784, which started throwing new light on 'Indian' pasts. Most contemporary Indians will find it unbelievable that the now commonplace accounts of "India's great past", were brought to us thanks to the labours of the Asiatic Society of Bengal – from the Mauryan empire (321 to 185 BCE), which is celebrated as a period of the great flowering of Buddhism to the so-called Golden Age of the Gupta empire (4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) (Kejariwal 1988). Effusive with the discovery of 'India's influence' in South-East Asia in ancient times, some French scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century extolled it almost "as a civilizing colonial mission rather like the French themselves at the time they were writing." Inspired by their work, in 1926, nationalist historians founded "the Greater India society for the study of Indian culture in East, South-East and Central Asia." (Dalrymple 2024: 14) It is this idea of a 'Greater India' that lies at the heart of the Hindu Right's fantasies of an ancient Hindu Kingdom that it wants to revive as the 'Akhand Bharat' (literally, 'Undivided India') of its dreams.

Linked to the massive enterprise of the Asiatic Society is a debate that has never ceased since then – on the claim that Hindus had no sense of history and lived in oblivion of their this-worldly political past. Though this claim was posed by the colonial and Orientalist scholars engaged in the task of reconstructing India's past, this suggestion was not taken kindly to by Indian scholars who produced narratives to show 'we too had history'. This debate continues unabated today. The relevant point here, for the moment, is that the Hindu Right's investment in the colonially constructed

past and the very idea of 'history' as something that belongs to a subject continuous through 'history' (for instance, India, Hindu) is not accidental. This knowledge and the colonial-modern episteme that lay behind it, is constitutive of the Hindu nationalist politics that we know by the name of the Hindutva. The straight line connecting modern Indians today with these pasts could only become possible with the internalization of the idea of 'history' by the modern Indian. Only after the 19<sup>th</sup> century did such straight-line narratives emerge, of the 'secularism' of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE emperor Asoka or of the political history of the 'Hindu' empires that followed, notably the Gupta empire, seen often as the Golden Era by the Hindu nationalists.

Sir William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and philologist, put forward the hypothesis of the probable common origin of Greek, Latin and Sanskrit on the basis of his studies and translations of Sanskrit texts by the Society. The German Indologist Max Muller was another important figure who translated major ancient Sanskrit texts, making them available to the world, adding to a new sense of 'Hindu' identity and pride in India. The discovery of striking similarities between Sanskrit and Greek and Latin in terms of syntax and vocabulary, led to flights of Hindu nationalist fantasy about Vedic peoples and their language possibly being 'ancestors' of Indo-European languages and peoples, not merely sharing common origins. The discovery of a full-fledged Indus Valley civilization by the mid-1920s, once again under the aegis of colonial archaeological institutions, sent the nascent Hindu nationalist imagination into a spin, leading to delusional claims of being the fount of all wisdom – a delusion that still drives the Hindu Right. In other words, every argument of 'Hindu glory' in the arsenal of the Hindutva propagandists can be traced back to these exciting new discoveries of their long forgotten past that the dejected intelligentsia of those times seized upon.

At the same time as the fires of Hindu nationalist imagination were being stoked by the new colonial/modern knowledge and its way of being, the upper caste elites in northern India, in a move reflecting their immense ideological debt to colonial knowledge began displacing the target of their ire from colonialism to the 'Muslim' rulers of the past. These early ideologues of the Hindu

nationalism thus turned the spotlight away from the British to the Muslims. Much of the antipathy towards Muslims was actually predicated on the Islamophobia that the Hindu nationalists had imbibed from the colonial power. Two things are quite clear. One, most 'Hindu' accounts of the period, regarding events like the supposed demolition of a Ram temple by Mughal ruler Babur in sixteenth century, do not consider them important enough to even refer to them, assuming that they did happen. Yet, these 'events' were retrospectively produced as key signs of 'Hindu' victimhood. Two, as scholars have pointed out, the very idea of a pan-Indian Hindu or Muslim community did not exist before the advent of the British (Pandey 1992). Medieval accounts refer to those who came to be described as 'Muslims' by the colonial rulers, as 'Turks' (Turushka), 'Persian' (Parasika) and 'Greek' (Yavana, from the word Ionians, used initially for the Greeks and subsequently to refer generically to foreigners) (Talbot 1995, p. 701). The large and almost homogeneous categories of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' were created in the course of enumeration and classification of populations by colonial censuses, as scholarship in the last few decades, especially by Bernard Cohn (1987) and the Subaltern Studies historians, has shown.

In the discourse of the Hindu Right, apart from the Muslims, the other problematic category has been that of the Dalits who it cannot present as the 'Other' because its entire project depends on incorporating them within a broader 'Hindu unity'. Its attempts therefore have been towards assimilating them within the larger Hindu body – though without upsetting existing power relations of upper caste dominance. This is an impossible task and the 'Muslim', therefore, serves as a convenient

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'enemy' whose very presence can be periodically invoked as a threat to the Hindus, thereby hoping to achieve their much-desired unity.

However, as mentioned at the very outset, the overall position of the Dalit intelligentsia is one of celebration of colonialism as the force that made their limited freedom possible. This is not a trivial question that refers to matters past. The very definition of 'Hindu' and 'Hinduness' is at issue today alongside the question of the place of the Dalits within that 'Hindu' society. How this is understood has a direct bearing on how the postcolonial Indian state deals with the question of redressing historical wrongs through affirmative action. The issue of Brahmanical domination remains a live one as does the Dalit stance that the challenge to it can only be mounted in the name of equality and rights, made available by colonialism.

Indeed, one of the most high-profile political cases that the current regime has slapped against a large number of activists, is known as the *Bhima Koregaon* case. This refers to an 1818 battle in which the untouchable community of Mahars fought in the British Army to defeat the upper caste rule of the Peshwas and this event was celebrated by Dr B.R. Ambedkar as a landmark in Dalit history. During the bicentenary celebrations of that event in 2018 the government cracked down. Sixteen lawyers, scholars, activists and artists were arrested without trial on the spurious charge of 'waging war against the nation.' Most are still in prison, some are out on bail after 5 to 6 years and one died while in custody (Shah 2024). The draconian action reveals the danger that Dalit and lower caste assertion poses to the Hindutva project of claiming a unified 'Hindu' community.

Thus, the Hindu Right, by pointing to the obvious Western orientation of Dalitbahujan discourses (the term Bahujan refers to the majority of Non-Brahmin castes) as well as to the 'foreign' provenance of Islam, Christianity and Marxism, identifies them all as 'enemies of Hindus'. However, because it cannot afford to dispense with the Dalit masses, it approaches them directly with their discourse of Hindu unity, seeking to pit them against the Muslims. But as I have argued above this is a false binary in the Indian context given their own imbrication in colonial-modern power-knowledge. The real challenge of decolonizing our

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thinking, I want to underline then, lies not in the search for some authentic, exceptionalist narrative of past Hindu glory but in *thinking our present outside of the frames set up by colonial knowledge and nationalisms.*

### The Real Challenge of Decolonizing

Decolonizing is an imperative today because of the dead-end that we find ourselves in, across large parts of the world, with states of the Global South mimicking Western capitalism in a world where all possibilities of further 'development' stand exhausted and a planetary crisis stares us in the face. This situation announces, as it were, the exhaustion of the modern European (or the colonial-modern) episteme.

