



# On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis

*By Walter D. Mignolo & Catherine E. Walsh*

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**D**uke University Press has introduced a new series 'On Decoloniality' with its first publication written by Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh. Their text, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, serves as a welcome addition to the expanding catalogue of decolonial thought. The text is neatly divided up into two parts: in the first half, Walsh reflects on decoloniality as praxis; and, in the second, Mignolo muses about the enduring lure of the coloniality of power, a concept first developed by Quijano (2000) to explain how Western colonialism is not only a political and economic system to extract wealth from the Global South but also a wider cultural and intellectual project based on the idea that Europeans have the right to conquer and colonise non-Europeans. As Mignolo and Walsh (2018: 3) argue in their co-written introduction, this new series seeks 'to disobey the universal signifier' of 'the West's global model'. What follows is not only a de-centring away from Eurocentrism, but also a rigorous critique of it, a format which at times places limitations on the authors' (Ibid) stated aim to move beyond resistance towards 're-existence, understood as "the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity".'

The authors fuse together ideas from critical thinkers around the world to describe decoloniality as thinking and doing otherwise to the coloniality of power. For example, Walsh discusses her activist work in Ecuador and with the Zapatista movement in Mexico. Although decoloniality is not a word that the Zapatistas use themselves, Walsh (2018: 49) convincingly argues that what matters are 'the perspectives, processes, prospectives, actions and thought; that is, the thinking and doing of/in praxis, insurgent resistance, and struggle' against the coloniality of power. She recalls many fascinating resistance stories about indigenous groups attempting to subvert the hegemony of Eurocentrism, stressing that decoloniality is a never-ending struggle for something else: pluriversalism. As Walshe (Ibid: 33) explains, for Eva Morales, former president of Bolivia, and Subcomandante Marcos, former leader of the Zapatistas, 'the emphatic no understood as defensive opposition—a social, cultural and political reaction against—has moved in recent years toward a propositional and insurgent offensive for that challenges and constructs.'

In one example, Walsh introduces the concept of interculturality, defined by indigenous people's movements

in Columbia and Ecuador as signifying 'more than an interrelation or dialogue among cultures. More critically, it points toward the building of radically different societies, of an "other" social ordering, and of structural economic, social, political and cultural transformations' (Ibid: 57). However, she then details how this term has since been appropriated by the World Bank and national governments to embrace neoliberal style reforms, thus emptying it of its radical meaning and transformative potential. This reiterates the need for decoloniality to be both political and epistemic (Ibid: 69).

In Part II, Mignolo critiques Eurocentrism and justifies the decolonial project. Musing about the colonial matrix of power's endurance, he explains that the model is self-reproducing, because: 'the making of colonial differences works in two directions: it makes the racialised person inferior to the person racialising, and it allows the racialising person to confirm him or her [or their] self in his or her [or their] belief' (Mignolo 2018: 189). Accordingly, resistance from within the colonial matrix of power is futile: 'there is no outside of it, and there is no privileged location (ethnic or sexual) from which to confront coloniality. For this reason, border dwelling, thinking, doing is the decolonial direction' (Ibid: 108). Mignolo (Ibid: 109) adds that, 'to end coloniality it is necessary to end the fictions of modernity. You cannot dispense with coloniality and maintain the principles, assumptions and belief laid out in the macro narratives of modernity'. Put simply, Eurocentrism needs to be deconstructed as one of many pluriversals in order to move beyond its essentialising tendencies that favour Europeans above all others. This, however, does not mean that essentialism will disappear any time soon, only that decoloniality will create alternative hierarchies, something not always properly accounted for in the current literature.

Mignolo's critique of Eurocentrism is impassioned, singling out post-Enlightenment conceptions of man, development, progress and rationality for particular scrutiny, because of their less visible but nevertheless important reproductive power. He astutely points out that, 'decoloniality is undoing and redoing' (Ibid: 120), referencing Walsh's idea of re-existence, in an unusual conversation with his co-author. The book's neat format, which allows each scholar to individually reflect uninterruptedly, is sometimes a frustrating limitation. Parts I and II could probably both exist on their own right, without the other. This is especially a shame as the reader can only imagine what fantastic new in-

sights might be realised if the authors were in more direct conversation with each other.

Interestingly, Mignolo (Ibid: 125) argues that indigenous cultures were destroyed in the Americas but not in Asia and Africa, and especially not in Islamic societies where Western institutions 'had to coexist (then and now) with existing local instituted knowledge, local languages, belief systems and forms of life.' It is unclear if this means that Islamic societies cannot be properly decolonial in Mignolo's estimation. Both authors' lack of sustained engagement, more generally, with the disruptive potential of religion, faith and religious rationality is also striking, especially considering that theologies of liberation exist across the Global South, unfortunately leaving an overly a secularised reading of decoloniality.

Another disappointment with *On Decoloniality* is the decision not to address what existing decoloniality looks like, because too much work is going into the critique of Eurocentrism, however well-argued. While Walsh gives many fascinating examples of mobilising failures, there is less sense of what it means to be *for* a decolonial movement today. Also, what does it mean to locate decoloniality in the Americas, over the span of the last 500 years, when this conception is limited geographically and temporally? What about decoloniality before the Enlightenment and outside of the Americas?

The authors also do not always recognise the many layers of resistance to Eurocentrism within the Global North. For example, Mignolo's (Ibid: 118) description of the work of Charles Baudelaire is incomplete; he may have coined the term modernity, but he and the artists around him were also seeking to critically reflect upon it, using the arts to imagine alternate realities, whether they be by staccato brushstrokes, romantic myth, or simply by shifting the gaze away from the object of art to its subject, as Eduard Manet's glorious *Olympia* demands. Indeed, Manet – a close friend of Baudelaire – was a founder of the Salon des Refusés for artwork rejected by the jury of the official Paris Salon. This move was incredibly disruptive, eventually inspiring impressionism, cubism, surrealism and many other rebellious art forms. Unfortunately, such disruptions are ignored in *On Decoloniality*.

As a result, decoloniality becomes something that is simply otherwise to Western capitalism and imperialism, an explanation of *why*, but without deconstruct-

ing the mechanics of *how*. Without that deconstruction, decoloniality is only that which claims to be so, without the perspective of those actually doing so, like the Zapatistas in Mexico. That said, any series 'On Decoloniality' is a welcome one, and hopefully, the authors of future volumes can revisit the important arguments in this text in conversation with the growing body of scholars, practitioners and activists who see transformative changes on the horizon.

**Work Cited:**

Quijano, Anibal (2000) 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,' *Nepantla: Views from South* 1 (3): 533–580.