We increasingly recognize today that our task in Asia, Africa and Latin America is not to strive to recast our societies in the image of the West but to strike a fundamentally different path from that imposed by the colonial-modern episteme. It is an imperative because we, in the three continents (and the Native populations in America and elsewhere), reject the idea that everything has already been thought in advance for us by Grand Old Men of the West and that our task is to merely execute their thought. It is important then, to underline, once again, that from this point of view, decolonization is not and cannot be an exclusively Indian problem. This means that it cannot be a project of replacing European provincialism by another parochial

'return to the source' – be it ancient 'Hindu' or 'Khmer' glory for that matter. It is about thinking what has been called the 'pluriverse' through an opening out of our thought to other traditions like the Chinese, Arab or Persian in our case, with which we have long had fruitful exchanges, despite conflicts, before nation-states drew borders around them. Indeed, if one looks at it closely, what we know as 'western knowledge' itself was never a hermetically sealed entity and has constituted itself by borrowing liberally from other traditions – even though it transformed it in its own way. Often that transformation was very generative but at one historical moment it also produced the monstrosity that we are left to deal with today.

The very first – and obvious – point to underline here is that anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism in their political form as nationalism/s do not add up to what we understand by decolonization today, which is much more than a political project. As political projects, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial nationalisms could very well replicate all the pathologies of other modern nationalisms, like xenophobia and ethnic cleansing. As they indeed have all over the postcolonial world, with a vengeance. We need to keep reminding ourselves that while the fear of the Other (the stranger) was certainly there in premodern cultures, it acquires the specific political form of ethnic cleansing and mass expulsion of 'non-citizens' only in the world of nation-states, their quest for a homogenous national culture, and the search for permanent majorities (in a perversion of the democratic principle) mainly in the last two centuries. The twentieth century has seen the endless production of 'refugees', 'boat people' and 'stateless people' as the excrement of the production of citizenship – the Rohingyas in twenty-first century South Asia are the most recent example nearer home. In other words, an anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism that merely mimics the nation-state's drive towards homogeneity and wants to produce new nation-states in the image of the West, obviously has little to do with decolonizing in our sense.

At this point it is necessary to return to our reference earlier, to the nationalism and nation-statism of the Hindu Right as another way in which it is constituted by the colonial-modern. Discussing the critique of nationalism in three political novels by Rabindranath Tagore, Ashis Nandy strikingly observes that

Each major contradiction in the novels *involves the entry of western ideas of the nation-state, history and progress*, into the Indian life style, as a means of organizing a culture's self-definition...*This success of colonialism is matched by the ambitions of a nationalism, which after faithfully swallowing the colonial worldview hook, line and sinker, is willing to sacrifice Indians at the altar of a brand new, imported, progressive history of the nation-state in the making.* (Nandy 1994, p. 48)

It is the italicized parts that I want to draw attention to because, even though Tagore in his famous 'nationalism' lectures uses the term 'nation', and Nandy additionally refers to 'nation-state' and 'nationalism', it is very clear that neither Tagore nor Nandy are talking only about the political form of the nation and nationalism. This is a category that Tagore sees as epistemic (though he does not use that term). In Tagore, as Nandy rightly suggests, the 'nation' stands in for all these other ideas like history and progress, which he also revolts against because it represents to him an abstraction that kills life. In more contemporary philosophical language, we could render Tagore's point as his critique of the Cartesian break between the subject and object, and the human and non-human. Tagore rejects the abstraction called 'nation' because it destroys the wholeness of life – an idea that he occasionally puts in spiritual language. Thus Tagore in one of his nationalism lectures, underlines what he sees as the crux of the new episteme – the rise of what he calls a 'political civilization' that leads to the colonization of all domains of life by the political, which he sees as little more than a scientifically enabled war machine: "This political civilization is scientific and not human", he says concluding a long diatribe against this new kind of civilization (Tagore 1992, p. 24). However, Tagore does not say this with any romantic idea of the past for he emphasizes:

Before this political civilization came to its power and opened its hungry jaws wide enough to gulp down great continents of the earth, we had wars, pillages, changes of monarchy and consequent miseries, but never such a sight of fearful and hopeless voracity, such wholesale feeding of nation upon nation, such huge machines for turning great portions of the earth into mince-meat, never such terrible jealousies with all their ugly teeth and claws ready for tearing open each other's vitals. (Tagore 1992, p. 24)

The new worldview that places politics at the centre and puts nations in competition with each other in order to attain something called 'progress', leading to wars and colonization – this is what lies at the centre of Tagore's ire. At one point he provides us with a striking imagery of different conceptions of 'progress'. "The railway train makes its progress towards the terminus station – it is a movement. But a full grown tree has no definite movement of that kind; its progress is the inward progress of life." (Tagore 1992, p. 26) We could actually push this metaphor of the tree further – even if it is not a full-grown tree its growth from a sapling to the tree is of a fundamentally different kind from that of the train, which in our present of the ecological and climate crisis also bespeaks a different kind of relation to the earth, fossil fuels and everything else that goes with it.

Since the demand for decolonization in thought and knowledge today, in the decolonial moment, is about epistemic reconstitution, it is here that Tagore's critique of 'political civilization' to which he gave the name 'nation' provides us an entry point for thinking about life and politics differently. "Our real problem in India is not political. It is social ... Politics in the West have dominated western ideals, and we in India are trying to imitate you" says he in his simultaneous criticism of the contemporary modern Indian (Tagore 1992, p. 77). While this indicates a way of thinking how we might put the political in its place, it is also something that can be highly problematic from the point of view of Dalits and the question of caste oppression. But Tagore, in his later life, is aware of the question of caste and inter-community relations and no blind admirer of tradition. He blames 'nationalism' for its defensive disavowal of any social critique. Thus, he says, we "never dream of blaming our social inadequacy as the origin of our present helplessness, for we have accepted as the creed of our nationalism that this social system has been perfected for all times to come by our ancestors who had the superhuman vision of all eternity and supernatural power of making infinite provision for future ages." (Tagore 1992, p. 94) Read in the context of our current concern with decolonization, this passage alerts us to the pitfalls of looking at the virtues of tradition as the answer to our present concerns. What you take from tradition and what you discard is a matter of serious deliberation and in this Tagore's touchstone is "modernism", which he defines as "freedom of the mind, not the slavery of taste." True modernists, he therefore says, do not need to modernize (Tagore 1992, p. 34).

Tagore's scathing critique of 'political civilization' and 'nationalism' underlines what I understand to be the most fundamental reason why we need to push for decolonization and epistemic reconstitution: the continuing exclusions and ontological depletion of the non-West that is reinforced every moment of our being. When we learn for instance, that all problems of the non-West in the present arise from its incomplete modernity, corrupted secularism or deformed democracy – in other words, from its inability to mould itself in the frame of the modern West, that's when the demand for decolonizing comes up with all its force. That's when we encounter Tagore telling us that the problem, rather, lies in our imitating the West, having abandoned our 'freedom of the mind.' When an African intellectual like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o raises the demand for the 'decolonization of the mind', he does so precisely to emphasize independence in thinking because he understands how the language of the colonizer becomes the instrument of continued exclusion of the colonized and even of the postcolonial subject – and her modes of thinking and being.

The edge of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique was of course, not directed only against the colonial oppressors but also against what has been called the 'coloniality of being' (Maldonado-Torres 2007) in the language of decolonial theory – that is to say, against the ways in which colonialism permanently transforms the colonized's ways of knowing and being. This, however, is something that is experienced not just by the colonized subject, individually, but also as a society that is internally split between strata that are schooled in the colonizers' ways, in their institutions and those who remain outside them.

The situation becomes extremely complex, especially in societies like India's, where the educated modern secular subject is, ever so often, so completely sold on the idea that everything associated with the past is worthy of rejection and ridicule. Not only is such an attitude politically disastrous, it is, in fact, historically incorrect and bespeaks of a certain kind of illiteracy and reproduces our ontological 'lack' on a daily basis.

So, if the Hindu Right revels in a ridiculously fantastic discourse of ancient Hindu glory, it finds its mirror image in the secular-modern that has (with some important exceptions) only specialized in dismissing everything associated with the past, thus unwittingly giving in to the Right's claim

that the entire Indian past was all only about Brahmanism and spiritualism. This is something that exists more at the level of the secular-modern common sense, often retailed by academic scholars, but not entirely true of the huge body of work produced by Indian historians and thinkers, including those of Marxist persuasion. One only has to read Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay's *Science and Society in Ancient India* or his works on Indian materialism and the Charvaka tradition, or the more recent studies by Ramkrishna Bhattacharya on Lokayata/ Charvaka philosophies to get a sense of the scientific rationalist and materialist traditions in ancient India. One has to simply dip into the scholarly historical investigations of a DD Kosambi, Romila Thapar, DN Jha, RS Sharma, Harbans Mukhia, Irfan Habib or more recently Nayanjot Lahiri and Upinder Singh (to name just a few names) to realize how complex and variegated the 'Indian' past has been, which is so often just dismissed as simply Brahmanical and spiritual. No less important is the work of many Western Sanskrit scholars or historians who have added to our knowledge of ancient and medieval India. We may have our own critiques of these historians' work today as more and more new vantage points open up and new research surfaces, but we can only dismiss them at our own peril.

The point is more than strategic – as it concerns our ability to grasp different aspects of the Indian social formation. Today, from a decolonizing perspective, we might want to interrogate, re-read and critique all these works in terms of their assumptions, but we cannot fail to recognize that they tell us a story of 'Indian pasts' that are far more complex than what the Hindu nationalist and secular-modern common sense would have us believe.

To conclude, from this perspective, decolonization demands that we also think afresh the narratives of Indian history by reinstating the diversity of perspectives of the subaltern castes and classes that were marginalized in the colonial construction of 'tradition', especially with respect to our understandings of caste (Dirks 2002, Mitta 2023). However, the recognition that decolonization cannot be an India-specific exercise also demands that we develop our own concepts and frameworks in conversation with others in the Global South who are struggling against the continuing hegemony of the colonial-modern episteme. This is an imperative if we are to find a more just and sensitive solution to the crises of our societies.

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# Double Critique Revisited, Or Does It Matter Who is the Most Legitimate Victim?

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## Abstract

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has accentuated the parallel existence of discordant and impervious narratives – the global anticolonial and the more local anti-Soviet/Russian. Caught up in their victimhood rivalry, both narratives demonstrate their inability to engage in pluriversal thinking and be ready to sacrifice their privileges, real or symbolic. The invasion has also shown the poverty of the global theory that continues to flounder in the swamp of emasculated universalism or to grab on to the provincial and ignorant “stand pointism” unable to practice solidarity with anyone and for anything. These are disturbing signs of a surrender to modern/colonial futureless agonistics that seeks to spite the enemy rather than to generate anything constructive. In its early years decolonial option stressed the importance of double critique. Today the double critique often shrinks to a one-sided rejection of the straw-manned collective west, while decolonial thinkers too easily pardon dictators and rogue states who manipulatively use their anti-Western rhetoric. Paradoxically, this bias reproduces the same modern/colonial paradigm which decoloniality claims to delink from while dismissing Ukrainians as mere victims or dispensable lives. The essay analyzes the reasons for this current dangerous binarization in decolonial thinking and reflects on possible ways for revamping the complexity of the double critique and hopefully, for reimagining decoloniality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In previous works I have already commented on complex and controversial historical, ideological, and political and geopolitical contexts that have shaped academic decoloniality and to some extent,

predetermined its subsequent limitations and blind spots (Tlostanova 2022, 2023a, 2023b). Today these mostly unperceived negative tendencies are leading to an increasing inaptness to interpret contemporaneity in all its complexity or much less deal with reimagining the future. This makes me more hesitant in subscribing to current decolonial beliefs. It is sad to witness that decoloniality is becoming one of those academic discourses that emerge every decade and then gradually shift from promising radical critique equipped with a set of fruitful concepts to an arrangement of predetermined platitudes. The original decolonial lexicon included several important notions that were subsequently overshadowed due to their complexity and indeterminacy and therefore, their inability to fit into the increasingly rigid decolonial frames. Additionally, academic decoloniality has gradually become more and more essentialist and binary, while dangerously balancing on the verge of idealizing the constructed premodern past and homogenizing the West as a straw-manned absolute enemy. I believe that taking decoloniality to merely restoring the forgotten and erased indigenous ways is limiting and divisive at best, not to mention that it is easily hijacked by conservative extreme-right propaganda populistically selling the “going back to the glorious past” idea to confused populations often marked by learned helplessness and in some cases, imperial resentment. What could save decoloniality in this situation is revisiting and reflecting upon the forgotten concepts such as double translation (Mignolo and Schiwy 2003), transculturation (Coronil 1995; Ortiz 1995), impurity (Lugones 1994) and especially double critique (Khatibi 1983; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006). It is this latter idea that I would like to dwell on in this text. The topic is prompted by a lack of adequate reactions to the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine on the part of decolonial thinkers or several questionable reactions which are also traceable in the CFP of this special issue.

Thus, the editors claim that “the liberation of Ukraine became a North Atlantic rhetoric to contain Russia and China” and are indignant about the EU proposition to decolonize Russia. I agree that the EU is not a legitimate agent of decolonization, and any decolonial moves in Russia should be initiated by the numerous non-Russian internal minorities and colonial populations and selected critically

minded Russians who are ready to dismantle their own imperial canon and question their own privilege thus performing decolonization as deimperialization of their own minds and deeds. Yet, taking the Russian occupation and Ukrainian resistance solely to the issue of Western dominance seems problematic at best and dangerous at worst. It makes me wonder why decolonial thinkers were perfectly able to come up with the term “imperial difference” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2011; Tlostanova 2015) and endlessly discuss the infamous inter-imperial squabbles grounded in the common “black legend” tactic in the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Greer et al. 2007), yet when it comes to the current use of exactly the same tactic by both Russia and the imagined collective West most decolonialists for some reason remain blind to the manipulateness of one (Russian) side and concentrate their critique exclusively on the West? Obviously, these are two sides of the same coin or, if you wish, it is the West looking at itself in a funhouse mirror and seeing Russia as its own distorted reflection, and the chronically imitative Russia once again using its habitual tactic of borrowing western ideas to later claim that it understands and implements them better than the erring West. If we only look at one agent in this entanglement, we will never understand what is going on, much less what can be done to get out of this dead-end.

Semiotician Yuri Lotman hiding from the Soviet repressions and antisemitism in Estonia back in the 1980s traced this specific Russian tendency historically, including the adoption of the Eastern form of Christianity from the Byzantine Empire, the reception of the French Enlightenment, and the modernist movements in the turn of the century art (Lotman 2002). A crude version of the same tendency is evident in the current Putin`s speechwriters` creations selectively appropriating anticolonial rhetoric to denounce the West while presenting Russia as the savior of humanity. Behind this manipulateness lies a chronic Russia`s inferiority complex periodically exploding into attempts to escape modernity regardless of sacrificing thousands of lives. It begs for double critique as Russia is unable to exist without the west, has nothing to go back to and cannot not be an empire. Yet, double critique is long forgotten while decolonial thinkers have gradually drifted towards binary either/or solutions that are becoming increasingly common.

Another problematic feature of this discourse exemplified in the CFP is a refusal to acknowledge the subjectivity of Ukrainians and their political will and determination. Ready to discuss on hundreds of pages the nuances of the emerging political identities of indigenous “nationalities” when, in reality, their participation in decision making sadly remains negligible, decolonial thinkers immediately, become bored when the same discussion refers to Ukraine which is consolidating into a political nation right now as a result of the heroic collective defense of its sovereignty. Instead, Ukrainians are perceived as silent faceless victims manipulated by the West and passively waiting for liberation from the outside, victims who are also way too White and Europeanized to be allowed into the rigid decolonial indigeneity/colorist scheme. This betrays the sad fact that transculturation with its nebula of specific ideas and sensibilities focusing on reciprocal mutual influences and stressing the agency and subjectivation of the colonized groups (Ortiz 1995; Tlostanova 2012), has fallen out of fashion in decolonial discourse and that this discourse itself is gradually shrinking to the old logic of the colonizer/colonized or in the current edition – the global North and its allies and sycophants, and the dewesternizers (Mignolo and Mattison 2012) or former “losers” who dream of recutting the world in their favor. Thus, decolonial thinkers themselves become easy victims of Putin’s version of the black legend.

In the current almost unanimous decolonial support of Palestine (which falls squarely into the classical anticolonial narrative and is also strongly anti-American and rightly critical of European hypocrisy) and equally unanimous and shocking refusal to back Ukrainian resistance one detects the echoes of the Cold War allegiances and rigid divisions myopically missing the fact that Putin’s Russia is not the USSR but a dirty lining of global neoliberalism with inflamed imperial ambitions. More importantly, it is an ethically erroneous move measuring the value of human lives and the measure of solidarity based on their incidental political allegiances or, to put it bluntly, on the notorious division into us and them. In this immoral logic Ukrainians are less worthy of pity than Palestinians because they selected a Western way. And if the homogenized West is seen as an ultimate enemy the situations when it may support

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some anticolonial struggles such as the Ukrainian one, for whatever selfish reason, are simply to be ignored. When such divisive ideas started to emerge in public decolonial interventions (Mignolo 2023; Decolonial International Network 2022) my attitude to decoloniality has become even more critical than in the last several years because disagreement with several conceptual decolonial assumptions and undelivered promises has now spilled into the real political struggles with many lives at stake. In fact, conceptual disagreements and actual political events are now extremely entangled. Abandoning the double critique not only leads to a paradoxical decolonial pardoning of any dictators and rogue states just because they are using the anti-US rhetoric in their propaganda. More importantly, this bias reproduces the same modern/colonial paradigm which decoloniality claims to delink from while easily dismissing Ukrainians as dispensable lives or ultimately, Russians as cancelled hostages with no future.

In several recent disputes with decolonial and global South thinkers on the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine, attempting to grasp the reasons for their silence or even open support for the Russian invasion, whenever I urged them to notice the local levels of coloniality and stop identifying it

only with the homogenized West, I got an answer that if the neo-imperial Russia loses, the Americans will take over. This statement is apparently seen by avowed decolonialists as a kind of a last argument which does not require any proof. In my view, it is a deeply problematic position completely devoid of empathy, responsibility, or genuine interest in other people's lives, and preoccupied exclusively with defending its own abstract righteousness. Meanwhile for the attacked and annihilated people it is difficult to say what is the difference in who would lie to them, exploit them, or destroy their lives – a Russian dictator, a western administration or a proxy local leader, if the result is the same lack of rights, dignity and future. The actual terms of their dependence are in any case more important than meaningless speculations on which power is less guilty.

Once again, what is lacking here is the forgotten double critique. Perhaps it is worth reminding that the idea was first formulated by Moroccan thinker and fiction writer Abdelkebir Khatibi (1983) and targeted both Eurocentric or Orientalist discourses and ethnocentric local narratives complexifying and nuancing the positionality and agendas of those who attempt to practice the double critique. In case of decolonial thinking, a double critical stance requires the awareness of many intersecting factors and agents of oppression, not just one homogenized West, and does not simply pardon or idealize anyone who is criticizing this imagined West, including petty dictators and autocratic regimes. Double critique takes into account the local sources and circumstances of inequality and unfreedom, which need to be scrutinized in relation to the larger forces of oppression. For instance, internal conservative religious patriarchal regimes are regarded in decolonial Muslim feminism as equally important targets of critique just as Western orientalist colonialist and neocolonialist discourses that are marked by White savior syndrome and superiority complex (Mernissi 2000). Axiomatically, it is impossible to fully understand the complexity of intersectional oppression if we are only able to see one of its aspects.

Therefore, double critique can be also fruitful for conceptualizing Ukrainian oppression, resistance, division, occupation, and emancipation. A doubly or multiply critical decolonial analysis is able to both acknowledge the dismay and poverty of

Russian imperial narrative attempting for many centuries to deny the very right to existence for Ukraine as a separate nation, the hypocrisy of European and North American official narratives, with no interest in the fate of Ukrainians and the only concern with avoiding a larger war while continuing to profit on the ongoing war, and the potential pitfalls of postcolonial nationalism in the next independence stage that require constant checking and balancing.

Ultimately, the double-edged critical charge of double critique balances the extremes of binary thinking leading to a third way that Sylvia Wynter refers to in her reflection on what it means to be human (1995). The third way is not simple turning the tables or switching polarities. It is going beyond, overcoming the current binary system rather than joining one of the sides. Wynter's approach seeks to dismantle the dualistic either-or logic dividing the world into us and them, and questions the very framework grounded in fixed, always correct stand points. It strives to maintain multiplicity, complexity, and Lugonesian "impure" (Lugones 1994) entanglements instead, each of which remains a subject of critique. This is not a new or particularly original approach, in fact, it is an example of feminist intersectional optic (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collings 2000) described long ago. Yet, as we know, high disciplinary fences and heteropatriarchal mansplaining easily seep even into the most democratic anti- and decolonial discourses and citation politics which is another reason why double and multiple critique is a necessity for decoloniality to survive and thrive.

Indeed, double critique does not divide humanity into clear-cut victims and perpetrators or oppressors following a dynamic intersectional approach instead. If in Muslim societies that Khatibi and Mernissi wrote about, double critique entailed a scaling of the Western dictate and local forms of control, in societies that went through the Soviet and often earlier Russian domination this approach stands for a critical conceptualizing of at least two but, in fact, many more forms and levels of imperial control (Tlostanova 2010), such as the global Euromodernity as a set of onto-epistemic, economic and political frames, which gets entangled with specific, often contradictory and insecure local imperial histories of less successful modern empires and their internal and external

colonial others, and importantly, their current involvement in different forms of nationalism and neo-colonial oppression.

Thus, independently from this forgotten history of double critique in early decolonial thinking contemporary Polish scholars Łukasz Bukowiecki, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Magdalena Wróblewska came up with the term “dual decolonial option” to claim that artists who work with contested urban memories “not only directly address the legacies of foreign dependencies, but in addition, and with an eye on the future, seek to destabilize nation-oriented essentialist interpretations of those dependencies...working through the national myths that have emerged in the aftermath of the period of foreign dependencies” (Bukowiecki et al. 2020, p. 33). Double critique then is targeted at both historical trajectories and current traces of various foreign influences and at the often-contested developments of the post-dependence national(ist) imaginaries that prefer a one-sided victimhood stance.

“Competitive victimhood” (Demirel 2023) grounded in uncontested modern/colonial agonistics that María Lugones criticized many years ago in her classical text on traveling to other people’s worlds with a “loving perception” (Lugones 2003, p. 96) is a global phenomenon which prevents various others from forming transversal coalitions dooming them to narrow and provincial standpoints with no future. This phenomenon is common among the radical protesting groups including decolonial ones as well as among the more traditional nationalist forms of identification. Thus, Jie-Huyn Lim addresses transnational trend of “victimhood nationalism” in his analysis of the dynamics of under- and over-contextualization in national victimhood constructions resulting in political biases: “If the over-contextualization inherent in historical contextualism gives rise to historical conformism of whatever happened in history, the de-contextualization results in a form of a-historical justification of the historical aftermath. Indeed, the spectres of de-contextualization and over-contextualization hovering over the victimhood controversy make historical reconciliation vulnerable to politicization” (Lim 2010, p. 158).

Double or multiple critique is the way to challenge victimhood nationalisms and other exclusivist

forms of rivalries to avoid seeing only one enemy and erasing other factors and levels of coloniality. Such an approach can potentially trigger transversal dialogues among often extremely distant others, whose decolonial trajectories might be more convoluted and indirect than the model versions of decoloniality represent. This is the case with various no longer post-Soviet subjects/nations looking in different directions and allying with often completely different power vectors. For these agents it becomes challenging to navigate the neo-imperial Russian advances, the intricacies and limitations of the European choice or its impossibility and constant postponement, the reality of yet another reproduction of racialization and orientalizing both by Russians, by Europeans and sadly, at times, by the former fellow sufferers from the Soviet regime who claim to be European.

I am, by no means, calling for restoring the fake Soviet people’s friendship or asking those who selected a European way to join those who are leaning more towards China or Turkey. I am, however, saying that an inability to practice double critique or, in feminist terms and to quote Mari Matsuda, to “ask the other question” (Matsuda 1991) while not rejecting but rather critically engaging one’s own stance, prevents from building transversal Lugonesian “deep coalitions that never reduce multiplicity spanning across differences, and being aware of oppression, are not fixed on it, but strive beyond into the world [...] towards a shared struggle of interrelated others” (Lugones 2003, p. 98). Such deep coalitions are indispensable for refuturing. As a result, increasingly, we face simplified narratives focusing on just one aspect of inequality or injustice and built exclusively around the West/East or North/South axis. They are easier to represent and chronically unable and unwilling to hear each other.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Third Karabakh war largely unnoticed by the world, and the horrendous Hamas attack and subsequent genocidal Israeli blockade and assault of Gaza have brought forward once again the parallel existence of discordant and deaf to each other (though deeply related) narratives – the anticolonial and that of the victims of the Soviet occupation, or the former countries of the so-called state socialism. Certainly, both terms are quite vague and deserve criticism but let us accept them for the sake of

brevity now. The long-established anticolonial narrative is a core element of a whole spectre of political and intellectual discourses covering not just the Global South but also the Global Left, both historically and currently.

Paradoxically, critiquing Euromodernity from the viewpoint of colonial difference, the anticolonial narrative, consciously or not, shares the epistemic frameworks of the Global North and centres the world exclusively around the narrative of Western modernity, albeit in a negative form, while uncritically accepting the way it erases the former second world with its own much less global anti-Soviet narrative. The West then becomes the only enemy whereas all other agents are assessed according to their relation to the West. Such a critique turns into a paradoxical legitimization of one main narrative and the erasure of all others. This dangerous simplification excludes millions of people from any possibility of having a voice and expressing an opinion since this would be complicating the simple narrative of one homogenized enemy (the Global North) and one main victim (the Global South).

The former Eastern bloc is increasingly expressing dissatisfaction with its systematic erasure and dismissal of its problems in anticolonial discourses, particularly those coming from the Global North, claiming that they generate new forms of discrimination and silencing (Hendl 2022; Hendl et al. 2023; Koobak et al. 2021). This does not mean that East European positions, and no longer post-Soviet ones, are always complex and nuanced enough as they also tend to dismiss the problems of the Global South as something beyond their immediate interest, thus entering once again the agonistic modern/colonial competition for the status of the main victim. Yet to be fair, there are many more voices and positions in this group that are able to understand intersections and entanglements between the anticolonial and the anti-Soviet. Still, caught up in their victimhood rivalry, the anticolonial and the anti-Soviet narratives demonstrate their inability to engage pluriversal thinking and make concessions by sacrificing one's privilege, real or symbolic. Sadly, most critical thinkers in this situation, including the decolonial ones, continue to flounder miserably in the swamp of emasculated universalisms or to grab on to provincial and often equally ignorant

"stand pointisms", unable to practice solidarity with anyone and for anything. Ironically, it is ultimately a sign of a complete surrender to modern/colonial agonistics, a rivalry for real and symbolic resources, media attention, reparations, that acts to spite the enemy rather than to generate anything constructive for survival of life on the planet.

At present, critical positions remain trapped in their respective narrow stances and curdling in their bitter rivalries. Active discussion of possible paths out of this current dead-end is what is needed and what decolonial thinking could work on but does not. The refusal to formulate an idea or better many ideas of the future and to conceptualize the ways to get there was a conscious decolonial choice, linked perhaps to its post-constructivist origins. This refusal to refer to any political and social future imaginaries was quite logical in the specific context of the early 1990s but is increasingly unproductive today. Moreover, having promised a radical "delinking" and a questioning of "the terms of the conversation" (Mignolo 2009, p. 4), academic decoloniality is unable to deliver on its promise, and slides into a descriptiveness for criticizing other anticolonial discourses. Unable to make sense of the complexity of the current global crisis, decolonialists mostly take a wait-and-see observer attitude which, once again, used to be acceptable thirty years ago but no longer is.

In this respect I have more hope for decolonial social movements outside academia, although their very nature is understandably situated, contextual, and local, and most of these movements have no tools for or intentions to fully understand the global crisis or how to deal with it. This of course does not mean that we should dismiss decoloniality as an academic discourse or decolonial movements as grass-roots forms of activism. It just means that most of these efforts, arguably important for satisfying our personal and collective dignity and sense of responsibility, would always be partial, limited, unsuccessful and unable to drastically change the current, accelerating defuturing and entropic tendencies. If we hope to really slow down the destructive processes rapidly eroding different forms of life on earth, including our own, we should perhaps do something entirely different: stop repeating the same decolonial ideas formulated thirty years ago again and again, while ignoring phenomena that do not fit within these quickly

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becoming outdated frames. We should, at the very least, attempt to launch projects which could lead to a slowing down of our descent into a global multifaceted disaster or, somehow, prevent its most dangerous consequences from becoming a reality. Such projects are already emerging in different parts of the world and are often generated in and by activist and social movements, many of them decolonial, and not by a typical academic ‘beating the air’ which continues to describe the world from a limited perspective and/or from a privileged bubble (Esimde 2014; Mujeres Creando 2020; RCMC 2025).

One of the important global projects in this respect should be delegitimizing the university as a colonial institution and building alternative relearning and remaking spaces and events outside the university. They should be uncontrolled by the state or corporations as these are powerful hindrances for the development of the new political imagination (Fry and Tlostanova 2020). Such initiatives obviously need both intellectual and financial support and a strong will. But in the last thirty years, none of the decolonial groups were able to implement it, except sporadically in specific contexts such as Amawtay Wasy Pluriversity (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2011) or in the form of

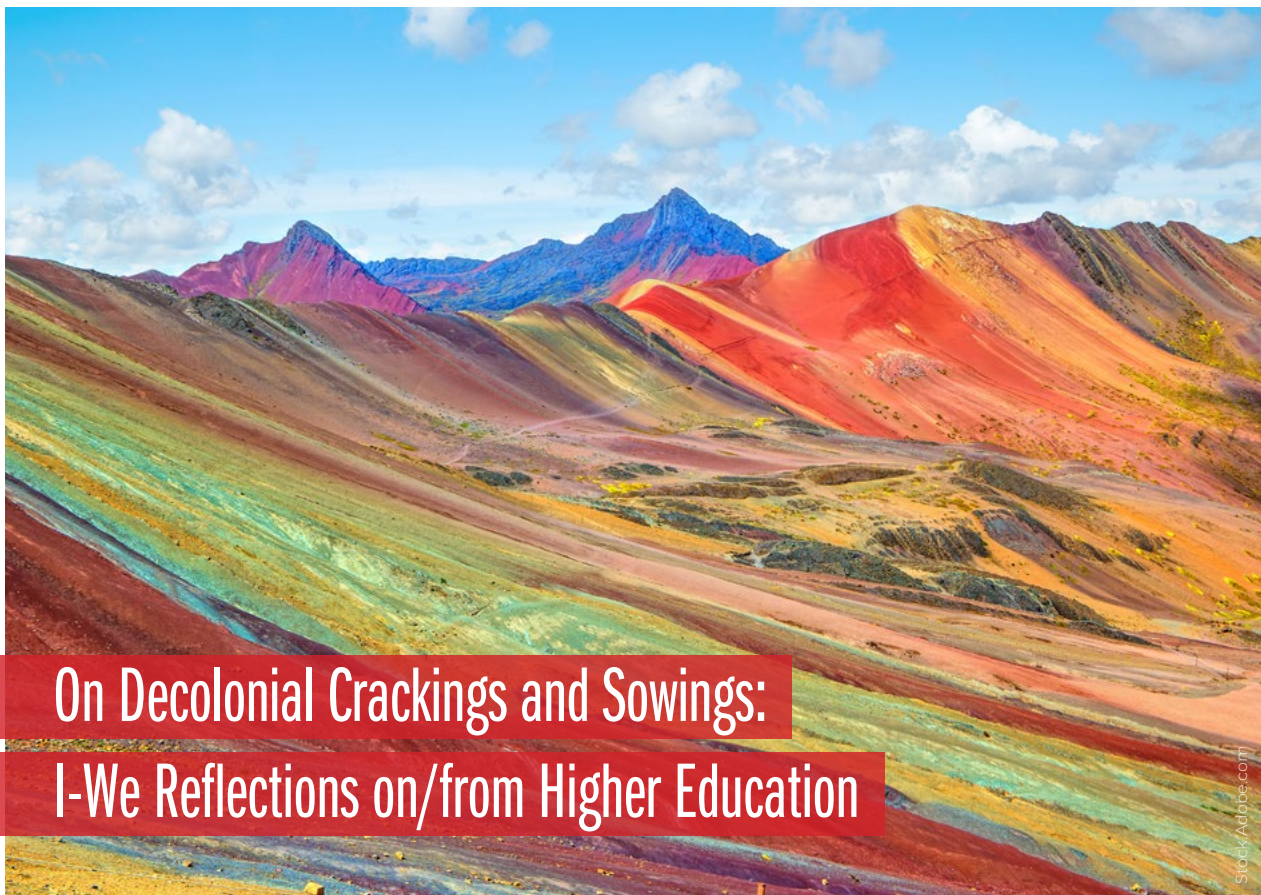
numerous decolonial summer schools that are still off-springs of the modern/colonial academic and cultural institutions, such as universities and museums and, therefore, are doomed to be forever shoot themselves in the foot by attempting to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house (Lorde 2007). I still wish to believe that such relearning and remaking spaces would emerge soon on a larger scale before decoloniality finally turns into a simplified, depoliticized metaphorical discourse and also, before some larger catastrophe makes it irrelevant to learn by forcing us all to concentrate on mere survival.

Instead of falling into a trap of binary thinking, such decolonial spaces could pay attention to various alter-global pluritopical visions of solidarity and “deep coalitions” whose grounds are open for collective formulation and discussion by the people themselves. Deep coalitions cannot be grounded in victimhood rivalry as they urge us to relearn how to hear each other and analyze our collective situations and predicaments in relation to each other and other others. This shift would require moving away from empty signifiers and false oppositions of yesterday’s theory and turning back to the long forgotten double critique opposed to both global coloniality and the local repressive neocolonial and neo-imperial regimes, to a horizontal multipolarity that needs to be envisioned and launched. This dynamic stance will be delinked from the failed utopias of the past and based on the resurrected solidarity of the people, and on transversality and the will to life and not to power. This would require us to engage in a complex relational worlding (Tlostanova 2023c), a balancing act to overcome the immobilizing locality of continental and national ontologies and the modern/colonial predicament, the bleakness of the looming world of permanent wars and conflicts and total surveillance and the hubris of thoughtless growth. Transversal decolonial communities of change could then attempt to make pervasive unsettlement and the complex colonial and socialist “duress” (Stoler 2016) into a positive ontological design (Fry 2017) and a flexible way of worlding, letting us relearn how to live in the immense and boundless, scarred and injured world that humans, in our current new stoical stance matching the air of the times, must still try to refuture.

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## On Decolonial Crackings and Sowings: I-We Reflections on/from Higher Education

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### Abstract

The university is one place, among many others, to sow and nurture decolonial thought, analysis, reflection, and action; analytical-actional thought, and thoughtful-reflective actionings, inside, outside, despite—and that both spite and crack—the institution of higher education. This article offers reflections from the author's own lived experience of decolonial sowings and cracking during more than two decades at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Ecuador, an international graduate-level public university formed in the decade of the 90s as part of the Andean Community of Nations. Its specific focus is with the planting and cultivation of a doctoral program-project collectively postured from the outset as an otherwise of graduate study grounded in decolonial praxis in which coloniality/decoloniality were central and guiding conceptual and analytical tools. Through a recount of some of the collective processes and practices of decolonial sowings and cracking, the article offers an I-we narrative that works to undo critiques of coloniality/decoloniality as an abstract universal, bringing to the fore decoloniality's actional character and embodied praxis.

### Openings

I write as an intellectual militant, a decolonial pedagogue, and a recently deinstitutionalized professor. All three—intellectual militancy, decolonial

pedagogy, and deinstitutionalization—have particularly significant meanings for me. While I have worked in institutions of higher education for

more than forty years, first in the United States and during the last twenty-five at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Ecuador, academia has never defined me, nor is it a term that I use to identify myself. The university has been one place, among many others, to sow and nurture decolonial thought, analysis, reflection, and action; analytical-actional thought, and thoughtful-reflective actionings, inside, outside, despite—and that spite—the institution of higher education.<sup>1</sup>

Intellectual militancy, decolonial pedagogy, and deinstitutionalization, in this sense, allude to and mark political, ethical, and praxis-based standpoints and refusals; a refusal to identify with and become subsumed by the academy and its structure-institution of power, and an insurgent standpoint rooted in praxis and pedagogies that work, on the one hand, to unveil the systemic operation and lived sense of colonial-capitalist-racialized-gendered-epistemic-territorialized power and, on the other, to plant and cultivate the possibilities of something else.

My identification as an intellectual militant is grounded in this refusal, insurgency, and praxis. So too is my understanding of pedagogy in practice, an understanding in no way limited to education or schools (see Walsh 2023). Deinstitutionalization is without a doubt connected, yet its specific reference is to my departure (in December 2022) from the University as institution. I do not deny that such departure has to do, in part, with the advantages and privileges of age and retirement. Yet the reference to “retirement” seems inappropriate and inadequate. I left the University not to rest, but to continue. Deinstitutionalizing was a political, ethical, and personal decision, a necessary action and response to an institution of which I no longer felt part; an institution that had radically transformed itself from the most progressive in the region to one of the most conservative, mirroring and reproducing the now global character and project of higher education—the UNI-versity—a central cog in the global (re)configurations of the colonial matrix of power.

Of course, formal education in general, and higher education in particular, have always been central sites of and for coloniality. As we well know, it is there that colonial ways of sensing, seeing, reading, knowing, and being in the world are inculcated,

structural racism, racialization, gendering, and ableism are bred, white-western knowledge frames are naturalized-universalized, and relational and collective forms of learning, thinking, and doing are ruptured and disassembled. This is true throughout the world, including in Abya Yala/Latin America where the global colonial matrix of power works today in multiple and mutating ways. Here—as well as elsewhere and most especially in the global souths—struggles are not necessarily for more “reform/re-form”—which typically strengthen and maintain the same systemic structure-institution—but for decolonial(izing) processes, practices, and praxes, including those that open cracks and fissures in the institution itself. While the cracks will certainly not rid us of coloniality or radically transform higher education’s institutionalized and increasingly globalized systemic structure, they are part of decoloniality’s actional work; of the doing that opens spaces and possibilities of decolonial and decolonizing otherwises despite—and that spite—coloniality’s presence and power.

This text offers reflections from my own lived experience of decolonial sowings and cracking during more than two decades at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (UASB) in Ecuador, an international graduate-level public university formed in the decade of the 90s as part of the Andean Community of Nations. My specific focus here is with the planting and cultivation of a doctoral program-project collectively postured from the outset as an otherwise of graduate study grounded in decolonial praxis in which coloniality/decoloniality were central and guiding conceptual and analytical tools. Through a recount of some of the collective processes and practices of decolonial sowings and cracking, I offer an I-we narrative that works to undo critiques of coloniality/decoloniality as an abstract universal, bringing to the fore decoloniality’s actional character and embodied praxis. My I-we here recalls María Lugones’ “I→we”, that which, for her, rendered present the movement between the solitary and the collective, a movement that draws from a sense of intentionality, active subjectivity, and “inside/outside/ in-between” interactions and conversations; that which implies and engenders a political moving with others (Lugones 2003, 228).

## Charges, Questions, and Qualms

In 2001, I was given a charge by the rector of the UASB: to conceptualize, organize, and put into practice an international and Andean focused and based doctoral program, in essence, the first doctorate in Ecuador.<sup>2</sup> The focus was to be in the areas of cultural and social politics and studies. Latin American Cultural Studies became the agreed upon name, what I have described elsewhere as part of the politics of naming (Walsh 2012). My experience with graduate education was not new; I had taught in master's and doctoral programs for a number of years in the U.S., and at the masters' level at the UASB and other Latin American universities. Yet what was new was the opportunity to critically and creatively think a graduate program from the start. However, with a very small budget, few PhDs in the country and region, and only two other faculty members with doctoral degrees besides myself at the University (and both in other fields), the challenges were numerous. So too were my questions and qualms regarding the *hows*.

How to conceptualize and organize a Latin American doctoral program that does not justify and contribute to the colonial-capitalist-racist-heteropatriarchal system of power, the hegemony and monologue of Euro-Western-centric rationality and thought, and the multiple violences that both engender, permit, advance and maintain?

How to put into practice a program-as-project grounded in the ongoing social, political, economic, epistemic, and existence-based struggles and lived realities of Abya Yala/Latin America?<sup>3</sup> In processes that think *from and with* these struggles and realities rather than just *study about*? And in modes of knowledge, thought, and reflection — intercultural, decolonial and inter-epistemic— that encourage comradeship and collectivity rather than individualisms and competition? A program-as-project in which the analytic of coloniality as well as decolonial/decolonizing praxis are pedagogical imperatives?

How and with whom (faculty and students) to sow and cultivate a doctorate not only with academic rigor, but also rigor in its commitment to an otherwise of thinking, knowing, researching, teaching, and doing?

## Sowings

The times then were quite different in Ecuador, in Abya Yala/Latin America, and in this University. The neoliberalization and globalization of higher education had not yet taken over. Critical thought still held an important place in debates both inside and outside the classroom, pushed further by the political and epistemic project-and-as-force of Ecuador's Indigenous movement, a project in which I was also engaged, having been given the task by the movement of sowing epistemic interculturality in the university. While the concept and analytic of coloniality were not widely known in the country or region, the ongoing legacy of colonialism and the never-ending work of decolonization were important themes of reflection and debate in the movement and in some allied intellectual circles. The UASB was a young institution then, with a social, political, and intercultural commitment and project. It was a space and place in which social movements were constantly present, and that invited and supported academic creativity, sociopolitical engagement, and critical thought. As such, it seemed to be a space-place of fertile ground. And so it was, at least for a while.

With the first cohort in 2002, the shared sowing began with twenty four students from throughout South America and a group of international faculty committed to processes of social transformation, critical thought, and this doctoral project; many were part of what later became known as the modernity/coloniality group.<sup>4</sup> Student selection here was particularly crucial, especially if we understand that the sowing begins with the seeds. In addition to the typical academic criterion, there were others equally central, including commitment to, engagement with, and experience in social and cultural processes, movements, and practices. Unlike doctoral programs in the Western world, the median age of those selected was around 38-40, mid-career women and men, including university professors, critical intellectuals, activists, cultural workers, and community-based leaders from a variety of lived experiences and perspectives, academic fields, and racial/ethnic/gender/class/cultural/territorial identifications. The individual and accumulated knowledges, experiences, and perspectives of the group not only complemented the transdisciplinary program of study, previously

negotiated and approved by the institutions of the University, its Andean coordinating committee, and the state entity of higher education. More importantly, it worked to broaden, adapt, and rethink it, rendering it, with the seeds and sowings, a program-as-project in the constant making.

I still vividly recall some of the vital and pivotal moments of the early sowings. One such moment was at the end of the first week of my opening seminar. With four to five hours each day of intensive discussion in class and more hours dedicated to reading, we were all a bit worn out. One of the students posed a question to the group as a way to evaluate the first week's experience. While the seminar, up until then, had been deeply participatory, at that moment the character and sense of participation radically changed. In response to the question, Adolfo, one of the students, began to uncontrollably weep and soon after others joined the wail until all in the room—including myself—were sobbing. While the sense of the cries was individual—leaving a young child behind in a home country, for instance, as was Adolfo's case—the movement of the cries from one to another fissured individualities and planted the beginnings—the seeds—of a “we”: a collective something else. With emotions let out, personal stories and embraces shared, and bodies as well as minds made present in the classroom, a community started to take form, a community that was later named “decul” by one of the group members and assumed by all;<sup>5</sup> a “we” that continues to exist and persist now crossing five generations.

I continue to wonder if this was not the first moment of sowing but also of decolonial cracking. That is of opening a crack in the academic and academicized domain of doctoral study and in the university institution itself; a crack in which seeds of decolonizing otherwiseness—including of embodied/incarnated senses, feelings, and emotions—could be and were planted. The seeds and cracks are central here; central to the tenet that decoloniality is sown, grown, and cultivated in and through praxis. While professors, pensums, and courses were certainly fundamental in building comprehensions of the concept, analytic, and what Aníbal Quijano referred to as the perspective (rather than theory) of coloniality/decoloniality (see Walsh, Mignolo, and Segato 2024, p. 3), it was through the doing that an otherwise of doctoral study took form; an otherwise made in the sowings but also in the crackings.

## Crackings

While the doctoral program-as-project was part of the University—a part that, over the years, greatly expanded the University's international recognition—it was viewed by many in the institution as a problematic and dissident space. That is as a space that did not conform to the norms, dissenting from, in its focus, perspective, process, practice and praxis, the very notion of “higher” education and doctoral work. The “problem” was with respect to the transversal of coloniality/decoloniality and, with it, the evidencing of a structural-systemic matrix of power in which race, gender, sexuality, knowledge, nature, and existence are intertwined. Such a “problem,” of course, was tied to the de-centering of social class as the hegemonic determinant of critical thought in its Latin American, European, and Eurocentric versions. But it was also with the (re) centering of racialized and gendered subjectivities, knowledges, cosmologies, and existences, a (re) centering that brought to the fore the presence of racisms and sexism in the University itself, most especially in terms of knowledge. However, the “problem” of dissent did not stop there. It was also with the processes and practices of the doctorate itself; that is, with its decolonial/decolonizing praxis of cracking.

There are many vignettes and stories to be told but, given the limitations of space, I recount just a couple here. One has to do with Diana Sofia, the daughter of Adolfo (decul 1) and Camilia (decul 3), the child who provoked Adolfo's heartfelt cries and later accompanied her father and, years after, her mother in classes. One day in Edgardo Lander's class on the coloniality of knowledge, Diana Sofia (then about 10 years old) raised her hand. After a number of minutes of trying to get professor Lander's attention, she spoke out. “Professor,” she said, “I have listened to your lengthy explanation of the coloniality of knowledge and tried to take notes, but I think my colleagues here in the classroom are in agreement that we have understood little.” As the adults around her nodded their heads in a shared “yes”, she asked: “Could you please explain it again and this time more clearly?” He did.

The crack here is not simply about Diana Sofía's active presence; in fact, from the first cohort on, there was always the presence of at least one child.

The crack has to do, in a more profound sense, with the relational and profoundly human praxis built in the classroom and its beyond, a decolonial/ decolonizing pedagogy and praxis that cultivated knowledge(s) in collective and in relation. For me, mapping has always been part of this pedagogy-praxis in practice. The collectively created maps of concepts, with their relational ties to lived struggles, realities, territories, and knowledges—to thinking and doing, to actional thought and thoughtful-reflective actionings—always covered the white boards, walls, and sometimes even ceilings of my courses.

Over a recent cup of coffee, Kattya (decul 4) recalled a related and key moment for her in the decolonial cracking. It was the first week of classes and we had covered a huge space on the floor with newsprint in order to begin a shared reflection on struggles of and around knowledge(s). As Kattya recounted, each person in the group began to note phrases or words. However, at one moment the individual character of the mapping shifted and without a spoken cue, everyone (including me) was on the floor with colored markers making relations and connections. For her, this was a crucial moment that opened a crack in what she and others in the group initially presumed and assumed as the individual and individualized nature and theory-based focus of doctoral study. This is not to say that theory was absent, but rather to underscore the collective processes of theorizing and theorization that move beyond the abstract and make ground in concrete territories, bodies, intersubjectivities, knowledges, experiences, and struggles.

The decolonial cracks and cracking certainly do not stop there. They extend to the processes of research as well. Our proposition has been to move away from—to fissure or crack—the traditional research tenets and practices that *study about* with their creeds of objectivity, neutrality, and distancing from the “objects” of study. The prospect instead has been to *think from and with*, a posture and practice that entail, among other aspects, making oneself an ongoing part of the research, reflection, and writing of the dissertation, including with relation to the contexts, subjects, and the research problem, but also with respect to a questioning of the privileges, assumptions, interpretations, and analyses of the researcher her- him-, their-self. Considerations of the methodological-pedagogical

*how*s are also central here, including *how* to build processes of shared analyses and praxes, of actional thought and thoughtful-reflective actionings. In an institutional setting where dissertations are often evaluated according to the traditionally established criteria of academic disciplines and disciplining, students know that they have to be doubly rigorous, evidencing in their investigations, arguments, and writing an ability to respond to traditional academia while, at the same time, fissuring and cracking the colonial matrix of power, most especially in terms of knowledge, thought, and investigative practice.

The intergenerational character of the program-as-project is, without a doubt, another crack, a crack in the degree-based focus of doctoral work; the degree as aspiration, destination, termination. Although the levels of graduation have been high (generally above 90%), with graduates now populating the Americas, holding positions as professors, program directors, deans, and, in one case, as rector, graduation has not meant an end to the decul connection. Past decules continue in their collaborations within and across cohorts, including in projects, programs, courses, publications, and events. Moreover, the majority of graduates have become elders to the newer generations, welcoming them into an established community, supporting their research interests, advising and accompanying their paths, strengthening and continuing the we-decul relation.

Over the years, we—myself and all those who are the decul community—have come to understand this program as a crack, a crack that indisciplined, disturbed, and fractured the institutional wall—the seeming totality—of this University and, more broadly, of the increasingly globalized institution of higher education in which coloniality evermore reigns. With its decolonial pedagogies and praxis of sowing and cracking, decul has worked to fissure the dominion of epistemic Eurocentrism and the normalcy of verticality and competition, while at the same time planting possibilities of something radically distinct, including of correlation, co-relation, and co-thinking. Moreover, it has pushed a learning to unlearn in order to relearn, a thinking *from and with* beings, knowledges, struggles, territories and places, and *from and with* possibilities of and for dignity, existence and life in these times of violence-dispossession-death.

As we well know, the crack itself does not make the wall fall down. Its projection is not for a reform of the wall-institution; it does not seek its own institutionalization. The crack is an aperture, fracture, fissure, that which breaks, challenges, and debilitates the solidity, the unicity, and the totality of that—in this case the system-institution—which presents itself as consensual, established, secure. Through the cracks we can see openings that can be widened, crevasses and arroyos to plant, to sow and cultivate an otherwise of thought, knowledge, being, feeling, studying, learning, doing, living. The crack, as we came to realize, is something that we can make and do despite the institution. It is a strategy, possibility, hope; a horizon of light, alliance, sowing, creation, relation. The crack, as such, is part of the pedagogy of sowing and the praxis that cultivates while it indisciplines and incommodes.

Surely there has been no shortage of attempts by the University to cover over the crack, to isolate it, to make sure it does not spread. Still, it continued in its multiplication. 'It's enough that not only doctoral theses but now master's theses continue to focus on decoloniality, this is not a decolonial university!', said some. Of course it is not, I responded. The project is not to institutionalize the crack or make decolonial thinking-doing into part of the system. It is to fissure the system itself.

### Closings and Sowings

As I announced my deinstitutionalization, authority-opponents rushed to prepare the elements to patch over, to eliminate any trace of the crack. They made it clear that decul, as we have constructed and known it, will cease to exist. But what they do not know is that cracks also grow within, behind, and despite the wall, multiplying and exceeding the wall-institution, extending to other walls, and sometimes even sprouting roots, leaves, and flowers as they make connections and relations. Could it be that with the multiplication of cracks, the higher education structure will eventually begin to crumble and fall? And what about the possibilities of fallen walls? I recall the words of Angela Davis that in recent years have widely circulated in internet (without a clear published source): "Walls turned sideways are bridges."<sup>6</sup>

The cracks are certainly not the solution. They are a decolonial(izing) strategy and tool; an actional

possibility in the struggles for sowing an otherwise of education(s), knowledge(s), existence, life. The practice of sowing is the praxis of cracks. Both are conscious acts and actions of cultivation that open, nurture, tend, and enable germinations, roots, hope.

"We are seeds" was my exclamation in the parting words that I shared on December 8, 2022 before a packed auditorium of decules and other students, colleagues, and many others, but with no authorities in sight. "We are seeds" was the collective cry that bellowed through the audience. "We are seeds", the phrase of resistance and re-existence that travels the territories of Abya Yala/Latin America today appearing as graffiti on university walls, city streets, and the banners of peoples in struggle: "They want to bury us, but they don't know that we are seeds."

As I said then, and as I repeat here, "we are seeds." We are seeds that multiply, that move and mix with the wind, seeds that carry the memory and force of decolonial resistance and re-existence, that sprout breaking through walls of concrete and stone, and that continue in their sowing and re-sowings in spaces, places, and territories, including—but of course not only—in institutions of higher education.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> I take the actional here from Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1968). For a deeper discussion see Walsh (2025).
- <sup>2</sup> I say the "first" because while there were two other doctoral programs in this same University that began around the same time, both were organized through an institutional agreement with a European university. No other doctoral programs existed in the country at this time.
- <sup>3</sup> Abya Yala, "land in full maturity and vital blood", is the name that the Kuna-Tule people (of the lands now known as Panama and Colombia) gave to the "Americas" before the colonial invasion. In its present-day use (which began to take form in 1992), Abya Yala is a decolonial proposition that challenges and takes back the politics of naming.
- <sup>4</sup> Included over the years and from this group, were Walter Mignolo, Edgardo Lander, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Javier Sanjinés, Fernando Coronil, Santiago Castro-Gómez, María Lugones, Augustin Lao-Montes, Ramón Grosfoguel, Aníbal Quijano, and Enrique Dussel, with Mignolo and Lander central figures present in all the five cohorts.
- <sup>5</sup> While "decul" literally refers to the name in Spanish of the program: doctorado en estudios culturales latinoamericanos, its use among the first and subsequent cohorts was as a sort of communal or community-based relational "we" identification. With each new cohort came the diminutives of "deculitos and deculitas" (little decules) and the denotation of those who came first as "deculotes" (big decules), in essence the decul elders.
- <sup>6</sup> See for example: <https://wagingnonviolence.org/rs/2024/05/turning-walls-into-bridges-the-transformative-power-of-unruly-migration/>